

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF TOM STOPPARD

Born Tomas Straussler to Jewish parents in a Czech town, Stoppard's family evacuated before the German occupation and lived in South Asia where Stoppard's father was killed when Stoppard was four. At an American school in India, 'Tomas' became 'Tom.' His mother remarried an Englishman (surnamed 'Stoppard') and moved the family to England. At seventeen, Stoppard became a journalist, never attending university. Stoppard started out writing radio plays but his turn to stage plays earned him immediate success. *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* vaulted Stoppard to fame in 1967 and won a Tony Award. Stoppard continued to write acclaimed plays for stage and radio and was in 2013 awarded the PEN Pinter Prize for "determination to tell things as they are."

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

A mid-twentieth century theater movement largely centered in Europe, the Theater of the Absurd invented a new dramatic style designed to express belief in life's ultimate meaninglessness, absurdity, and incomprehensibility and to expose the futility of human rationality. Plays in this movement conveyed these beliefs by incorporating uncomfortable silences, parodying realism, making characters perform meaningless and repetitive actions, mixing comedy and tragedy, avoiding scenes of resolution or enlightenment, and writing dialogue whose copious wordplay and nonsense suggested the meaninglessness of language itself and its insufficiency as a means of communication. Playwrights of the Absurd included Samuel Beckett, Jean Genet, Eugene Ionesco, Harold Pinter, and Tom Stoppard.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Aside from *Hamlet*, Stoppard's play is also influenced by another major drama: [Waiting for Godot](#) by Samuel Beckett. First performed in 1952, Beckett's play fundamentally changed theater by abandoning traditional ideas of character and plot and by commenting on techniques of play-acting within the play itself. Stoppard's play makes use of many of these dramatic innovations while also referencing [Waiting for Godot](#) more explicitly: like Beckett's, Stoppard's play is built around two men waiting around on stage for action that seems never to come.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*

- **When Written:** 1964
- **Where Written:** England
- **When Published:** 1967
- **Literary Period:** Theater of the Absurd
- **Genre:** Tragicomedy
- **Setting:** nowhere; the royal court in Denmark; a ship to England
- **Climax:** Rosencrantz and Guildenstern read Claudius' letter and discover that it orders Hamlet executed.
- **Antagonist:** The Player

EXTRA CREDIT

Even More Shakespeare. *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* evolved out of Stoppard's earlier one-act play, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Meet King Lear*, which Stoppard wrote in a Berlin mansion in 1964.

Acclaimed in Any Medium. In 1990, Stoppard adapted *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* into a screenplay that he directed himself. The movie won the Golden Lion award at the Venice Film Festival that year.



PLOT SUMMARY

Wearing Elizabethan costumes on a blank stage, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are tossing **coins**, all of which land 'heads.' Rosencrantz is unperturbed by the improbable odds but Guildenstern grows disturbed, demanding Rosencrantz think through potential meanings of the unlikely situation. They realize they can't remember a past before tossing coins and have only vague recollection of being called by royal summons. The Tragedians march onstage lead by the Player, who sees Rosencrantz and Guildenstern as a potential audience and tries to entice them into buying a performance with the chance to sodomize the lowliest tragedian, Alfred. Guildenstern is appalled but the Player maintains that people only go to the theater for crude entertainment full of "blood, love, and rhetoric" (and mostly blood). The Player accepts and loses two futile bets to Guildenstern and agrees to pay with a play. Rosencrantz extracts a coin from under the Player's foot, sees it fell on tails, and, suddenly, the lighting shifts the scene to Elsinore Castle.

A disheveled Hamlet and Ophelia run on stage for a brief, mute appearance. Then Claudius and Gertrude enter, welcoming Rosencrantz and Guildenstern and explaining they've been sent for to uncover the cause of Hamlet's recent transformation. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern agree to do so,

then, alone on stage, lament the absurd incomprehensibility of their situation. Perplexed by what action to take, they stay passive. The sight of Hamlet prompts them to practice acting in character, but they muddle their names. Just as Guildenstern decides they're "marked," Hamlet walks on taunting Polonius. When Hamlet notices Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, he greets them warmly but can't tell them apart. The lights black out and rise on Act Two, where Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are still talking with Hamlet, who explains he's only mad when the wind blows north. Alone, Guildenstern tries to be optimistic but Rosencrantz insists they made no headway with Hamlet, who made them "look ridiculous." They try to figure out which direction's south and wonder if anyone will enter. Guildenstern alludes to an "order" of which they are a part.

Hamlet enters with the Tragedians, who he's booked to play the next night, then exits. The Player is cold towards Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, who left midway through the Tragedians' performance, humiliating them beyond measure. An actor's whole existence, the Player explains, depends on being watched. Guildenstern asks desperately for acting advice to help his and Rosencrantz' efforts with Hamlet. "Act natural," the Player says, and tells them there's no truth, only assumptions. He exits. Hamlet, Claudius, Gertrude, and Ophelia enter briefly and Rosencrantz and Guildenstern assure Gertrude they're making progress with Hamlet.

The Tragedians return to rehearse their play, whose plot turns out to be [Hamlet's](#), including Rosencrantz's and Guildenstern's deaths played by actors wearing Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's clothes. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are uncomprehending. Entrances by Ophelia, Hamlet, Claudius, and Polonius interrupt the Tragedians' play. The Player calls the play "a slaughterhouse," bringing out the actors' "best." Guildenstern criticizes spectacular stage deaths, insisting death is simply "a man failing to reappear." The lights blackout. The sun rises on Rosencrantz and Guildenstern alone.

Claudius enters briefly and tells Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to find Hamlet and Polonius' corpse (Hamlet murdered him) but the two procrastinate and, when a scornful Hamlet enters, are unable to make him obey them. Alone, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern despair. Hamlet eventually returns and promises to go with them to England.

Act Three opens on Rosencrantz, Guildenstern, and Hamlet on the [boat](#) to England. While preparing their speech to the King of England, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern read the letter Claudius gave them and realize it orders Hamlet's death. They're at first horrified and wonder if they should intervene, but eventually rationalize passivity and feel better. While they sleep, Hamlet steals, reads, and replaces the letter with another.

The Tragedians' appear on the ship as stowaways, pirates attack, and Hamlet goes missing, distressing Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. Reviewing their plan, they now discover that the

letter orders their own execution. They're indignant, then despairing. Infuriated by the Player's calm claims to understand death, Guildenstern stabs him and the Player falls and dies. But the dagger turns out to be fake and the Player stands up, alive and smug, having convinced Guildenstern with the very sort of acted death Guildenstern claims isn't convincing. The Player and Tragedians' gleefully act out various deaths. Lights fade on them. Alone, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's exasperation at death gives way to resolved acceptance. Rosencrantz disappears, then Guildenstern does.

Lights rise on the corpse-strewn end of [Hamlet](#). An ambassador reports that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are dead and the lights fade out as Horatio promises to tell the tragedy's story.



CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Rosencrantz – A schoolmate of Hamlet's whom Claudius hires with Guildenstern to spy on the Prince and convey him to execution in England, Rosencrantz is a minor character in [Hamlet](#) whom Stoppard expands into a lead. Stoppard describes Rosencrantz as someone who, when winning a [coin](#) toss ninety times in a row, will feel slightly sheepish at winning so many coins off his friend but will remain otherwise unperturbed by the situation. Often fearful and foolish and deeply forgetful (Rosencrantz frequently forgets even his own name), Rosencrantz is the self-described supporting half of the Rosencrantz and Guildenstern pair. With Guildenstern, Rosencrantz' struggles against passivity, hopelessness, and the inescapable structure of [Hamlet's](#) plot constitute a play-long meditation on death that ends in the foregone conclusion of his own passing a few moments before Guildenstern's.

Guildenstern – Like Rosencrantz, Guildenstern is a minor character in [Hamlet](#) expanded by Stoppard into a protagonist. Stoppard describes Guildenstern as someone who, when losing a [coin](#) toss ninety times in a row, will be more concerned about the implications of the situation than by the lost change. The self-described 'dominant personality' of the Rosencrantz and Guildenstern pair, Guildenstern, like Rosencrantz, is often fearful and foolish but he can also be bullying, easily angered, and bossy, and possesses a firmer grasp on reality and a stronger memory than Rosencrantz. With Rosencrantz, Guildenstern's struggles against passivity, hopelessness, and the inescapable structure of [Hamlet's](#) plot constitute a play-long meditation on death that ends in the foregone conclusion of his own passing.

The Player – Jaded, domineering, loud-mouthed and long-winded, the Player is the leader of the Tragedians and frequently expounds on the view that humanity's only real understanding of death is as a melodramatic death on stage. Though Rosencrantz and especially Guildenstern resist his

cynical perspectives, the Player and his troupe reappear again and again to undermine all traces of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's idealism and encourage their darkest views on the essential meaninglessness of human life.

The Tragedians – Garish, bawdy, and boisterous, the Tragedians make up the ragged and increasingly impoverished dramatic troupe led by the Player. Their theatrical specialties are "blood, love, and rhetoric," but especially "blood" – dying, the Player explains to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, is the Tragedians' greatest talent and thus the thing they best depict on stage. The sound of the Tragedians' instruments makes a musical refrain throughout the play that repeatedly haunts Rosencrantz and Guildenstern.

Hamlet – The famously passive protagonist of Shakespeare's play, Hamlet is the Prince of Denmark, son to Gertrude, and nephew to Claudius who goes half-mad after his father dies and his mother marries Claudius. Fearful of Hamlet's menacing mad speeches, Claudius sends Hamlet to be killed in England in the care of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. En route, Hamlet stealthily reads and rewrites Claudius' order, resulting in Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's execution. As in Shakespeare's play, Stoppard's Hamlet eludes Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's every attempt to gather information on him and tricks them into being executed. Yet in Stoppard's play, Hamlet is a secondary character with a fragmented presence as he wanders on and offstage. Still, though rarely onstage, Hamlet frequently features in Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's dialogue as the two remain haunted and worried about their relationship to Hamlet throughout the play.

Claudius – Hamlet's uncle and nemesis in Shakespeare's play who secretly murdered his own brother (Hamlet's father) and slimily marries his brother's widow Gertrude to assume Denmark's throne. Claudius hires Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to spy on the troublingly deranged Hamlet and to carry out his plot to have Hamlet executed in England. In Stoppard's play, Claudius is an intermittent but sinister and domineering figure whose orders Rosencrantz and Guildenstern accept without knowing how to fulfill them.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Alfred – The lowliest member of the Tragedians who is perennially forced into playing female roles, Alfred is a miserable and unwilling actor who is frequently bullied by the Player and offered up as a prostitute for any paying audience member interested in cruder entertainments.

Ophelia – Polonius' daughter and Hamlet's love interest, Ophelia is a main character in Shakespeare's play whose frustration with Hamlet's madness and cruelty eventually drives her truly insane and leads her to commit suicide. In Stoppard's play, Ophelia barely speaks and appears on stage only to weep and suffer Hamlet's chasing.

Gertrude – Queen of Denmark, Gertrude is Hamlet's mother and Claudius' new wife. Worried about her son's growing bitterness and madness, Gertrude implores Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to do their best to glean the cause of Hamlet's changed character and, in Stoppard's play, appears only intermittently onstage.

Polonius – The famously long-winded and foolish if well-meaning father to Ophelia, Polonius is accidentally murdered by Hamlet. Stoppard's play offers only a few glimpses of Polonius, first as a babbling buffoon, then as a corpse dragged along by Hamlet.

