

# ROSENCRANTZ AND GUILDENSTERN ARE DEAD

by Tom Stoppard



## THE AUTHOR

Tom Stoppard (b.1937) was born to non-observant Jewish parents in Czechoslovakia. His family fled the country at the time of the Nazi invasion, and during the war lived successively in Singapore, Australia, and a boarding school in India. During this time his father served as a doctor in the British army and died in a Japanese concentration camp. After the war his mother remarried a British army officer and the family moved to England. There Stoppard (he adopted his stepfather's last name) completed his schooling, leaving school at seventeen to become a newspaper reporter in Bristol. One of his assignments was as a drama critic, which stimulated his love of the theater. His first play, *A Walk on the Water* (1964), which was broadcast on British television. Two years later, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* was performed at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival and established his reputation as one of the best young playwrights in Britain. *The Real Inspector Hound* (1968) and *Arcadia* (1993) are among many other plays that he has written. He also was fully or partially responsible for the screenplays for *Brazil* (1985, nominated for an Academy Award), *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade* (1989, uncredited), *The Russia House* (1990), *Shakespeare in Love* (1998, for which he won an Academy Award), *Enigma* (2001), and *The Bourne Ultimatum* (2007), among others. The major themes of his writing include the nature language, the meaninglessness of life, the dangers of censorship, and the centrality of human rights. He has won multiple Tony Awards along with many other honors and was knighted by Queen Elizabeth II in 1997.

*Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* (1966) can be categorized as part of the Theater of the Absurd movement advanced by playwrights such as Samuel Beckett, Harold Pinter, Edward Albee, and Eugene Ionesco. The movement is grounded in the philosophy of existentialism, which views life as essentially meaningless and emphasizes human alienation. The play that brought Stoppard early acclaim is in many ways similar to Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, in that two characters in a vaguely-defined setting alternate periods of senseless banter, comments on the meaninglessness of life and death, and silence. Stoppard's masterpiece involves two minor characters from Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. In the course of the play, he incorporates dialogue from the Bard's tragedy only as the two title characters would have been privy to it. Otherwise, they stand around engaging in wordplay and flipping coins, which for some bizarre reason always turn up

heads. They are incapable of acting outside the context of Shakespeare's narrative, and ultimately are the victims of a story that has already been written.

## MAJOR CHARACTERS

- Rosencrantz - A bit player in Shakespeare's tragedy, he and Guildenstern, childhood friends of Hamlet, are the central figures here.
- Guildenstern - The companion of Rosencrantz, the two are virtually indistinguishable, though he is the philosopher of the pair.
- Player - The leader of the dramatic troupe that performs before the Danish court.
- Alfred - The young boy who plays the female roles in the drama troupe; he is often the victim of physical and sexual abuse.
- Hamlet - The central character in Shakespeare's tragedy, but a bit player in this one.
- Ophelia - Hamlet's intended, she commits suicide when Hamlet kills her father Polonius, though this play never mentions her death.
- Claudius - The king of Denmark, he is Hamlet's uncle. In order to gain the throne he murdered Hamlet's father and proceeded to marry his mother. He sends Rosencrantz and Guildenstern with Hamlet to England bearing a letter that tells the English king to kill Hamlet.
- Gertrude - Hamlet's mother and the wife of two successive Danish kings.
- Polonius - The father of Ophelia and the chief adviser of Claudius.

## NOTABLE QUOTATIONS

"List of possible explanations. One: I'm willing it. Inside where nothing shows, I am the essence of a man spinning double-headed coins, and betting against himself in private atonement for an unremembered past. Two: time has stopped dead, and the single experience of one coin being spun once has been repeated ninety times. . . . On the whole, doubtful. Three: divine intervention, that is to say, a good turn from above concerning him, cf. children of Israel, or retribution from above concerning me, cf. Lot's wife. Four: a spectacular vindication of the principle that each individual coin spun individually is as likely to come down heads as tails and therefore should cause no surprise each individual time it does." (Guildenstern, Act I, p.16)

"My name is Guildenstern, and this is Rosencrantz. I'm sorry - *his* name's Guildenstern, and *I'm* Rosencrantz." (Rosencrantz, Act I, p.22)

