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Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead

by

Tom Stoppard

1967



MonkeyNotes Study Guide by Nova Benway

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KEY LITERARY ELEMENTS

SETTING

As Rosencrantz and Guildenstern travel to the castle, their surroundings are purposely vague and featureless. Once they get to the castle, the change in scenery is very slight, and when they are on the boat, taking Hamlet to England, the change is again nearly imperceptible. Stoppard constantly reminds.....

LIST OF CHARACTERS

Major Characters

Rosencrantz - A bumbling, ridiculous but harmless Elizabethan gentleman. He can't remember his own name, wonders idly about his toenails, and would probably be lost without his companion, Guildenstern. He seems happy to let other people make his decisions for him, right down to whether he will live or die. He never wants to upset anyone, and he is completely unaware of the fact that this might be annoying.

Guildenstern - Rosencrantz's companion, who is generally smarter and more worldly-wise than his friend. Sarcastic, cynical and often irritated, he tries desperately to understand the world around him, with little success. Thus, Rosencrantz's indifference to their situation often infuriates him. He wants to know why they were summoned to court, what they are supposed to do for Hamlet, etc. It is difficult for him to act without knowing, and this tends to incapacitate him.

The Player - The leader of a band of traveling actors, who seem more often to make their living through prostitution. The Player cares little for honesty or straight-forwardness. He is willing to cheerfully do just about anything to make money, and he is used to failure. He too is cynical, but in a different way than Guildenstern: while Guildenstern gets disappointed in people for not acting as nobly as he would like, the Player expects them to act badly. It doesn't bother him.

Minor Characters

Hamlet - Friend of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, and Prince of Denmark. Since the death of his father the King, and the marriage of his uncle and mother, he has been.....

Additional characters are identified in the complete study guide.

CONFLICT

Though they are often silly and ineffective, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are surely the heroes of the play. They long for comfort, stability, and an understanding of their situation, all of which are denied them. Their **antagonists**, however, are not so easily identified. Claudius may be one, since he seems to care little about them, wanting only to use them for his own purposes. Hamlet, too, can be considered an antagonist, even though he does not have "evil" motives. He wants to save his own life, and is willing to trade Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's lives for it. In fact, the entire court seems to be at odds with.....

SHORT PLOT SUMMARY (Synopsis)

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are two Elizabethan gentlemen, traveling in a featureless landscape. They are spinning coins together, and Rosencrantz keeps winning over and over again, each time calling 'heads.' The number of times the coin lands on heads is no surprise to Rosencrantz, who is simply excited about his 'new record.' He also feels a bit bad about taking so much money from his friend.

Guildenstern, on the other hand, is shocked at the improbable results of the coin spins. He wonders what it means about the nature of the universe-does probability really exist? Are they living in some kind of alternate world? Guildenstern is irritated that Rosencrantz isn't interested in his musings; he thinks it is very important to understand phenomena such as this.

Rosencrantz has his own curiosities, but they are less serious: he wonders why his toenails never seem to grow, for example. They try to remember what they are doing traveling, and finally recall that they were awakened that morning by a man summoning them to the King. They don't know what he wants, but they know it is urgent.

Then suddenly they hear a band, and a group of actors appears, led by the Player (the lead actor.) The Player tries to interest Rosencrantz in a "show," making it clear that what he is.....

THEMES

Perhaps what this play is most "about" has nothing to do with its content. Stoppard continually reminds the reader that he or she is reading a play, an artificial representation of decidedly uneventful events. Thus, one of the play's central themes is plays themselves. We are constantly made to think of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, and encouraged to find humor in the tragic drama. Even though most of the characters in *Rosencrantz* die by the end, one is not likely to feel sad when they do--it is not a tragedy. The play is deeply dependent on Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, to the point that the reader's reaction to it is dependent on.....

MOOD

There is very little emotion in this play--even at the end, when the main characters disappear (seemingly dying); the audience does not exactly feel bad for them. This is perhaps because the audience is so muddled by the play's events that they find it difficult to align themselves with any.....

BACKGROUND INFORMATION - BIOGRAPHY

Tom Stoppard was born Tomas Straussler in Zlin, Czechoslovakia on July 3rd, 1937. His family moved to Singapore shortly after his birth. His father was killed during the war and his family moved to Darjeeling, India, for several years. There his mother met a British officer named Kenneth Stoppard. They married and the family moved to England. Tom Stoppard left school at age 17, bored with academics and began working for small newspapers. Though he was a good reporter and was promoted to writing feature stories quickly, he made little money and had to live at home. He was made a theatre critic, and he gradually learned that he loved the theatre. He says, however, that he was a terrible critic: he was under the impression that art was.....