Horatio – Hamlet's best friend and a major character in [Hamlet](#), Horatio only makes one appearance on Stoppard's stage. At the end of the play, he holds Hamlet's corpse and speaks the lines that he speaks at the conclusion of Shakespeare's play, promising to tell the story of Hamlet's tragedy.

A Guard – A guard who briefly escorts Hamlet in Act Two.

A Soldier – A soldier who updates Hamlet on the approach of Fortinbras' troops in Act Two.

Fortinbras – The Prince of Norway, Fortinbras appears only at the end of Stoppard's (and Shakespeare's) play, surveying the array of corpses on stage.

The Two Ambassadors – The two ambassadors appear only at the end of Stoppard's (and Shakespeare's) play, delivering the message from England that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern have been executed.

Laertes – Polonius' son and Ophelia's brother, Laertes is slain by Hamlet in a duel in Shakespeare's play. In Stoppard's play, Laertes appears only as a corpse on stage at the end.



THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.



DEATH

The odds of the coin toss that opens Act One – an 100-long streak of "heads" – at first seem impossible, the sure sign of a make-believe world. Yet, as the play goes on, it becomes clear that there's nothing really odd about those odds: they represent the probability of human life. Death wins every time. "Life is a gamble, at terrible odds" the Player explains, "–if it was a bet you wouldn't take it." Above all, this is a play about death. Most obviously, the title – *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* – states the death of its protagonists. But the protagonists' deaths are a foregone conclusion even apart from the title, which is in fact a line from

Hamlet. As characters drawn from another play, the details of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's deaths are already scripted by Shakespeare's play before Stoppard's play even begins.

Everyone in the audience knows exactly how Rosencrantz and Guildenstern will die from the first moment of Stoppard's play. By building his play around these characters, Stoppard is thus able to exaggerate the fatedness and inevitability of death.

Yet while death is a sure thing, the play casts it in a fresh, unsettling light. Death itself may be a given, but the *human acceptance* of death is no given, and the characters struggle against death even in the face of its 100% probability. As inevitable as it is, it seems impossible to accept death. In fact, it seems impossible even to describe it properly. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern argue with the Player and Tragedians about what 'real' death looks like. "What do you know about *death*?" Guildenstern demands of the Player and, when the Player replies that dying is "what the actors do best," Guildenstern insists death can't be acted because "[t]he *fact* of it is nothing to do with seeing it happen—it's not gasps and blood and falling about." Indeed, the Player recounts that the time he arranged for one of his actors to actually be hung on stage, the audience booed it as a subpar performance.

Impossible to recognize, death thus remains elusive even as the play never stops dreading its inevitability. All the deaths on stage, after all, are staged, be they performances of plays-within-the-play (such as those that occur during the Tragedians' play and the fatal stabbing enacted by the Player) or supposedly 'real' action (such as Polonius' corpse, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's deaths at play's end, or the corpse-strewn final stage). The play's running meta-theatrical commentary (comments about plays made within a play) keeps the audience hyper-aware of this fact. Guildenstern's frequent critiques of staged deaths makes even the gracefully subtle portrayal of his and Rosencrantz' deaths at play's end – a gore-free, sudden disappearance – seem unsatisfying, questionable, eerily incomplete.

Indeed, Stoppard seems committed to producing this sense of incompleteness that, while it fails to deliver a complete understanding of death, completely captures the human understanding of death - which is, of course, quite incomplete. The play portrays awareness of death as the ever-present yet ever-unknown constant in life. "There must have been...a moment in childhood when it first occurred to you that you don't go on for ever," Rosencrantz reflects, "And yet I can't remember it. It never occurred to me at all." He concludes that he can't remember the moment of realization because no one moment exists. Instead, one is "born with an intuition of mortality. Before we know the words for it, before we know that there are words," we know there is death.



INDIVIDUAL IDENTITY

Since death is inevitable, the play goes on to ask, what does one make of a single human life? What is individual identity? Though most of the characters

in the play are characters appropriated from *Hamlet* (whose characters were in turn based on other literary historical characters), *Hamlet*'s main characters (Hamlet, Claudius, Horatio, and Ophelia) are here greatly diluted and constantly fade in and out of sight, seeming more like representations of ghosts than like representations of people. In turn, two of *Hamlet*'s most minor characters – Rosencrantz and Guildenstern – are Stoppard's play's protagonists and speak the vast majority of its lines. The play also foregrounds another minor character by giving Alfred, the lowliest member of the Tragedians, more attention than any of the troupe's other actors. In choosing to highlight his play's characters this way, Stoppard foregrounds powerlessness and lowliness, further emphasizing the helplessness of the individual human life against the prevailing force of death.

Yet beyond choosing to feature powerless individuals and washing out powerful ones, Stoppard's play also questions the specific identities of his characters and suggests that not only is the human self lowly and powerless, but it may not even be a "self." Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's identities prove extremely porous. They are constantly losing track of themselves and mix up their own names, even their own body parts, as Rosencrantz thinks Guildenstern's leg is his in the dark at the beginning of Act Three. When facing exact depictions of themselves in the Tragedians' play, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are intrigued but unable to recognize them. "Well, if it isn't--! No, wait a minute, don't tell me...I never forget a face...not that I know yours, that is," Rosencrantz tells the character representing him, then loses his grip of the situation and mistakes the character for himself by implying that the character has almost recognized Rosencrantz whereas it's in fact Rosencrantz who has almost recognized the character: "For a moment I thought—no, I don't know you, do I? Yes, I'm afraid you're quite wrong. You must have mistaken me for someone else," Rosencrantz says.

Other characters struggle, too, to recognize individual identity and Claudius and Hamlet confuse Rosencrantz and Guildenstern while Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's conversation with the Player confuses Hamlet's, Claudius', and Polonius' relationships to Ophelia. Stoppard himself once described his play's protagonists as "two halves of the same personality." By presenting characters that seem to flicker back and forth between identities, Stoppard questions the notion of identity at large. If every human individual is condemned to die, what distinguishes one from another?



FREE WILL

As the play questions the reality of individual identity, it likewise questions free will. What is it? What is choice? What is action or progress? Can

one trust all the trappings and signs of existence if one knows that they'll soon be extinguished? As the play proceeds, individual decisions and actions seem more and more inconsequential, nearly equivalent to apathy and passivity.

Hamlet is, famously, a play whose crisis swirls within the vortex of Hamlet's passivity. Yet this play reveals that Hamlet's passivity is in fact everyone's. Every individual might as well be motionless, might as well fail to act, since his or her every effort is overridden by a more powerful motion: the trajectory of life towards death. Guildenstern describes this trajectory in terms of being on a boat: "We can move, of course, change direction, rattle about, but our movement is contained within a larger one that carries us along as inexorably as the wind and current..."

Indeed, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern bustle about on stage but ultimately effect nothing, their attempts at action all thwarted by the plot structure of the original *Hamlet*, whose inexorable progression is analogous to the inexorable motion of life towards death. (Indeed, the exchange of the letter ordering Hamlet's death for the letter ordering Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's is in fact a plot twist in the original *Hamlet*.)

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern try futilely to intercept Hamlet on stage and end up going along with anything the prince and/or Claudius proposes. As in *Hamlet*, they agree to reason with Hamlet, sail to England, are executed, etc. Even that seemingly spontaneous pirate attack is just playing out a reference already written into *Hamlet*.

Yet while human will may be powerless against mortality, it can still act meaningfully within the realm of interpersonal relationship and human emotion. Helpless as they are, humans can still choose to be kind to others and to honor friendship and, in so doing, instill their lives with some meaning. Thus, Guildenstern's tenderness towards Alfred and his comforting of Rosencrantz stand out as affecting moments of warmth within the play. Conversely, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's passivity after discovering Hamlet's death-sentence stands out as one of the play's most horrifying instances. Though any action may have been futile, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's choice to not even *try* to act to save him bespeaks a level of disregard for human life on par with death's itself.



THE ABSURDITY OF THE WORLD

As a play investigating the central, unknowable mysteries of existence – death and mortal beings' capacity for free will – *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern*

Are Dead charts the human struggle to make sense of a universe characterized by utter randomness, harshness towards human life (the universe itself could be seen as the dramatic

"bloodbath" described by the Player), and complete apathy towards the human condition. All human meaning is undermined by the meaninglessness of the environment humans are forced to inhabit. The effort to make meaning thus grows increasingly absurd.

The play's use of language reflects the absurdity of human attempts to make meaning, incorporating wordplay and pushing the bounds of sense to demonstrate how difficult it is to convey significance. Dialogue in the play frequently replicates the coin toss revelation: what at first seems absurd is actually reality, what seems false is revealed to be true. It's the play's mode of presentation that startles the audience into a seemingly new perspective: the already known is seen anew, and seems unrecognizable. As Guildenstern says: "All your life you live so close to truth, it becomes a permanent blur in the corner of your eye, and when something nudges it into outline it is like being ambushed by a grotesque."

Thus, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern frequently misspeak or jumble common idiom, but, listened to carefully, these "mistakes" describe the situation more accurately than the "right" phrasing might. "[O]ver my head body!" Rosencrantz shouts in exasperation, "I tell you it's all stopping to a death, it's boding to a depth, stepping to a head, it's all heading to a dead stop." Though they may first seem like mistakes, his phrasings point out truths: 'head body' describes the living thinking being he is better than the conventional ("correct") expression 'dead body' would; his mis-phrasings of the expression 'coming to a head' end up illuminating the play's actual trajectory towards death. Later, Rosencrantz' description of sunset as "The sun's going down. Or the earth's coming up" rings similarly true.

Furthermore, the play's many instances of mishearing and misunderstanding start to accrue their own sense of accuracy: death, as Rosencrantz and Guildenstern repeatedly remind the audience, is the unknown, is beyond the grasp of human perception. When Rosencrantz tries to rationalize death by comparing it to a boat, Guildenstern responds, "No, no, no...Death is...not. Death isn't... Death is the ultimate negative. Not-being. You can't not-be on a boat." By riddling the play with moments of lost meaning, the play's script creates a linguistic experience – 'not-understanding' – akin to the unimaginable not-being of death that renders life in the world so absurd.



THE THEATER

As a play written within the structure of another play (Shakespeare's *Hamlet*), *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* offers a complex meditation

on the nature of the theater and the relationship between drama and lived human life. The play articulates a wide range of views on the theater, from a harsh critique of theater's artifice and inability to represent death (articulated by Guildenstern) to an unreflective willingness to embrace dramatic entertainment as diversion from life (exemplified by

Rosencrantz) to a cynical conviction that humanity's entire notion of truth is made up by the stage and that humans have no frameworks to understand death apart from those the theater gives them (articulated by the Player).

Apart from using characters to articulate perspectives on the nature of drama, the play's very structure explores theater's possibilities and potential similarities to human life. Stoppard's play takes two characters from [Hamlet](#), Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, who, in *Hamlet*, have a fairly limited role, and turns those characters into this play's protagonists Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. In so doing, Stoppard seems to offer a kind of inside-out view of the original play, where the stars have become mere supporting characters and the supporting characters have become stars. Still, though freed from their original bit parts and launched into the spotlight, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern all along remain trapped by their old roles as [Hamlets](#) original plot structure proves inescapable, its inexorability becoming a metaphor for the inevitable progression of life towards death. Stoppard thereby uses the dramatic form itself to comment on the shape of human existence.