"Give us this day our daily mask." (Guildenstern, Act I, p.39)

“Half of what he said meant something else, and the other half didn’t mean anything at all.”  
(Rosencrantz, Act II, p.57)

“Wheels have been set in motion, and they have their own pace, to which we are . . . condemned. Each move is dictated by the previous one - that is the meaning of order. If we start being arbitrary it’ll just be a shambles: at least, let us hope so. Because if we happened, just happened to discover, or even suspect, that our spontaneity was part of their order, we’d know that we were lost.” (Guildenstern, Act II, p.60)

“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 honoured. One acts on assumptions.” (Player, Act II, p.67)

“You understand, we are tied down to a language which makes up in obscurity what it lacks in style.” (Player, Act II, p.77)

“The bad end unhappily, the good unluckily. That is what tragedy means.” (Player, Act II, p.80)

“We’ve traveled too far, and our momentum has taken over; we move idly towards eternity, without possibility of reprieve or hope of explanation.” (Guildenstern, Act III, p.121)

## NOTES

**Act I** - As the play begins, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are flipping coins. Every time one turns up heads, Rosencrantz keeps it, while Guildenstern keeps the tails. The problem is that every coin turns up heads so that Rosencrantz winds up with almost all the money and Guildenstern with nearly none. As the string of heads reaches 92, they discuss the possible reason for this obvious violation of the laws of probability and remark that, until very recently, their coin-tossing games had come out about even. What changed? A messenger arrived summoning them to appear before the king in Elsinore, and since that time the coins have behaved oddly indeed.

As they travel, they meet a group of players who offer to perform for them for a small fee, larger if obscene, larger still if the audience wishes to participate. The two friends decline the offer, and by flipping coins get their money back from the players. As they keep winning, the players offer to give them Alfred, the boy who plays the female roles in the plays, to do with as they wish, horrifying Rosencrantz and Guildenstern in the process.

A lighting change places them within the palace at Elsinore. Ophelia runs on, pursued by a disheveled Hamlet. He grabs her wrist, expresses agony by his expression, and then the two run off in opposite directions. Claudius and Gertrude then enter, followed by Act II, scene 2, lines 1-52 from Shakespeare’s play, in which the king clearly confuses the identities of the two men. After they leave, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern decide that they want to go home because they are sick and tired of a world where nothing is as it should be and they aren’t even sure of their own names. Guildenstern assures his friend that everything is under control and that they are mere spectators in their own lives; they simply need to float along with the tide and see what happens.

They now know they are supposed to find Hamlet and ascertain the cause of his seeming madness. They decide to practice asking questions, and what follows is a nonsensical exchange worthy of Abbott and Costello's *Who's on First?*, but it has a point because it is a game with no rules where the conclusion is that nothing matters. Hamlet then crosses the stage reading a book, and the two then practice questioning *him*, with Guildenstern taking the role of Hamlet. They go over the familiar ground of Hamlet's tribulations but shed no new light on the subject. Hamlet then reenters with Polonius, and the act ends with Shakespeare's Act II, scene 2, lines 220-243, where Hamlet greets the pair for the first time.

**Act II** - The act begins with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, Hamlet, the players, and Polonius acting out Shakespeare's Act II, scene 2, lines 377-403, where Hamlet is feigning madness. When they are alone onstage, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern admit that Hamlet defeated them soundly in their battle of wits, 27-3 according to Rosencrantz. They then proceed to argue in nonsensical fashion whether or not the wind is southerly. They start playing with a coin again, then are interrupted by the entrance of Polonius, the players, and Hamlet, who act out Shakespeare's Act II, scene 2, lines 541-553, in which Hamlet asks the players to insert a speech he has written into their play.

After they leave, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern banter about their tongues, then the Player comes in and bemoans the fact that they had performed on the road on the way to Elsinore without an audience, thus making their performance meaningless. They then discuss the play to be performed that night and share thoughts about Hamlet's condition, eventually proclaiming him to be "stark raving sane." After the Player leaves, the two friends discuss death, wondering why people are afraid of being shut up in a coffin if they're going to be dead at the time. They then tell two awful jokes about heaven and religion, but they are in reality just killing time waiting for someone else to come onstage to give their lives meaning and direction.