LITERARY / HISTORICAL INFORMATION

Tom Stoppard admits that *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* was influenced by many different writers. He does not, however, think of himself as entirely within the framework those writers shared. He has always said that his play was not meant to be taken too seriously, that it is intellectual entertainment but not designed to change one's philosophy. Thus, one might say that Stoppard is part of a literary tradition, but often sets himself apart from that tradition by fondly ridiculing it.

One of the most obvious of Stoppard's influences is Samuel Beckett, an Irish playwright working mainly in the mid-twentieth century. Beckett's plays are often confusing, uncomfortable

CHAPTER / ACT SUMMARIES WITH NOTES / ANALYSIS

ACT ONE

SCENE 1: The Coin Spin

Summary

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are two well-dressed Elizabethan men in the middle of a coin-spinning game. Their location is featureless. Whoever calls the coin correctly wins it, and Rosencrantz has been calling heads and winning dozens of times. While he feels guilty about taking so much money from his friend, he does not see

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the consistent "heads" tosses as peculiar at all. Conversely, Guildenstern doesn't care about the money, but he is disturbed by the lengthening series of "heads" tosses. Rosencrantz is caught up in the game, but Guildenstern wants to think about it theoretically. He begins thinking about the laws of probability, focusing on the idea that if six monkeys were thrown up in the air repeatedly, they would land on their heads and tails about equally often. He tries to calculate the idea of an "even chance" in his head: he just can't believe that the coin could land heads-up so many times in a row if there was a fifty-fifty chance each time that it would land tails. Rosencrantz, however, continues to be embarrassed at his success, calling it "boring," which irritates Guildenstern, who is very interested in what is going on. Rosencrantz calls out that heads has come up eighty-five times: a new record for him. Guildenstern gets angrier, asking what Rosencrantz would have thought if the coins had come down against him eighty-five times. Not understanding that, in terms of probability, this outcome would have been no different, Rosencrantz simply tells him he would suspect that the coins were fake. Guildenstern wants Rosencrantz to feel some awe, or even fear, at the strangeness of the results of their game, but Rosencrantz cannot be moved. Guildenstern imagines possible reasons that this could be happening: he is willing it out of some unremembered guilt, or God is willing it, or time has stopped and they are repeating the same coin toss over and over.

Trying, more idly now, to understand, he asks Rosencrantz about his memories. He asks him what the first thing he remembers is, but Rosencrantz doesn't understand. He tells Guildenstern he's forgotten it: "it was a long time ago." Guildenstern, irritated, becomes more driven to philosophize. He tries to decide whether, since probability is a natural phenomenon, they might not be in a "natural" realm of existence. He suddenly remembers "we were sent for," by someone, which will gain importance as the play progresses. He tries to prove that if one says that while operating under unnatural forces the probability is that probability does not exist, that in itself is a probability. This means (he says) that since probability does not seem to apply to their coin game, they must not be operating under unnatural forces.

However, his pleasure at his own reasoning does not last long, as he remembers how many times in the past they have spun coins together, never getting such results before. He believes that normal living depends on basic equality; it creates harmony, preventing anyone from losing or winning too much. Rosencrantz, meanwhile, talks randomly about strange scientific phenomenon, such as the fact that fingernails grow after death. Guildenstern becomes more and more tense, demanding what the first thing Rosencrantz remembers from today is. Finally Rosencrantz begins to follow the thread, crying that a messenger woke them up. He summoned them on official business, no questions asked. Rosencrantz remembers them leaving very quickly, afraid of arriving too late, but when Guildenstern asks him "Too late for what?" he cannot answer. They don't know where to go now; Rosencrantz doesn't even remember where he came from.

Guildenstern begins to get depressed, feeling that, since they were picked out by this messenger, they should not be left to find their own way from now on. When Rosencrantz thinks he hears a band playing, Guildenstern begins to theorize about the nature of illusions. He suggests that one can turn an extraordinary happening into an ordinary one at will. His example is a unicorn: if one man sees it, he is amazed, but if a whole crowd sees it, they simply assume it is a horse with an arrow in its forehead. As Guildenstern continues, his friend realizes that a band is, in fact, coming.

Notes

In all the debate early in this scene, it is unclear who is "right": while Rosencrantz seems to be the foolish one of the pair, who simply enjoys his game and doesn't examine it theoretically, Guildenstern also seems misguided. After all, while it is very unlikely that a coin would come down heads nearly a hundred times in a row, it is possible. While it is unusual, it is not necessarily cause for shock and philosophical analysis.