In addition to illuminating the structural similarity of a play to human life, Stoppard uses frequent repetition, allusion, and metatheatrical observations to create a sense of claustrophobia in the play akin to the human feeling of being trapped inside mortality. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern seem locked into repeating numerous small actions – playing with coins, playing at questions, trying and failing to remember the past – and are, of course, also locked into repeating the larger action of their already scripted roles from [Hamlet](#). [Hamlet](#) itself contains a play within a play (in the middle of [Hamlet](#), Prince Hamlet hires actors to perform a play that he hopes will expose Claudius' guilt). That play-within-a-play is contained in this play too: Stoppard's *Hamlet* hires the Player and Tragedians to perform it, creating a play-within-a-play-within-a-play. Amidst everything else, Stoppard also scatters metacommentary throughout his script so that a disappointed Rosencrantz is crushed not only by his own disappointment but by the knowledge that it's deflating the dramatic scene: "Now we've lost the tension," he says.

meaningless. While a tossed coin should, according to the law of probability, have a 50-50 chance of falling 'heads' or 'tails,' the coins in this play fall almost exclusively on 'heads,' signaling that probability's law is suspended. Such suspension may seem at first to be the stuff of make-believe, but the play quickly reveals that there is nothing fantastical about such odds: they are in fact the odds of human will against death. Death always prevails, no matter how badly humans try to fight it or struggle to stay alive. Throughout the play, coins feature in various games (be it the coin toss of play's start, Guildenstern's coin toss with the Player, or Rosencrantz' coin tricks) that replace a 50-50 law of probability with an 100% likelihood, thereby symbolically gesturing towards death's utter inevitability.



THE BOAT

The boat symbolizes the trajectory of human life and the fundamentally limited and futile nature of

human action. As a boat's passengers are able to move at will within the contained space of the vessel but are ultimately swept up in the greater movement of the boat's motion, so too are a human individual's actions and developments dwarfed by the unstoppable progress of his life towards death. Though Act Three's setting on a boat is in line with Shakespeare's original play, the set also resonates with symbolic significance as Rosencrantz and Guildenstern hurdle helplessly towards their own deaths. As Guildenstern reflects, describing his and Rosencrantz' situation on board, "We can move, of course, change direction, rattle about, but our movement is contained within a larger one that carries us along as inexorably as the wind and current..."



QUOTES


Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Grove Press edition of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* published in 1967.

Act 1 Quotes

☞☞ The sun came up about as often as it went down, in the long run, and a coin showed heads about as often as it showed tails. Then a messenger arrived. We had been sent for. Nothing else happened. Ninety-two coins spun consecutively have come down heads ninety-two consecutive times...

Related Characters: Guildenstern (speaker), Rosencrantz

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 



SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



THE COIN

First featured in the uncanny **coin** toss between Rosencrantz and Guildenstern at play's start, coins appear throughout the play and symbolize the forces of mortality that control human life and render human free will

Page Number: 18



Explanation and Analysis

In this section, Guildenstern considers the improbability of their situation: he and Rosencrantz have tossed ninety-two coins and each coin has landed face-up. The more curious and clever of the two, Guildenstern lays out the possible explanations for the phenomenon, including "divine intervention," and then introduces a tricky syllogism. In philosophy, a syllogism is logical statement consisting of two factual statements—the premises—and the consequence of those two statements—the conclusion. Syllogisms (both correct and incorrect) appear throughout Samuel Beckett's play "Waiting for Godot"—this speech is one of many allusions to the absurdist play, which also features two male characters engaging in comic repartee in a sort of theatrical limbo.

Here, Guildenstern describes the "messenger" as a disruptive, disembodied presence, one that pushes the two characters toward their improbable and tragic future. The messenger's arrival marks the beginning of a long chain of events, each one unlikely, unlucky and yet inevitable. The ninety-two tosses are a miniaturized version of the play's general plot.

☞ We have no control. Tonight we play to the court. Or the night after. Or to the tavern. Or not.

Related Characters: The Player (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 25

Explanation and Analysis

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern have just met the Tragedians, who arrive on stage with a cart full of props. The Player, their spokesperson, first offers them a private performance, making various ribald suggestions, and then he exchanges a few gloomy words with Guildenstern.

Here, we encounter one of Stoppard's many meta-theatrical flourishes: while the Tragedians are the actors in the play's universe, everyone on stage is an actor in the audience's universe. Stoppard asks us some difficult questions in this section: is the stage all that different from our daily reality? Do we all progress along paths without any agency, just as actors follow their scripts? The Player's repeated and fragmented use of "or" brings to mind the very monotony of

a world without free will: each person's path is fixed yet unknown to him. And we see this combination of monotony and confusion throughout the work; characters react to events with an unruffled calm and yet never fully understand the plot's trajectory.

☞ There were always questions. To exchange one set for another is no great matter.

Related Characters: Guildenstern (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 38


Explanation and Analysis

Gertrude, Claudius and Polonius have just asked Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to comfort Hamlet and uncover the "cause of [his] lunacy." They then depart, leaving the two characters even more befuddled, in a state of confused agitation.

In this section, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern spout a series of comic non sequiturs — though their dialogue does not adhere to the typical logic of conversation, the play's essential absurdity bubbles up, reminding us that the world is unknowable, both on stage and off stage. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern always have questions — they never understand the task at hand or the plot's progression — and yet the questions themselves are irrelevant because no answers exist. In other words, while questions are an essential part of the play, their content, their subject matter, is interchangeable. This statement can comfort readers, too: we should always question the text but we should never focus on answers of simple solutions to our questions.

☞ There's a logic at work—it's all done for you, don't worry. Enjoy it. Relax. To be taken in hand and led, like being a child again...--it's like being given a prize, an extra slice of childhood...

Related Characters: Guildenstern (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 40

Explanation and Analysis

Upon glimpsing the complexity of the situation and the

extent of his own confusion, Rosencrantz feels a stab of panic; Guildenstern, on the other hand, remains calmer and attempts to soothe his friend. Guildenstern does not seem to think that they must understand the larger situation in order to play their part.

Despite their different reactions, the two characters exhibit a similar fatalism, making no mention of how they might *alter* their shared fate. Action is clearly impossible, here. In fact, Guildenstern calls the complete lack of free will a "prize, an extra slice of childhood." (The mention of childhood seems particularly appropriate given Rosencrantz's juvenile whining: "I want to go home.") While this sunny outlook and resignation don't last throughout the play — Guildenstern often despairs at their circumstances — Stoppard does present this as a curious alternative to anguish, particularly if we understand the play to have a "circular" structure, a sort of closed loop.

Of course, the very idea of "being a child again" is antithetical to the play's almost obsessive interest in time, death, and age. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are hurtling towards death, and their passivity does not reverse the march of time.

Act 2 Quotes

☞☞ 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.

Related Characters: Guildenstern (speaker), Rosencrantz

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 60


Explanation and Analysis

At the beginning of Act 2, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern end a conversation with Hamlet, who then exits with Polonius. Alone on stage, the two protagonists realize that they have made no headway: Hamlet has kept the upper hand and divulged very little useful information about his condition. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are as befuddled as usual, and Guildenstern remarks that they are "condemned" to a narrative over which they have no control.

Most obviously, this is a remark about the impossibility of free will, particularly within the theater. The two characters follow two major scripts: the original Shakespearean storyline and Stoppard's own words. Guildenstern also voices an even more troubling thought, wondering if their "spontaneity" is also inscribed within a larger "order." In other words, perhaps any attempt to break free of the play's logic is vain and impossible, since the play's logic accounts for these actions, as well. This is an absurd, circular proposition, and yet it is in keeping with Stoppard's world, one without logic or any hope of escape.

☞☞ We cross our bridges when we come to them and burn them behind us, with nothing to show for our progress except a memory of the smell of smoke, and a presumption that once our eyes watered.

Related Characters: Guildenstern (speaker), Rosencrantz

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 61

Explanation and Analysis

Guildenstern makes this statement partway through another digressive, illogical conversation with Rosencrantz, who cannot even remember the past few minutes. He tosses a coin, checks it, then looks away, distracted. His inattention provokes Guildenstern's own non sequitur, a statement that has no connection to the conversation. (Of course, a very subtle connection does exist, insofar as Rosencrantz has only recently yelled "Fire!" for no apparent reason.)



Here, Guildenstern combines two idioms: to cross a bridge when you come to it (or, to deal with a problem only when you must) and to burn a bridge (or, to sever ties with someone else). While this marriage of the two expressions is startling, it is not unrelated to the play's plot. The two characters *do* only deal with problems as the problems arise and they *do* destroy relationships with other characters, including Hamlet himself.

This quote, coming in the middle of a scene about memory and the continuity of identity, does not move away from these thematic concerns. (And yet it is also moving in its own way as a standalone proverb.) As soon as Rosencrantz and Guildenstern cross these proverbial bridges, they forget the whole experience, remembering "the smell of smoke," the "presumption that once our eyes watered" (that

they had some kind of emotional or physical reaction to the experience), and nothing more.

☞ You don't understand the humiliation of it—to be tricked out of the single assumption which makes our existence viable—that somebody is *watching*...

Related Characters: The Player (speaker), Rosencrantz, Guildenstern

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 63


Explanation and Analysis


In Act 2, the Tragedians arrive at Elsinore, where they plan to perform "The Murder of Gonzago" at Hamlet's request. The latter has just retired for the night, leaving Rosencrantz, Guildenstern, and the actors on stage. The Player confronts the two men and explains that their behavior — they walked away midway through the Tragedians' performance — has offended the troupe.

Here, Stoppard again reminds us that his play works on many levels: Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are audience members, in a sense, and yet they are also merely characters played by actors. The "somebody watching" in this section is not only Rosencrantz or Guildenstern, but also anyone watching Stoppard's play. The play-within-a-play structure of "Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead" is an allusion to Shakespeare's original, which features the same device, as well as a commentary on the similarities between life in and outside the theater. Of course, actors can only perform if "somebody is watching," but all of us, even off stage, must act and speak before witnesses, people who can attest to our reality.

☞ 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.

Related Characters: The Player (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 67

Explanation and Analysis

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are relieved that the Tragedians have arrived at Elsinore: Guildenstern explains that they are otherwise alone and that their solitude breeds uncertainty and uneasiness. In response, the Player instructs them to "act natural" and take things on trust, since he considers truth inaccessible.

This section calls to mind the earlier bet between Rosencrantz and Guildenstern and its unlikely outcome. The word "currency" reminds us of the ninety-two coin tosses, all of which landed on heads: both men trusted that the coin would follow a particular law of probability, though it did not. In this way, Stoppard brings our attention to the discrepancy between reality and a governing law, reality and some imagined deeper truth. The Player explains that we all must make decisions relying only on an incomplete and faulty understanding of the situation, relying only on our assumptions. The verb "acts" is also crucial to this quote, as Stoppard again acknowledges the blurry boundary between the theater and life.

☞ Hamlet is not himself, outside or in.

Related Characters: Rosencrantz (speaker), Hamlet

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 67

Explanation and Analysis

Explaining that we all must act "on assumptions," the Player then asks Rosencrantz and Guildenstern about their own assumptions; in response, they explain that they must "glean" what afflicts Hamlet, since he is not "himself, outside or in."



The more we consider this quote, the more obviously absurd it becomes. We might understand if Hamlet were only externally "not himself" or if he were only internally "not himself" — but the simultaneity of these two conditions is perplexing, raising the question: if you are not yourself "outside or in" are you yourself at all? Is an individual's identity irreducible and essential, more central and basic than his or her body or brain?