As they reach the limit of their frustration, Claudius, Gertrude, Polonius, and Ophelia enter, picking up at Shakespeare's Act III, scene 1, lines 11-35. After they leave, Rosencrantz complains that the other characters are constantly coming in and going out, never giving them a moment's peace; Guildenstern then points out that his friend never seems to be satisfied. Hamlet then comes onstage, pantomiming the "To be or not to be" speech, while Rosencrantz and Guildenstern try to talk themselves into approaching him and asking him a direct question. Before they can get up the courage, Ophelia enters with her prayer book and they go through Shakespeare's Act III, scene 1, lines 97-101.

Rosencrantz finally decides to take action with the next character who comes in. A woman enters and Rosencrantz puts his hands over her eyes, saying "Guess who," but it turns out to be Alfred dressed in women's clothing. Rosencrantz tries to flee the stage, but is blocked at every turn by the players, who are preparing for a dress rehearsal. They go through the dumbshow. Ophelia then comes running in, followed by Hamlet, and they act out Shakespeare's Act III, scene 1, lines 155-159. Claudius and Polonius then enter, inserting Shakespeare's Act III, scene 1, lines 172-179. After they leave, the Player tells his troupe that their rehearsal was a disaster and that they clearly are not getting it. He then talks about the nature of tragedy - "everyone who is marked for death dies." The mime continues, going far beyond the one envisioned by Shakespeare; Claudius and Gertrude overdo it in bed, they then mime the scene with Hamlet in Gertrude's bedroom and the murder of Polonius behind the arras. The scene goes on pantomiming the furious Claudius sending Hamlet to England with two messengers, who bear a letter intended to result in Hamlet's death but which leads to their own deaths at the hands of the king of England. All this is narrated by the Player

for the benefit of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. After the “spies” die, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern argue that what the players do is nothing like death, which is not blood, crying, and screaming, but passing into oblivion.

After a blackout, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are alone on the stage. Claudius then enters, inserting Shakespeare’s Act IV, scene 1, lines 34-41, telling them of Polonius’ death. They then go to find Hamlet. He soon enters, dragging the body of Polonius, and crosses the stage. Hamlet then returns, going through Shakespeare’s Act IV, scene 2, lines 5-30, where the prince directly confronts the two as fools who are being used by the king. After he leaves, Claudius enters and the playwright inserts Shakespeare’s Act IV, scene 3, lines 12-18. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are frustrated that they have really contributed nothing to the action, but then discover that they are to take Hamlet to England. As the act ends, they hear Fortinbras and the Norwegian army approaching, and we hear Shakespeare’s Act IV, scene 4, lines 30-33.

**Act III** - The final act begins in complete darkness. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are on a ship with Hamlet bound for England. The stage brightens when Hamlet brings on a lantern. The two friends imagine appearing before the king of England and in the process tear open and read the letter from Claudius, at which point they realize that it is Hamlet’s death warrant. They discuss the merits of delivering Hamlet to his death. Rosencrantz is opposed to the idea, but Guildenstern is more philosophical about it, arguing that everyone dies eventually, and what’s so bad about death anyway? They fall asleep, and Hamlet steals the letter and replaces it with one of his own composition.

When daylight breaks, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern hear music emanating from three large barrels onstage. They soon discover that the barrels contain the players, who have stowed away on the boat to escape the wrath of Claudius, who for obvious reasons was less than enamored with their play. Suddenly the ship is attacked by pirates. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, the Player, and Hamlet hide in the barrels, but when the smoke clears Hamlet is gone. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern now wonder what they are supposed to do, since the subject of their letter is no longer anywhere to be found. The Player advises them to go to England, deliver the letter, and let the king worry about it. They again imagine appearing before the king, again tear open the letter and read it, and this time discover that it contains *their* death warrant. When the Player begins to address the problem, Guildenstern cries out that he knows nothing about the reality of death because all he can do is act it out over and over again. In his rage he stabs the Player in the throat, and he dies messily in the middle of the stage. The other actors applaud, and he quickly gets up, demonstrating that the dagger Guildenstern had used to stab him was a stage prop with a retractable blade. The players leave, and the light fades; during the darkness, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern disappear. When the lights come up again, the audience sees the concluding death scene from *Hamlet*. The characters who are still alive speak Shakespeare’s Act V, scene 2, lines 396-416.