Guildenstern doesn't see this. He evaluates his elementary ideas about probability, even down to the simple idea

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that a two-sided, equally weighted coin has as much chance of coming down heads as tails. Guildenstern also seems just as confused about their being "sent for" as Rosencrantz. Neither of them really wonders why they were sent for, and we are not told exactly who sends for them.

Their curiosity about life has no direction. They either ask random questions, like why fingernails might grow after death, or worry uselessly over metaphysical ideas. Rosencrantz doesn't seem interested in important questions. Guildenstern attempts to answer those questions by applying bizarre, inappropriate strategies. He uses a syllogism to try to determine whether they are still in reality as they know it. This kind of reasoning becomes all the more absurd when the two begin their discussion about where they are going and why.

They barely remember that they were sent for by royalty, and they certainly have no idea what they will be asked to do once they get where they're going. All of their complicated theorizing means very little when one realizes that they are completely in the dark about the simplest things. They follow orders without any knowledge of the purpose of their mission.

It seems that, while they (or at least Guildenstern) would like to have some understanding of life's mysteries, they are somehow able to largely ignore an idea so central and personal as their own fates. They skirt around major issues, focusing on the minor ones instead. An example of this is the appearance of the band: Guildenstern is so caught up in wondering about the nature of illusion that, at first, he ignores the fact that the band is not an illusion at all and is, in fact, standing right in front of him. Their surroundings or lack thereof underscore their confused mental states.....

OVERALL ANALYSES

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Major Characters

Rosencrantz - An Elizabethan gentleman traveling with his friend, Guildenstern, to the castle Elsinore to see their friend Hamlet.

Rosencrantz is at times like Guildenstern's younger brother: he tries to please him, make him laugh, and entertain him, but he usually just ends up annoying him. Neither of them is sure of his own name, but he is the one who cannot remember what happened to him this morning. Rosencrantz is helpless, depending on Guildenstern for comfort even when he is just sitting still. He is pathetically ingratiating, pretending to play betting games with Guildenstern but letting him win so many times that he.....

Guildenstern - He might be called the better half of the inseparable duo that is Rosencrantz and Guildenstern-- at the very least, he is the smarter one.

He is fairly quick to understand implications, hints, etc., unlike his friend. He is deeply unhappy, because he is just smart enough to know that he will never fully understand his life. He wants to know the reasons for things-- from why Hamlet would want to die to why a coin could spin a.....

The Player - The Player is a ridiculous yet sinister figure in the lives of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. He may be dramatic and clownish, but he is not a fool like Rosencrantz. He merely does whatever he must to get by.

Once, he was an actor. Now he is, as.....

PLOT STRUCTURE ANALYSIS

It is difficult to comment on the plot of *R&G* as a whole, because it is composed of so many disparate ideas. One moment there is talk of the nature of probability, next, death and what it means to die, followed directly by

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jokes about how to appease an angry king. This is, however, exactly what Stoppard wanted: he has avoided coherence at all costs.

The comic scenes undercut the solemn scenes, which undercut the absurd scenes. Hamlet considers committing suicide, then spits into the wind, hitting himself in the eye, then happily sends Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to their deaths. In the midst of it all, pirates attack. The play references extremely serious works, such as *Waiting for Godot* and *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*. Both of these are.....

THEMES – THEME ANALYSIS

R&G is “about” many things, most of which are not communicated through the plot. This is most obvious in the case of *R&G*’s relationship to *Hamlet*. While Stoppard is clearly much indebted to Shakespeare, he does not build his story on top of the latter’s. He builds it around it.

Thus the Player and his troupe rehearse a play, Hamlet and Ophelia run on, fighting, and the actors continue their practice. The audience often laughs at the great drama that is playing out behind the scenes, as the main stage is given to a couple of goofy courtiers who can’t remember their.....

POINT OF VIEW

Since *Rosencrantz* is a play, there isn’t as much opportunity for point of view as there might be in a novel. A novel can devote much time to describing one person’s experience of everything around him or her. *Rosencrantz*, of course, cannot do that, but it does seem to ally the reader much more

QUOTATIONS - QUOTES

- Guildenstern: It must be indicative of something, besides the redistribution of wealth. (Act One, pg. 16)
- Guildenstern: The scientific approach to the examination of phenomena is a defense against the pure emotion of fear. (Act One, pg. 17).....

STUDY QUESTIONS

- 1.) Why do people keep mixing up Rosencrantz and Guildenstern?
- 2.) Why do they mix up each other?.....

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