Stoppard already makes it evident that their task is a futile one; Hamlet has far more control over the situation than either Rosencrantz or Guildenstern. Even as they describe

his symptoms to the Player, they speak in vague and contradictory terms, eventually resorting to the nonsensical diagnosis "stark raving sane."

☝ I mean one thinks of it like being *alive* in a box, one keeps forgetting to take into account the fact that one is *dead*...which should make all the difference...shouldn't it? I mean you'd never *know* you were in a box, would you? It would be just like being *asleep* in a box...

Related Characters: Rosencrantz (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 70

Explanation and Analysis

Rosencrantz makes this short speech in response to his own question: "Do you ever think of yourself as actually dead?" Guildenstern's unsatisfactory reply prompts his companion to describe his morbid, confused vision.

Of course, the box is a coffin: death is one of the play's essential, tricky questions, stumping the two protagonists at every turn. How can anyone describe death if death is simply non-being? (Guildenstern comes to this problem later on.) Yet here, Rosencrantz's box also brings to mind the thought experiment called "Schrödinger's Cat," in which a cat is locked in a box along with a vial of poison that will be shattered if a single atom of a radioactive substance decays. Atoms don't obey the laws of physics that govern larger objects: they can be in multiple states at once, both whole and decayed. So too is that cat, as long as it remains inside the box, both dead and alive simultaneously. Stoppard often weaves scientific theories into his plays — and this thought experiment in particular deals with problems of observation and simultaneity. As per the title, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern *are* dead and yet they persist for three acts. The audience's gaze is important for scientific as well as theatrical reasons: to watch something is to make it real.

☝ Whatever became of the moment when one first knew about death? There must have been one, a moment, in childhood when it first occurred to you that you don't go on forever. It must have been shattering—stamped into one's memory. And yet I can't remember it. It never occurred to me at all. What does one make of that? We must be born with an intuition of mortality. Before we know the words for it, before we know that there are words, out we come, bloodied and squalling with the knowledge that for all the compasses in the world, there's only one direction, and time is its only measure.

Related Characters: Rosencrantz (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 72

Explanation and Analysis

In a state of increasing agitation, Rosencrantz tells a series of unintelligible jokes about religion and then embarks on this long, one-sided discussion of death and memory. It culminates in the arrival of Claudius, Gertrude, Polonius and Ophelia.

In this speech, Rosencrantz sets out two possibilities: we learn about mortality as children and the discovery is "shattering," or else we "come out, bloodied and squalling with the knowledge" of our own impending deaths. While he seems convinced by both possibilities — he uses the verb "must" in both cases — he sides with the latter option because of his own memories and experience. Here, death is inextricably linked to fatalism: Rosencrantz believes that "there's only one direction," and that we cannot stray from our path.

His mention of the "compasses in the world" should remind us of Hamlet's declaration, "I am but mad north north-west," and the ensuing confusion between Rosencrantz and Guildenstern as they scramble to situate themselves with regards to the cardinal directions. This is a comic moment, of course, a misunderstanding of Hamlet's metaphor, but it's further proof that the two exist in a sort of theatrical limbo, neither alive nor dead.

☝ Do you call that an ending?—with practically everyone on his feet? My goodness no—over your dead body.

Related Characters: The Player (speaker), Rosencrantz, Guildenstern

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 79

Explanation and Analysis

The Tragedians begin their rehearsal of "The Murder of Gonzago" only to be interrupted by Hamlet and a wailing Ophelia, who come onstage and promptly break off their engagement. When the tumult has died down and the actors begin their rehearsal anew, Guildenstern asks: "Wasn't that the end?" The Player is shocked, and adamant that a play's ending involve multiple deaths.

Humor plays an essential role in this passage, as it does throughout the text. The Player uses the idiom "over your dead body" to express his dismay at Guildenstern's question; however, the expression also functions on a literal level, as no ending is complete without a pile of dead bodies, in the Player's estimation. Again, the play within a play sheds light on Stoppard's work and *Hamlet* itself, both of which end with the deaths of major characters. By virtue of his occupational knowledge, the Player understands much about the shared fate of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. While this line does indeed foreshadow the play's grim ending, almost every interaction and pun in the play has a similar effect. Even the title, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, lays out the central plot point.

Well, if it isn't—! No, wait a minute, don't tell me—it's a long time since—where was it? Ah, this is taking me back to—when was it? I know you, don't I? I never forget a face—...not that I know yours, that is. For a moment I thought—no, I don't know you, do I? Yes, I'm afraid you're quite wrong. You must have mistaken me for someone else.

Related Characters: Rosencrantz (speaker), The Tragedians

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 82

Explanation and Analysis

The Tragedians continue their rehearsal and "The Murder of Gonzago" follows Hamlet's exact story line. The two spies who bring Lucianus (i.e. Hamlet) to England are the play's Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, though Stoppard's play has not yet come to this plot point. When the spies remove their cloaks, revealing that their coats are identical to those of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, the two protagonists express surprise and confusion.

In this moment of hesitation, Rosencrantz seems at first to recognize his own clothing, then questions his own recognition. The reversal is an absurd one, as Rosencrantz initiates the interaction, then accuses the actor of mistaking him "for someone else." The two main characters experience this eerie uncertainty throughout the play, most notably when neither is sure if he is Rosencrantz or Guildenstern. Gertrude, Hamlet and Claudius cannot keep the two separate and repeatedly mistake one for the other. Stoppard shows, here, that our understandings of personality and identity are arbitrary and fragile. Since true free will does not exist and we all simply follow scripts (on and off stage), what constitutes our "self" or our personality?

It's what the actors do best. They have to exploit whatever talent is given to them, and their talent is dying.

Related Characters: The Player (speaker)

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 83

Explanation and Analysis

Guildenstern, disturbed by the play's gruesome end, has just asked the Player "what [he knows] about death." And the latter, coolly professional, explains that mimicking death in a variety of styles (e.g. heroic, ironic, comic) is an actor's primary skill.

Stoppard brings our attention back to death, as he does repeatedly throughout his play. Death is the inevitable conclusion of all plot lines, both acted and lived, and all movement, both on stage and off, carries us toward death. Again, the barrier between the theater and real experience is a shaky one — the Tragedians in Stoppard's play have a particular honesty and insightfulness insofar as they understand their collective position, whereas Rosencrantz and Guildenstern remain confused, not fully aware that they are simply characters in a play. The play within a play has an obvious artifice that helps us understand the larger work. And the question of death's theatricality is also essential, as Guildenstern later takes issue with the Tragedians' conviction that a true death is not a convincing death. Stoppard poses the question: if death is "not being," can it be acted out?

☛ I extract significance from melodrama, a significance which it does not in fact contain; but occasionally, from out of this matter, there escapes a thin beam of light that, seen at the right angle, can crack the shell of mortality.

Related Characters: The Player (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 83

Explanation and Analysis

Here, the Player elaborates on his earlier definition of an actor's talent: while the other Tragedians can only "exploit" their talent, dying, their spokesperson has the more impressive and "more general" skill of pulling "significance from melodrama."

The Player is the main point of contact between the play within the play and the play itself; as the only self-aware actor, he understands dramatic devices and rules better than Rosencrantz or Guildenstern understand them. When the Player states that melodrama "does not in fact contain" significance, we should follow this claim to its logical conclusion and ask ourselves: does Stoppard's work contain significance? This paradox — between the hilariously, senselessly absurd and the highly philosophical — generates much of the play's power and tension. Can a text seriously declare that it lacks all seriousness? And where can the Player find significance, if not in the melodrama?

The Player claims that this beam of light can "crack the shell of mortality," suggesting that significance and life are incompatible, that meaning leads to death. The words "shell of mortality" are an echo of Hamlet's famous soliloquy, in which he calls his body a "mortal coil."

☛ On the contrary, it's the only kind they do believe. They're conditioned to it. I had an actor once who was condemned to hang for stealing a sheep...so I got permission to have him hanged in the middle of a play...and you wouldn't believe it, he just *wasn't* convincing! It was impossible to suspend one's disbelief—and what with the audience jeering and throwing peanuts, the whole thing was a *disaster!*

Related Characters: The Player (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 84

Explanation and Analysis

Guildenstern has expressed indignation at the Player's simplistic and garish understanding of death: he maintains that death is "a disappearance gathering weight" rather than the "mechanics of cheap melodrama." In response, the Player recounts an actor's death onstage and the ensuing negative reception: in his estimation, this proves that an acted death is always more convincing than a true death.

Of course, the situation itself is an absurd, impossible one. (Note the Player's pun on the expression "*suspend* disbelief," an allusion to the actor's demise, as well as the anachronistic image of Elizabethan spectators throwing peanuts.) This recurring question — is death a disappearance or a spectacle? — prompts us to imagine and anticipate the inevitable deaths of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern; we might also question our own expectations as readers or audience members. While the two buffoonish spies do simply die offstage and disappear in Shakespeare's play, Stoppard takes it upon himself to reexamine the lives (and deaths) of these two minor characters in his adaptation. And do their offstage deaths confirm Guildenstern's conviction, or is Stoppard mocking his protagonist?

Act 3 Quotes

☛ Free to move, speak, extemporize, and yet. We have not been cut loose. Our truancy is defined by one fixed star, and our drift represents merely a slight change of angle to it: we may seize the moment, toss it around while the moments pass...but we are brought round full circle to face again the single immutable fact—that we, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, bearing a letter from one king to another, are taking Hamlet to England.

Related Characters: Guildenstern (speaker), Rosencrantz, Hamlet

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 101


Explanation and Analysis

Act 3 begins with darkness: only slowly do the protagonists (and readers) understand that the action has moved to a boat bound for England. In this section, the two have not yet read the letter entrusted to them by Claudius, containing Hamlet's death sentence. Yet the moment is still has an ominous weight to it, a sense of impending doom.

While only present in the final act, the boat symbolizes a few of the play's major themes, including death and human agency. Guildenstern explains that the ship moves toward a "fixed star" — we can think of this fixed star as death, the inevitable end point of all lives and all stories. The two characters may entertain the illusion that they're free ("to move, speak, extemporize") but they're stuck on a boat they cannot steer. In other words, they're stuck living out a story that they cannot control. The boat represents the ultimate paradox of free will: Rosencrantz and Guildenstern experience moments of apparent freedom while both acknowledging that they "have not been cut loose."

☞ He couldn't even be sure of mixing us up.

Related Characters: Guildenstern (speaker), Claudius

Related Themes: 


Page Number: 104

Explanation and Analysis

Here, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern have concluded that Claudius gave them each the same sum, since he cannot "discriminate between" the two. The quote in question, which follows this statement, is representative of the entire text insofar as it marries obvious humor and more unsettling existential worries. On the one hand, Rosencrantz speaks of the King's twofold confusion: he is not certain of the two characters' identities, nor is he certain of his own uncertainty. This brings to mind earlier comic moments, including Rosencrantz' own (very vocal) befuddlement and his faulty recollection of his own name. On the other hand, this quote raises key questions about the self: Are Rosencrantz and Guildenstern truly different characters (particularly if they follow one single trajectory throughout the play)? Can you have an identity if you cannot control your own story?

☞ Now we've lost the tension.

Related Characters: Rosencrantz (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 107



Explanation and Analysis

As Rosencrantz and Guildenstern explain to each other again and again why they boarded the boat and how they will proceed once they've disembarked, Rosencrantz discovers that he has misplaced Claudius's letter to the King of England. The two panic, only to find the letter in Guildenstern's jacket. They're relieved, but then they can't quite remember what to do with letter: they've "lost the tension."