## ESSAY QUESTIONS

Discuss the following in a five-paragraph essay:

1. What is the significance of the coin-flipping scene at the beginning of Tom Stoppard’s *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*? Discuss how this introduces one of the major themes of the play and places it firmly in the realm of the Theater of the Absurd. How does this scene introduce us to the worldview of the playwright? How is this theme developed throughout the rest of the play?

2. In Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, the playwright contrasts the orderliness of art (particularly the theater) with the randomness of real life. Given the absurdity of much of the dialogue in the play, in what sense may it be said to be orderly? Is planning necessary in order to portray randomness? Support your analysis with specifics from the play.
3. Compare and contrast the ways in which Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* and its parent play, William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, use acting to comment on the realities of life. Do both playwrights make the same points when they use actors to shed light on life, or do they have different things in mind? Support your conclusions with details from both plays, being sure to include relevant quotations.
4. Tom Stoppard, the author of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, loved the English language, and his plays are full of wordplay. In this respect he had much in common with Oscar Wilde, the author of *The Importance of Being Earnest*. Compare and contrast the nature of the wordplay in the two theatrical masterpieces. Do the playwrights use puns and other forms of witty language in the same way or do they have different purposes for their wordplay? Support your arguments with specific quotations from both plays.
5. Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* has often been compared with an earlier absurdist comedy, Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*. Analyze the two plays in terms of their absurdist themes, being sure to use character, situations, and quotations to support your arguments.
6. Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* has often been compared with an earlier absurdist comedy, Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*. Write an essay comparing and contrasting the central pairs of characters in the two plays. Consider their banter, their struggles with identity, and the futility of their existence in your analysis.
7. In Act II, scene 7 of Shakespeare's *As You Like It*, the melancholy Jaques says, "All the world's a stage, and all the men and women merely players." To what extent could this famous line be considered a central message of Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*? According to Stoppard, what is the significance of the play in which we all play our parts? What is the importance of the roles we play? Support your assessment with quotations from the play.
8. Near the end of William Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, the title character says, "Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player that struts and frets his hour upon the stage, and then is heard no more. It is a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing." Would Tom Stoppard, the author of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, agree? Why or why not? Use quotations from the play to support your argument.

9. Identity is a central theme in Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*. The two title characters are not only confused by the members of the Danish court, but they sometimes forget who they are themselves. What is the playwright seeking to communicate through this comic situation? Why do the characters have so much trouble answering the seemingly simple question, "Who am I?"
10. The Theater of the Absurd grew out of the philosophy of existentialism. How does existential teaching concerning the world, human life, and morality influence Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*? Support your analysis using characters, situations, and quotations from the play.
11. Is Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* a comedy or a tragedy? Why do you think so? To what extent is Stoppard arguing that the tragic or comic quality of the play is the nature of the reality in which we live? Keeping in mind the definitions of the two terms, support your conclusion with specifics from the play.
12. In Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, why do the protagonists have so much trouble making decisions? What does their struggle say about the playwright's philosophy of life?
13. To what extent does Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* portray accurately a world without God? If one were to suppose that God did not exist, why would Stoppard's worldview make sense? How would the central characters respond differently if they believed in the providential oversight of an omnipotent Deity?
14. James 4:17 says, "Whoever knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, for him it is sin." Paraphrase this verse in the context of Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*. How does the playwright treat the relationship between action and inaction? Does such a distinction mean anything in the meaningless universe of existential philosophy? Why does Stoppard imply that choosing is better than not choosing, activity better than passivity?
15. On numerous occasions throughout Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, Guildenstern parodies Jesus' petition in the Lord's Prayer, "Give us this day our daily bread," in each case changing the last word to comment on their situation in the play. How do these lines reflect the worldview of the playwright? What do they say about his view of the Lord's Prayer, prayer in general, and the presence of God in the world?
16. Though determinism and chance would appear to be contradictory concepts, both play major roles in Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*. Are the two really contradictory, or is a life governed by chance as much beyond the reach of meaningful activity on the part of the individual as one governed by Fate? Explain how the play develops this relationship and evaluate it on the basis of the Bible's teaching concerning divine sovereignty.