In this moment, both characters seem to shed their roles, speaking as two actors rather than as Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. The "tension" is the dramatic tension, the suspense that has been pushing the story along. Stoppard directs our attention to the boundary between acting and living and then applies pressure to that boundary: this meta-theatrical moment implies that all human life is as artificial as theater, and that we can only understand the simple and digestible versions of the world offered by actors.

☞ No, no, no...Death is...not. Death isn't. You take my meaning. Death is the ultimate negative. Not being. You can't not-be on a boat.

Related Characters: Guildenstern (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 108

Explanation and Analysis



This is Guildenstern's earnest reply to Rosencrantz's question: "Do you think death could possibly be on a boat?" As usual, Guildenstern proves more thoughtful than Rosencrantz, and yet his meditations are dead ends — they further upset him and they're at odds with Rosencrantz's more carefree attitude.

In this moment, we again encounter the tension between death onstage and death offstage, theatrical death and actual death. Guildenstern holds firm to his conviction that an actor cannot fake his or her demise since death simply "isn't." In other words, Guildenstern considers Rosencrantz' question ridiculous: the verb "to be" and the noun "death" cannot coexist in a sentence, since death is simply non-existence and non-being ("not to be," as Hamlet himself famously says). While Guildenstern's claim makes a certain amount of sense, we should also consider Stoppard's textual allusions to Greek mythology, particularly to the River Styx

and Charon the ferryman. Stoppard is not the first to represent death as a boat: in the Ancient Greek tradition, dead souls crossed the River Styx (to the afterlife) on a boat captained by Charon. This obvious reference is a sort of counterpoint to Guildenstern's claim that art cannot represent death.

Let us keep things in proportion. Assume, if you like, that they're going to kill him. Well, he is a man, he is mortal, death comes to us all, etcetera, and consequently he would have died anyway, sooner or later. Or to look at it from the social point of view—he's just one man among many, the loss would be well within reason and convenience. And then again, what is so terrible about death? As Socrates so philosophically put it, since we don't know what death is, it is illogical to fear it. It might be...very nice...Or to look at it another way—we are little men, we don't know the ins and outs of the matter, there are wheels within wheels, etcetera—it would be presumptuous of us to interfere with the designs of fate or even of kings. All in all, I think we'd be well advised to leave well alone.

Related Characters: Guildenstern (speaker), Hamlet, Rosencrantz

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 110

Explanation and Analysis



Rehearsing their upcoming interaction with the King of England, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern open Claudius' note and discover their role in a plot against Hamlet. This surprises and dismays them, but the two characters soon come to terms with the situation and rationalize their inaction.


They do so by sticking to the play's own disturbing logic: death is inevitable and free will impossible. If they involved themselves or attempted to save Hamlet they would be acting out of character; they would be questioning the play's crucial determinism, which they have relied upon for two and a half acts already. Guildenstern calls any hypothetical interference "presumptuous." Stoppard again alludes to Beckett's "Waiting for Godot" in this section — Guildenstern outlines a lazy syllogism when he mentions Socrates and says "he is a man, he is mortal, death comes to us all, etcetera." Vladimir and Estragon, the two characters in Beckett's play, are in a perpetual state of confusion, unable to comprehend the simple, rigorous logic of a syllogism. Again and again, they begin their attempts with

the premise that "all men are mortal." Rosencrantz and Guildenstern speak in similar circles, reaching dubious conclusions.

Life is a gamble, at terrible odds—if it was a bet you wouldn't take it.

Related Characters: The Player (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 115

Explanation and Analysis


In a brief wordless interlude, Hamlet replaces Claudius' letter with another, this one asking the King of England to execute Rosencrantz and Guildenstern rather than Hamlet. When the protagonists awake, unaware of this unfortunate turn of events, they discover that the Tragedians have been hiding in barrels onboard the ship. The Player explains that Claudius banished them from Denmark because their play offended him.

This metaphor, comparing life to a risky bet, brings to mind the play's endless coin tossing, the succession of 92 heads in the first scene. When the Player says that "life is a gamble," he means that life is a sort of lucky streak, inevitably cut short by death. And yet this prediction — "if it was a bet you wouldn't take it" — isn't quite true, as both Rosencrantz and Guildenstern make unwise bets again and again. They must in order to live: all human life is a ridiculous, impossible bet against death. Such inevitability gives the play both its grim edge and its absurd levity, as death renders sincerity and solemnity futile.

We've travelled too far, and our momentum has taken over; we move idly towards eternity, without possibility of reprieve or hope of explanation.

Related Characters: Guildenstern (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 121



Explanation and Analysis

Rosencrantz, Guildenstern, and the Tragedians discover that Hamlet has disappeared during the Pirates' attack. The two protagonists are at a loss, since they cannot give the King of England the letter if they do not also deliver Hamlet. And yet as usual, they rationalize their inaction and make no effort to change their unfortunate situation.

However, Stoppard does not depict their response as reprehensible or disappointing; instead, it follows the play's own logic. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern have no free will and can only act out the parts they inherited from Shakespeare's work. The literal and the abstract converge in this moment, as the two characters "move idly towards eternity" on the boat as well as in the script. And the noun "momentum" does similar work, reminding us that our protagonists are mere objects in space that obey physical laws as well as the endearing pawns of kings and queens. They are indeed "idle" here as they contemplate their bleak futures, but this idleness is an acceptance, an acknowledgment of their limited roles.

☹️ No...no...not for *us*, not like that. Dying is not romantic, and death is not a game which will soon be over...Death is not anything...death is not...It's the absence of presence, nothing more...the endless time of never coming back...a gap you can't see, and when the wind blows through it, it makes no sound...

Related Characters: Guildenstern (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 124

Explanation and Analysis

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, along with the Tragedians, discover that the letter in their possession now orders *their* execution rather than Hamlet's execution; Guildenstern panics and attacks the Player, who feigns his death and then brushes himself off, unharmed. This final ironic gesture seems to overwhelm Guildenstern: this short, impressionistic speech is one of his last lines in the play.

Guildenstern circles back to his first argument, dismissing the Tragedians' stage deaths as unconvincing and misleading. An actor cannot mime death because death simply "is not..." Note the abundance of negative constructions in this quote, as well as the obvious contradictions: "the absence of presence" and "the endless

time of never coming back." Even the ellipses, the breaks between Guildenstern's disordered thoughts, are "absences" — they are tiny visual and grammatical gaps that hint at Guildenstern's impending disappearance. Each one contains all the "not being" of death.

The mention of wind in this quote also brings to mind the characters' repeated, bumbling attempts to locate the cardinal points according to the sun's position or the wind's direction. No wind ever blows through Stoppard's play because the characters inhabit a theatrical limbo, a sort of no-man's-land between life and death.

☹️ Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are dead.

Related Characters: The Two Ambassadors (speaker), Rosencrantz, Guildenstern

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 126

Explanation and Analysis

Rosencrantz disappears, followed by Guildenstern; a flood of light illuminates a stage littered with corpses. Only Fortinbras (the Norwegian crown prince), Horatio and the Ambassadors have survived the tragedy, and the English Ambassadors announce that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern have been killed in England.

This remark, "Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are dead," is essentially the play's last intelligible line, since music and darkness drown out Horatio's final speech; in other words, these five words bookend the entire work, raising questions about time and circularity. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern have endless, meandering discussions about the "one direction" of time — however, the play ends right where it began, and we can easily imagine Rosencrantz and Guildenstern popping back into existence and pulling out another betting coin. As per the play's title, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern have been dead since the first scene.

The words "Rosencrantz and Guildenstern" form the subject of the sentence. The two characters grapple with their individual identities for three acts and yet in the final scene, the Ambassadors refer to the two distinct characters as a single unit; in this way, Stoppard ends the work on an unsettling note, at once summing up and dismissing his two protagonist's fears. The two characters are memorialized as one.



SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

ACT 1

The curtain rises on an entirely non-descript set where Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, in full Elizabethan costume, have been betting on **coin** after coin toss for a long time. The stage directions set the scene: every time the coin falls on "heads," Rosencrantz keeps it. Every coin has been falling on "heads," so Rosencrantz holds a bag nearly full of coins while Guildenstern holds one nearly empty. Rosencrantz is unsurprised by the improbable run of "heads," though he appears a bit sheepish to be depriving Guildenstern of all his coins. Guildenstern "is not worried about the money, but he is worried by the implications" of the run of heads. Still, he remains calm.

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern continue to toss **coins**, which continue to fall on "heads" (it's now been 85 times and counting). They admit that they have been tossing coins for as long as they can remember. Rosencrantz is just happy to be winning all the coins, but Guildenstern turns furious, pushing Rosencrantz to question the situation, to fear it. The run of "heads" goes on and Guildenstern returns to a mild, contemplative mood. He muses on what the run might indicate: 1. that he himself is secretly willing it by betting against himself to atone for a forgotten past; 2. that "time has stopped dead" and the run is just one toss repeated; 3. that there has been some divine intervention; 4. that it really is just chance. Rosencrantz admits he can't remember anything before they started tossing coins. Guildenstern thinks hard and remembers a messenger who sent for them.

To Rosencrantz's uncomprehending surprise, Guildenstern goes off on a long rant trying to make rational sense of their situation. Rosencrantz chimes in with "another curious scientific phenomena" that fingernails and beards keep growing after death, bewildering Guildenstern. "But you're not dead," Guildenstern points out. He is determined to focus on how they got here. Together they piece together a patchy memory of a foreign man on horseback waking them by shouting their names at dawn and ordering them by "urgent...royal summons." Yet neither can remember what they were summoned to do.

Straightaway, a dramatic contrast is established between the characters' Elizabethan outfits (traditional Shakespearean costumes) and the utterly blank set. These characters have been plucked from their Shakespearean context and set down in a kind of eerie no-place, a blank space with no characteristics to mark it in time. Rosencrantz's reaction to the absurdly steady run of heads suggests that he is less reflective than Guildenstern.



Meanwhile, the steady fall of 'heads' suggests that, wherever Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are, the conventional laws of probability don't apply here. The fact that the men have no real memory of a past prior to tossing coins is another indication (along with the nondescript set) that the reality Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are in is strangely disconnected from ordinary time. Guildenstern's reaction to the situation confirms that, of the two, he is quicker to question things and is more analytical than Rosencrantz. Guildenstern's first three theories could only be true in an absurd world. The fourth could theoretically happen in the real world but would be an absurd event.



While Guildenstern tries to reason his way towards an understanding of their absurd situation, Rosencrantz offers unrelated trivia, again showing Rosencrantz to be the less rational-minded of the two. Still, though Rosencrantz's comment may not connect to the situation in a rational way, it nevertheless introduces one of the play's major themes: death.



Rosencrantz and Guildenstern hear music and the Tragedians march in, carrying their instruments and lead by the Player, who halts his troupe assuming that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are an audience for them. "Don't move!" He tells Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern mix up their names introducing themselves. The player rattles off the Tragedians' repertoire (they'll perform anything from melodrama to comedy to poetic set pieces to realism), but Rosencrantz and Guildenstern balk at the price and the Player sets off with the troupe.

Guildenstern stops them and asks where they're going and how they came this way. The Player is noncommittal, attributing the meeting to "chance" "or fate" and saying they're going to perform for the court or the tavern that night or the next, or not. Guildenstern mentions he might use his "influence" at court: "I have influence yet," Guildenstern says. "Yet what?" asks the Player, and Guildenstern shakes him violently, insisting he has influence.

When Guildenstern asks about the potential of "getting caught up in the action," the Player happily sends the tragedian Alfred to get dressed as a woman for an "uncut performance of *The Rape of the Sabine Women*" in which the audience can participate. Guildenstern, trembling and enraged, slaps the Player and professes disgust at the obscenity and lowness. The Player bows sadly and says Guildenstern should have found them in "better times" when they were "purists." He and the Tragedians begin to leave.

Rosencrantz stops them and asks what the Tragedians do. The Player responds that they "do on stage the things that are supposed to happen off. Which is a kind of integrity, if you look on every exit being an entrance somewhere else." He spits on Rosencrantz's offer to buy a performance with a single **coin**. He accepts Guildenstern's offer to bet on coin tosses, which all fall on "heads." He accepts Guildenstern's offer to bet that the year of Guildenstern's birth doubled is an odd number and, of course, loses. He offers Alfred up as payment. Guildenstern asks a pathetic, forlorn Alfred what he has left to lose. "Nothing," Alfred replies. Guildenstern chastises his sniffing: "this is no way to fill the theatres of Europe."

This play has already presented itself as a play interested in thinking about the theater by introducing two characters appropriated from another play ([Hamlet's](#) Rosencrantz and Guildenstern) and by setting up a stark dramatic context between its costumes and its set. Now, the entrance of the Player and Tragedians' further develops the theme of theater by setting up Rosencrantz and Guildenstern as a potential audience for other characters on stage.



The Player's noncommittal answers suggest a worldview as willing to accept that human life is governed by fate as it is willing to accept that life is just a matter of chance. Either way, the Player does not ascribe his situation to his own free will. The Player's mishearing points out a second meaning in Guildenstern's words that questions Guildenstern's sense of identity and infuriates him.



Again, the double meaning of a phrase ends up causing misunderstanding. Guildenstern uses the word 'action' to mean 'action of the plot,' whereas the Player understands him to mean 'sexual action.' Guildenstern's fury at the Player's lewd offer attests to Guildenstern's idealism and high-minded notion of what theater should be. The Player's attitude towards theater is cynical and pragmatic.



The Player's view of theater is not just sexually perverse, it's also perverse in inverting the traditional relationship between the theater and the real world: the Tragedians perform what is "supposed to happen off[stage]" in reality. While the Player may be world-weary and jaded, he is also absurdly naïve, since he agrees to bet that a number multiplied by two will be odd (every possible answer would of course be even). Guildenstern's comment to Alfred pokes fun by bringing up a grand classic ideal of the theater in the context of a tawdry, crude acting troupe.



In order to make the Player pay his bet with a play, Guildenstern asks him about what play the Tragedians might perform. The Player is puzzled by the idea of "plays" and Guildenstern's suggestion of performing a Greek classic, responding that they really just do "blood, love, and rhetoric" or a combination of two, as long as one of the two is blood. "Blood is compulsory." "Is that what people want," Guildenstern asks. "It's what we do," the Player replies. The Tragedians' begin readying for the play. The Player explains that he will not change into costume or make an entrance onstage since he is always in character and always "on." He remains pointedly immobile for a long time until Rosencrantz prods him to lift his foot, revealing Guildenstern's **coin** beneath it. The Player exits.

Rosencrantz exclaims that the **coin** had fallen on tails and throws the coin at Guildenstern, who catches it. The lights suddenly change the stage from exterior to interior. An alarmed Ophelia runs on stage followed by a piteously disheveled Hamlet. They're mute. He scrutinizes her face, then sighs. They exit. Claudius and Gertrude enter and Claudius address Rosencrantz and Guildenstern as "Rosencrantz and Guildenstern" and he, then Gertrude, speak their original lines from [Hamlet](#) explaining that they sent for the two to entreat them, Hamlet's dear friends, to find out what has caused Hamlet's recent transformation of character. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern respond with their original lines from [Hamlet](#) agreeing to do so. As they're leaving, they bump into Polonius who informs Claudius that the ambassadors from Norway have returned and then exits, rambling mid-speech. Claudius and Gertrude exit too.

Rosencrantz is upset and Guildenstern tries to comfort him, both of them jumbling their words: "it's all stopping to a death, it's boding to a depth, stepping to a head, it's all heading to a dead stop," Rosencrantz exclaims, longing for the time in which there were no questions, when he remembered his name, and answers abounded. "There were always questions," Guildenstern retorts, "To exchange one set for another is no great matter." He reflects that one spends all of life living "so close to truth, it becomes a permanent blur in the corner of your eye" so that when one looks at it head-on, it's "like being ambushed by a grotesque." Rosencrantz remains frustrated and disoriented. Guildenstern tells him that the only beginning is birth and the only end death and that he should relax: "There's a logic at work" and that "to be taken in hand and led" is "a prize, an extra slice of childhood."

Once again, Guildenstern has much higher-minded ideas about the theater than the Tragedians do. Though the Player is describing his theatrical philosophy, his statement "blood is compulsory" also rings true in a larger context. 'Blood' – as in 'death' – is in fact a compulsory experience in human life. In this respect, the Tragedians' performance program is quite realistic. By claiming always to be both in costume and onstage, the Player admits that he has no personal identity other than his role as actor and director. For him, there is no reality other than the reality of the theater.



The sudden change of scene seems to be produced by the sudden "change of fortune" of the coin landing on 'tails.' But breaking the spell of 'heads' only drops Rosencrantz and Guildenstern into another absurd reality: the fragmented reality of the play, [Hamlet](#), that first created their identities. When Claudius and Gertrude address them in Shakespeare's language, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are able to respond with Shakespeare's lines in kind. Still, the world of [Hamlet](#) here is not the rich, complete world written by Shakespeare but a piecemeal, partial world with a ragged Hamlet, muted dialogue, abridged actions, and jagged scene cuts.



Rosencrantz stumbles on his words in frustration, but his jumbled phrases end up describing the situation more accurately than the conventional idiom ("coming to a head"). Indeed, the play [Hamlet](#) moves towards the many deaths of its final act and its language contains sinister deeper meanings. It also contains a famous scene of 'stepping to a head' in which Hamlet stumbles on a skull. Guildenstern takes on the identity of the adult comforter in his relationship with Rosencrantz. At the same time, Guildenstern's assurances describe a lack of free will (being led through life like a child) as a good thing, "a prize." He sees such a situation here as a kind of innocence, but it can also be described as a kind of enslavement.



Rosencrantz and Guildenstern review Claudius' request, become increasingly perplexed about whether and how to take action, but stay in place. "I feel like a spectator" Rosencrantz remarks. "What a fine persecution," Guildenstern notes, "to be kept intrigued without ever being enlightened." Rosencrantz suggests they "play at questions," which, it becomes clear, means firing questions back and forth. Whenever someone makes a statement, the other person gets a point. Rhetoricals and repetitions also affect the tally. Guildenstern shouts out the score and is winning. "Are you deaf?" Guildenstern asks him. "Am I dead?" Rosencrantz replies. They continue and Rosencrantz starts shouting the score, transferring Guildenstern's points to himself and Guildenstern shakes him violently asking him who he thinks he is. Rosencrantz treats this like a question in the game. They ask each other if the game matters.

Hamlet crosses the stage reading and exits. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern practice being in character by addressing each other by name, but they mix up their names. Then Guildenstern tries to pretend to be Hamlet so Rosencrantz can question him, but this brings about more confusion as Rosencrantz at first can't figure out who's who. Then, with Guildenstern speaking as Hamlet, the two exchange in a back-and-forth that lays out the parameters of Hamlet's situation: his father the king has died; his uncle has married his widowed mother and become the new king "offending both legal and natural practice." Rosencrantz continues to muddle up his, Guildenstern's, and Hamlet's identities.

Guildenstern tells Rosencrantz to go see if Hamlet's there. Rosencrantz peeks offstage where he reports seeing Hamlet talking. He wonders if they should go. "Why?" Guildenstern asks, "We're marked now." Hamlet and Polonius enter upstage mid-conversation. Hamlet is walking backward and telling Polonius that he could be as old as Hamlet if he could go backward. Polonius, aside, remarks that that may be madness but "there is a method in it." When he notices Rosencrantz, he points Hamlet out to him. Guildenstern and Rosencrantz call out to Hamlet who comes downstage greeting them warmly, though he first mixes up their names. They all laugh and Hamlet asks how they are. The lights black out.

Paralyzed by doubt and confusion, Rosencrantz describes this state of being in terms of theater – he compares the feeling of lacking free will as the experience of being a member of an audience, "a spectator." Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's game of questions treats language absurdly, turning it from a real-world means of communication into a toy to play with. In the context of the game, Rosencrantz' question "Am I dead?" has no real meaning – yet, the meaning of the question seems relevant to the sudden shift of identity he undergoes by taking Guildenstern's score for his own. In doing so, he extinguishes his identity as Rosencrantz and becomes Guildenstern instead.



Hamlet's appearance prompts Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to sort out their roles in Hamlet's world but their attempts to do so only confuse those roles further. In taking on theatrical personas, they seem to lose track of their 'real' identities and start mixing up their names. At the same time, the description of Hamlet's situation reveals that it, too, is rife with identity-confusion: his uncle has suddenly turned into his father by marrying his mother.



Guildenstern's response to Rosencrantz describes their situation in theatrical terms – to be "marked" means to be in an assigned position on stage. Polonius' response to Hamlet recognizes sense in what seems to be nonsense language, suggesting that the absurdity of Hamlet's words in fact contains some logic (indeed, Hamlet connects moving backward in space with moving backward in time). Recognizing Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, Hamlet affirms their identities, though his inability to tell them apart calls those identities into question.



ACT 2

Rosencrantz, Guildenstern, and Hamlet's conversation continues from the previous scene, though what they're saying is at first indecipherable. The first discernable line is Hamlet's: "S'blood, there is something in this more than natural, if philosophy could find it out." There sounds a flourish from the Tragedians' band and Guildenstern notes that they're "the players." Hamlet once again welcomes Guildenstern and Rosencrantz, says they must all continue being fashionable and ceremonious, and notes his "uncle-father and aunt-mother are deceived" since he is only mad when the wind blows "north north-west" and when it blows south, he knows "a hawk from a handsaw."

Polonius enters and calls out to them. Hamlet tells Rosencrantz and Guildenstern that Polonius is a baby, and then walks upstage with Rosencrantz. Polonius says he has news for Hamlet and Hamlet mimics him saying, "I have news to tell you...When Roscius was an actor in Rome." Hamlet and Polonius exit.

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are reluctant to speak, hemming and hawing between them. Guildenstern suggests that they "made some headway" but Rosencrantz says that Hamlet "made us look ridiculous." They assess their interaction with the prince in terms of the questions game, which, Rosencrantz points out, Hamlet beat them at by a long shot. "He murdered us," Rosencrantz notes. Guildenstern tries to look on the bright side, saying that they at least got Hamlet's "symptoms" but Rosencrantz insists that those didn't make any sense.

Remembering Hamlet's comments about the wind's direction, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern try to figure out which way is South, wondering if it's in the direction of the audience. They can't figure it out and their attempts to orient themselves by the sun, by the direction of their own travels, and by licking their fingers (to test the wind) all prove frustratingly futile. "You seem to have no conception of where we stand!" Guildenstern shouts at Rosencrantz, "You won't find the answer written down for you in the bowl of a compass."