17. The title characters in Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* may be indistinguishable to others, and sometimes even to themselves, yet in some ways they are very different. Discuss the differences between Rosencrantz and Guildenstern as Stoppard portrays them. Are these differences in any way derived from Shakespeare's play, or are they the inventions of the modern playwright? If the latter, what is the significance of the differences between the two friends, and how does Stoppard use them to convey his themes about human existence?
18. Evaluate the morality of the Player in Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*. How would you describe his moral standards, or lack thereof? How does his amorality, his willingness to use the members of his troupe for the sexual gratification of his audience, contribute to the play's social commentary? What do you think Stoppard is saying through this?
19. In Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, would you consider the title characters everyman figures, representing the plight of all humanity? Why or why not? Support your arguments with specifics from the play.
20. Evaluate the view of death presented in Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*. Be sure to consider the comments of the Player, who has the most to say on the subject, as well as the responses of the title characters. How does Stoppard's view of death cohere with existential philosophy? How does it contrast with what Scripture teaches on the subject?
21. Does Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* leave the viewer with any hope of redemption at the end of the play? Why or why not? Why is this a natural consequence of the playwright's existentialism? Why does this in the end identify the play, and human life along with it, as a tragedy rather than a comedy?
22. To what extent is it necessary for someone viewing Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* to be familiar with William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*? Does Stoppard assume too much, expecting the viewer to have knowledge that modern audiences may not have, or does he incorporate sufficient information to enable the viewer to appreciate what he is seeing, even with a minimal knowledge of Shakespeare's play?
23. In Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, the playwright encourages the audience to identify with the title characters by making them generic everyman figures, yet at the same time distances the audience from them by making sure that the audience knows things the characters do not. What is the impact of this simultaneous identification and distancing, and how does it contribute to the message the playwright is seeking to send to his audience?
24. Do the title characters in Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* change over the course of the play? How and to what extent? What does their response to the absurdity of life say about how the playwright expects us to respond to the same problem?

25. Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* incorporates a significant number of passages from William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. Why does Stoppard do this? How does this help to orient the audience to the condition of the title characters, and by extension to the position in which we all find ourselves?
26. Many of the major characters in William Shakespeare's *Hamlet* play minor roles in Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*. Generally, Stoppard has these characters speaking Shakespeare's lines. Are the characters the same in Stoppard's play as they are in Shakespeare's? If not, how are they different? What motivation might Stoppard have had for making these alterations?
27. When an author uses the embedding technique of presenting a story within a story or a play within a play, one of the reasons for doing so is to distance the audience from the action. Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* accomplishes this very successfully because the audience is never allowed to forget that they are watching a play. Does this technique keep the observer or reader from identifying with the characters? Do you identify with anyone in the cast as you read the book? Why do you think Stoppard might have structured the drama in this way?
28. In Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, to what extent are the protagonists responsible for their deaths and to what extent are they victims of Fate? As you answer the question, be sure to relate your conclusion to the playwright's worldview and existential philosophy.
29. In Act II of Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, Rosencrantz says, "Half of what he said meant something else, and the other half didn't mean anything at all." To what extent could this statement be applied to the dialogue in the play as a whole? How does the use of language described in this quotation allow the play to be both deeply serious and lightly comical at the same time?
30. In Act II of Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, the Player says, "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 honoured. One acts on assumptions." Analyze this statement, considering the role of presuppositions, the role of faith, and the nature of truth itself. Does Stoppard agree with the Player? Why or why not? To what extent does Scripture support the Player's assertion and in what ways does it not?
31. In Act II of Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, the Player says, "The bad end unhappily, the good unluckily. That is what tragedy means." This statement is an allusion to the words that Oscar Wilde places in the mouth of Miss Prism in Act II of *The Importance of Being Earnest*: "The good ended happily, and the bad unhappily. That is what Fiction means." Compare and contrast the ideas communicated by the two playwrights concerning the meaning of human life.

32. In Act III of Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, Guildenstern says, "We've traveled too far, and our momentum has taken over; we move idly towards eternity, without possibility of reprieve or hope of explanation." How does this quotation incorporate key themes of the play, especially with regard to Fate versus free will and the meaninglessness of life?