In calling the situation "more than natural," Hamlet describes the absurdity of his world – it seems to act outside the bounds of natural law and logic. His advice to Guildenstern and Rosencrantz calls on them to act out artificial identities by behaving fashionable and ceremonious (rather than just being natural). His hybrid descriptions of Claudius and Gertrude show how muddled their identities have grown: each drifts between two roles, occupying neither one stably.



Hamlet's jibes are aimed at Polonius' identity – they call him a baby (when he is of course a grown man) and mimic his voice. Polonius' line alludes to Classical theater – Roscius was an actor in ancient Rome.



Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are upset because they've been unable to exercise their own wills in Hamlet's company. He holds complete control over them. Yet their understanding of how Hamlet exercises that control is absurd: they again return to the game of questions which leeches language of meaningful content and treats conversation like a tennis game. Metaphoric use of 'murder' foreshadows their literal murders at Hamlet's hand.



Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's futile attempts to determine their geographic coordinates further emphasize just how absurd their situation is. The reality they're occupying floats outside the scope of conventional measuring tools: they can't use a compass or the sun to locate themselves in this absurd world.



Rosencrantz and Guildenstern give up on the question of direction and wonder instead whether someone will come on stage. Rosencrantz suggests that Guildenstern shout in order to intrigue someone into coming on, but Guildenstern refuses, explaining that they are "condemned" to "their own pace" and that if they act spontaneously they will ruin the "order" – "at least, let us hope so." Then he notes that, if he and Rosencrantz "happened to discover, or even suspect", that their own "spontaneity was part of [the others'] order" Rosencrantz and Guildenstern would "know that [they] were lost."

Rosencrantz shouts "Fire!" and, when Guildenstern leaps up, Rosencrantz says he's just "demonstrating the misuse of free speech. To prove that it exists." He looks for movement in the direction of the audience, doesn't see any, and says the audience should burn to death. He takes out a **coin** to toss but claims not to have looked to see which face it fell on. Guildenstern asks Rosencrantz what the last thing he remembers is and, when Rosencrantz says he doesn't want to think of it, Guildenstern reflects that "we cross our bridges when we come to them and burn them behind us" so that they have no sign of their own progress except "a memory of the smell of smoke." Rosencrantz hides the coin between his fists and has Guildenstern guess which fist. When both his hands are empty and the coin isn't in his pocket or on the floor, Rosencrantz first laughs, then grows puzzled.

Polonius enters and exits with Hamlet and the Tragedians. Hamlet makes arrangements with the Player for a performance of *The Murder of Gonzago* the next night with a short speech written by Hamlet and inserted into it. Hamlet greets Rosencrantz and Guildenstern and exits. "So you've caught up," Guildenstern says to the Player, who responds coldly, "Not yet, sir." Guildenstern and Rosencrantz banter back and forth, tossing off different expressions for being speechless ("lost for words," "tongue-tied," "a mute in a monologue," etc.)

The Player reveals the cause of his cold manner: Rosencrantz and Guildenstern left in the middle of the Tragedians' play, leading the Tragedians to act on for a while without any audience which caused them immense humiliation. In despair, the Player laments at great length about the players' loss of dignity: "to be tricked out of the single assumption which makes our existence viable – that somebody is *watching*..." After the Player's account, Guildenstern claps and good-naturedly comments on the Player's speech as if it were a professional performance.

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's exchange describes the theater – the "order" of the plot, the sequence of entrances on stage – as a set of constraints on their own reality. Yet they will only truly be "lost" if they give up on the belief that they can act spontaneously within those constraints. To discover that even their spontaneity was scripted would be to lose their free will to the theater, and thus be "lost."



Rosencrantz' exclamation makes a joke on the themes of free will and theater – he shouts in order to "prove" free speech (the free will to speak as one pleases) and then insults the audience for treating his free speech like a scripted line in a play (which, of course, it is) rather than a real-life warning. Guildenstern's view on human beings' relationship to the past describes individuals existing in a hellish and absurd present with no memory of past experience beyond a vague grim inkling of loss. Rosencrantz unwittingly demonstrates the sort of human helplessness Guildenstern just described when the coin trick he thinks he's in charge of ends up mysteriously eluding him.



*Here the play-within-a-play dimension that was first introduced with the Tragedians in Act One grows even more complex: the Tragedians have crossed into the world of [Hamlet](#) and are hired to perform the very play (*The Murder of Gonzago*) that constitutes the play-within-the-play in Shakespeare's [Hamlet](#). Here, it will be the play-within-a-play-within-a-play...*



The Player's complaints construct a definition for identity in theater: he reveals that an actor's identity ("our existence") is entirely dependent on the audience (those somebodies "watching"). Guildenstern's applause then treats the Player's rant as a performance (rather than the expression of personal feelings). The Player has, after all, said in Act One that he is always in character.



Guildenstern and Rosencrantz tell the Player they've made it up to him by booking him a performance at court and coach him in how to perform for royalty: "a good clean show" with none of the "usual filth." But the Player informs them that the Tragedians' have "always" had a booking with the court and that he's been to court before. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are surprised and intrigued.

The Player starts to leave but Guildenstern tries first calmly, then desperately, to get him to stay and advise them on what to do. The Player tells them to relax, respond, stop asking so many questions, and to "act natural." When Guildenstern says he doesn't know whether the information he and Rosencrantz have been given is true, the Player tells them "Everything has to be taken on trust; truth is only that which is taken to be true...One acts on assumptions." He asks Rosencrantz and Guildenstern what their assumptions are and the three confusedly bounce possibilities for Hamlet's state off one another: "melancholy," "madness," "moods," moroseness." The exchange gradually devolves into nonsense: "stark raving sane," Rosencrantz concludes.

Rosencrantz, Guildenstern, and the Player next try to pinpoint the cause of Hamlet's state, a conversation that proves equally futile: "The old man thinks he's in love with his daughter," the Player says, but Rosencrantz is confused by the pronouns. Guildenstern barks out that nobody can leave because "all this strolling about is getting too arbitrary" but the Player insists he has lines to learn and Guildenstern relents. The Player exits. Rosencrantz shouts "Next!" and no one comes on stage. Guildenstern asks what he expected and Rosencrantz replies, "Something...someone...nothing."

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern reflect on Rosencrantz's **coin** trick, which Guildenstern was impressed by. They decide to "think of the future," "to have one" since "one is...having it all the time...now...and now..." They then begin to discuss death and Rosencrantz reflects on how difficult it is to "think of yourself as actually *dead*" in a box since one can only think of oneself alive. He reflects it'd be better to be buried alive in a box as "you could lie there thinking—well, at least I'm not dead!" and could tell oneself that someone was going to come by and get one out. Guildenstern shouts at Rosencrantz to stop his musings: "You don't have to flog it to death!"

Guildenstern's advice to the Player refers back to the grand, high-minded ideals of theater that Guildenstern first elucidated in Act One. The Player's information instantly disempowers Rosencrantz and Guildenstern by revealing that their will has had no influence on the booking.



Coming from the mouth of someone who claims to always be acting, the phrase 'act natural' (which typically means not to act) suggests an artifice to even 'natural' behavior. The Player's definition of truth denies the existence of essential truths and reduces truth to the status of individual human illusion. Each person occupies an absurd, precarious world of personal "assumptions" that may or may not be shared by those around them. As a phrase, "Stark raving sane" well-captures Hamlet's state: at once both sane and insane.



Rosencrantz's confusion about pronouns echoes the blurred identities that [Hamlet](#) centers around (the uncle become the father, the mother become the aunt). Guildenstern's sternly issued then immediately relented order illustrates just how desperate and absurd is his attempt to gain some control of the situation. He has next to no free will within the theatrical framework. Indeed, he defers without protest to the Player's plan to go learn lines.



Again, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's unusual way with words reveals hidden significance in common phrases: to 'have' a future typically means to possess one, but they show it can also mean to pass one's future, to experience and engage it. The present is thus just the future being 'had.' In having trouble actually imagining death, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's conversation reflects death's utter unknowability.



Rosencrantz continues: "Eternity is a terrible thought." He babbles on half-telling religious jokes, then stands up shouting offstage: "All right, we know you're in there! Come out talking!" Then he wonders what "became of the moment when one first knew about death" as he can't remember it. He suspects one must know about death at birth, before one even has words for it. He again shouts offstage: "Keep out, then! I forbid anyone to enter!" and, when again no one comes, remarks "That's better..."

At once, Claudius, Gertrude, Polonius, and Ophelia enter, behind Rosencrantz upstage. Claudius takes Rosencrantz by the elbow and they plunge deep into conversation. Stage directions note the context: "Shakespeare Act III, scene i." Still facing front, Guildenstern reflects, "Death followed by eternity...the worst of both worlds," then turns upstage to take Rosencrantz's place with Claudius while Gertrude asks Rosencrantz about their progress with Hamlet. Guildenstern joins in too. Rosencrantz, obviously lying, tells Gertrude that Hamlet asked few questions and answered all of theirs. In actual lines from Shakespeare's play, Rosencrantz reports that he and Guildenstern have enticed Hamlet with the Players and Gertrude thanks them. Telling Gertrude that he has sent for Hamlet to trick him into confronting Ophelia, Claudius leads everyone to exit but Rosencrantz and Guildenstern.

Rosencrantz, announcing he's fed up with the others always going to and fro, makes to leave stage himself. He loses confidence. Looking offstage, he notices Hamlet's coming and runs back downstage to tell Guildenstern. Guildenstern laments ever getting Hamlet "into conversation." Hamlet enters and pauses, deciding whether or not to speak. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern watch and Rosencrantz observes half-heartedly that it's their chance to "accost him" but can't get himself to do it. He tells Guildenstern that their problem is that they're "overawed," and keep succumbing to the others' "personality."

Ophelia enters with a prayerbook. Hamlet greets her and they exit talking. Guildenstern sarcastically congratulates Rosencrantz on intercepting them, then orders Rosencrantz to "shut up and sit down. Stop being perverse." A female figure appearing to be the Queen enters and Rosencrantz ambushes her from behind, covers her eyes, and "with a desperate frivolity" asks "Guess who?!" The Player enters downstage and shouts for Alfred, who, it turns out, is the figure Rosencrantz mistook for the Queen. Rosencrantz approaches the Player and attempts to reach under the Player's foot, but the Player slams his foot down on Rosencrantz's hand. "I put my foot down," the Player says when Guildenstern asks what happened. Rosencrantz, confused, grabs Guildenstern and begs him not leave him.

By interspersing Rosencrantz's talk of death with his futile attempts to exercise his will over the other play's characters, this passage relates three themes: death, free will, and theater. Death and theater are shown to be similar in both being non-negotiable. As Rosencrantz can neither understand nor control death, he can't understand or control the play.



The characters' sudden entrance undercuts Rosencrantz's just-uttered prohibition (forbidding anyone to enter) and further emphasizes the ineffectuality of Rosencrantz's will. Indeed, he and Guildenstern are immediately swept up into the other characters' action, telling Gertrude just what she wants to hear (rather than telling her the truth) and dutifully speaking lines from Shakespeare's script from [Hamlet](#). Their motions back and forth to take each other's physical places on stage further demonstrates Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's interchangeability.



While Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's exasperation and insurmountable passivity illustrates their own lack of free will, it also echoes the struggles with passivity and free will explored in Shakespeare's original play. In [Hamlet](#), Hamlet repeatedly tries to confront Claudius and exact revenge upon him and repeatedly cannot bring himself to actually do so. He, too, grows frustrated and questioning of the world and of himself.



When Rosencrantz finally manages to surmount his passivity and actively intercepts the queen, his action proves fruitless. The female figure is not Gertrude but only Alfred. Rosencrantz, who thought he was at last taking initiative to affect the world of [Hamlet](#), ends up affecting nothing. At the same time, this mix-up connects the themes of identity and theater, exemplifying the way in which a costume can shift someone's identity. The Player's action makes literal a normally rhetorical phrase, an absurd and sinister operation.



More of the Tragedians enter, one dressed as a King. The Player explains they are doing a dress rehearsal and that, because they always use the same costumes, the players often "forget what they are supposed to be in." After some bumbling, the dress rehearsal begins with a dumbshow, which, the Player explains, makes the subsequent action easier to understand. In the dumbshow, the Player-Brother of the King poisons the Player-King to death and woos the widowed Player-Queen.

Ophelia enters wailing and followed by a hysterically shouting Hamlet. Then addressing her and the Tragedians as well (and looking pointedly at the Player-Queen and Player-Brother, Hamlet explains there will be no more marriage and that of those already married "all but one shall live... The rest shall keep as they are." He tells Ophelia to go to a nunnery and exits. Ophelia collapses. The Player-King starts his lines for the play.

Claudius and Polonius enter and lift Ophelia to her feet. The Tragedians leap back and incline their heads. Claudius speaks actual lines from [Hamlet](#), musing on Hamlet's psychological state. He's not in love, Claudius thinks, and not mad, but his soul is plagued by a threatening melancholy that has persuaded Claudius to send Hamlet off to England. Claudius, Polonius, and Ophelia exit.

The Player claps his hands for attention and tells the Tragedians they're not "getting across." He calls for them to start Act Two and, when Guildenstern expresses surprise that the dumbshow hasn't just ended, the Player is astonished that Guildenstern would think it could end with "everyone on his feet. My goodness no—over your dead body." He explains to a bewildered Guildenstern that events have to "play themselves out to aesthetic, moral and logical conclusion" which always means that "everyone who is marked for death dies." "Marked?" Guildenstern asks. The Player speaks on despite Guildenstern's confusion and when Guildenstern asks who gets to decide what happens, the Player replies that it's "written." Guildenstern grabs him violently but the Player, unfazed, explains that there is "no choice involved. The bad end unhappily, the good unluckily. That is what tragedy means."

The Player calls for the Tragedians to take up Act Two and the action begins. The Player-Queen and Player-Brother engage in a love scene. The Player explains that the Player-Brother has ascended to the throne and won the Player-Queen's heart without her knowing that he'd killed her husband, the Player-King. Rosencrantz protests saying an audience won't want to watch "filth." The Player insists that that's exactly what people want to watch.

Like the Player's earlier claim to be always in character, the Tragedians' confusion blurs the boundaries of theater, turning a collection of discrete plays into one vague, ongoing production, each performance indistinguishable from the last. The dumbshow is the same dumbshow the Players perform in [Hamlet](#): its action mimics Claudius' murder of Hamlet's father and wooing of Gertrude.



Hamlet and Ophelia's interruption further blurs the boundaries of theater: characters drawn from one play (Shakespeare's) walk in on characters rehearsing another play, all within the context of a larger play (Stoppard's). By addressing the Tragedians', Hamlet further muddles this boundary.



Continuing to play with the idea of theater, the Tragedians' who had just been performing a play suddenly become audience members who "incline their heads" to watch Claudius and Polonius speak lines from Shakespeare's play.



The Player's explanations to Guildenstern directly articulate the connections between death, free will, and theater: as death is the inevitable ending of life, so too is it the "aesthetic, moral and logical conclusion" of drama. As humans have no free will to decide whether or not to progress towards death, so too is a play compelled by its script, unable to choose to act otherwise. Earlier, Guildenstern used the word "marked" to describe being in a designated position on stage. Yet the Player extends the verb's definition revealing that a play's character is not just "marked" by being positioned on stage but by being positioned to die.



Again, the action of the Tragedians' play parallels the action of the play-within-the-play in [Hamlet](#) as well as the action of [Hamlet](#) itself. Again, the Player cynically insists that high-minded ideals have no place in the theater, whose audiences want only crude entertainments.



The dumbshow continues with the Player narrating everything for Rosencrantz and Guildenstern while now also playing Lucianus, the Player-Brother's nephew, who, devastated by his uncle's marriage to his mother, turns crazy and murderous. They act out a stylized version of *Hamlet's* "Closet Scene" (in which Hamlet confronts Gertrude and murders Polonius). Here, the Player-King stands in for the Polonius figure. The Player-Brother, guilty and fearful, hires "two spies" to take Lucianus to England with a letter for the King of England. They sail and arrive in England, but Lucianus has disappeared. The King of England (played by the Player-King) reads the letter and orders the two spies' deaths. "A twist of fate and cunning has put into their hands a letter that seals their deaths!" the Player explains. The two spies wear exactly the same coats as Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern approach the spies thoughtfully, as if they recognize them, but can't put their finger on what the recognition is. "You must have mistaken me for someone else," Rosencrantz finally tells the spy dressed like him.

The Player calls the play "a slaughterhouse" and says it thus brings out the Tragedians' best. When Guildenstern protests that actors know nothing of death, the Player insists to the contrary. "[T]heir talent is dying" he says of the Tragedians. His own, he says, is to "extract significance from melodrama" where there is actually only meaninglessness. Guildenstern grows increasingly upset, exclaiming that death on stage is nothing like real death. The Player again contradicts him, pointing out that, when one of his actors was condemned to death, he had the execution performed on stage and that it "just wasn't convincing!" The audience jeered it. "Audiences know what to expect," the Player says, "and that is all they are prepared to believe in." The two spies act out death as lights fade and Guildenstern insists that death is not "gasps and blood and falling about...It's just a man failing to reappear." Rosencrantz claps for the spies. The lights black out.

Through the dark come shouts to "Give o'er the play" and cries for lights. The lights come on as a sunrise on a stage empty except for two figures lying down in the exact positions where the two spies died. The figures are Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. Still prone, they argue about which way is east. Guildenstern says "they're waiting to see what we're going to do" and that, as soon as they act, the others will come racing on to confuse them.

The dumbshow's action continues to parallel the plot of *Hamlet*, now moving on to represent Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's role and fate in Shakespeare's play. Watching the dumbshow, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern thus confront their own lives' trajectories, the source of their identities. That the dumbshow versions of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern wear the same clothing as the Rosencrantz and Guildenstern watching the play makes this parallel painfully obvious. Yet because Stoppard has appropriated the characters Rosencrantz and Guildenstern without allowing them any memory of their roles in *Hamlet*, the Rosencrantz and Guildenstern watching the play can't recognize themselves in their own roles. They have only a vague sense of their identities, a fact Rosencrantz illustrates by mixing himself up with the spy.



This exchange connects the themes of death and theater with the world's absurdity. Though Guildenstern insists that death is not about theatricality or melodrama, the Player explains that in fact the melodramatic deaths of the theater are the only version of death that people can understand or recognize. It shapes human expectations, and people absurdly end up (as in the Player's story) having expectations that an actual death should live up to the terms of staged deaths. The Player's seemingly absurd claim – that the Tragedians' "talent is dying" – is in fact literally true. Every mortal being possesses the talent of dying.



Lights rising as sunrise (rather than stage lights) indicates a shift into the "real world" of the play. The reflections are dizzying. In this world, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern have taken the positions of the actors' who were just executed in the dumbshow (as indeed those actors' roles were simply modeled on Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's actual fate).



Before Rosencrantz can protest, Claudius calls Guildenstern's name from offstage. Claudius and Gertrude enter. Claudius explains that Hamlet has killed Polonius in madness and asks Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to go find Hamlet and bring the corpse to the chapel. Claudius and Gertrude exit. Alone on stage, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern procrastinate following Claudius' order and make numerous false starts to leave stage in search of Hamlet. Finally, seeing Hamlet approaching from offstage, they make traps with their belts for Hamlet to trip over coming on stage. Hamlet enters from the opposite end of stage dragging the corpse of Polonius and exits from the same side. "That was close," Rosencrantz says.

Confused again, Rosencrantz shouts for Hamlet, who comes on stage. They ask about the corpse, which Hamlet says he's compounded. When Rosencrantz asks where he put the corpse, Hamlet tells them not to believe "I can keep your counsel and not mine own." He calls Rosencrantz "a sponge...that soaks up the King's countenance, his rewards, his authorities" and warns Rosencrantz that the King will throw him away once he's done with him. He orders Guildenstern to bring him to the king. The three approach one side of the stage and Hamlet bows, presumably towards an approaching Claudius. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern follow and while they're deep in their bows, Hamlet turns and exits stage from the other direction. Claudius enters behind Rosencrantz and Guildenstern and demands, to their dismay, that they bring him Hamlet. They lie and say Hamlet is under guard right outside. Then, just as Claudius exits, Hamlet is escorted by a guard onstage and off, following Claudius.

Lighting changes to Exterior. Guildenstern, pensive, reflects that "it doesn't seem enough; to have breathed such significance." Rosencrantz reflects that it was "a trying episode" but that "they're done with us now." "Done what?" Guildenstern asks. Rosencrantz breezily dismisses everything, claiming not to care, then catches sight of Hamlet offstage. Guildenstern exclaims he knew it wasn't over and that they will be taking Hamlet to England.

Though they may still be passive and ineffectual, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's attitude towards the [Hamlet](#) plot has grown more agitated, even vindictive, as they try to trap Hamlet into falling on his face. Nevertheless, they remain afraid and threatened by Hamlet and are thus relieved by being spared an interaction with him. Polonius is the first real corpse of the play.



Hamlet, previously friendly and welcoming to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, has soured towards them. He accurately accuses them of being Claudius' pawns. By ordering them to take him to the king, he undercuts Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's will. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern were supposed to order Hamlet to accompany them to Claudius but Hamlet has turned this escort into Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's obedient fulfillment of his own order. Again, just as Rosencrantz and Guildenstern seem to be getting a grasp over the situation, Hamlet eludes them. Then, again, Hamlet undercuts their authority by performing the action they would have ordered him to do (i.e. approaching Claudius) on his own.



Guildenstern's reflection indirectly describes the experience of speaking a play's lines (and echoes the Player's earlier comments on melodrama's "significance"). Guildenstern's mishearing – thinking "done" means 'performed' rather than 'finished' – turns a conclusion into a continuation of action. Indeed, the play will go on.



Hamlet enters with a soldier who explains that the troops coming through are sent against Poland by Fortinbras of Norway. The soldier exits and Rosencrantz approaches Hamlet, asking if he'd like to go. Hamlet says he will in a minute but that Rosencrantz should go first. Hamlet turns to face upstage. Rosencrantz returns downstage. Guildenstern faces front and doesn't turn, asking Rosencrantz about what Hamlet's doing. Rosencrantz looks over his shoulder and reports that Hamlet's talking to himself. He starts to leave, pointing out that Hamlet gave them permission to. Guildenstern says, "I like to know where I am. Even if I don't know where I am, I like to know that. If we go there's no knowing." "No knowing what?" Rosencrantz asks. "If we'll ever come back," Guildenstern replies. Rosencrantz points out that they don't want to return, that once they leave they'll "be free." Guildenstern is skeptical, but follows Rosencrantz to exit. Blackout.

ACT 3

The stage is in pitch darkness. There's a faint sound of the sea. In the dark, Guildenstern and Rosencrantz call out to each other and, as usual, mix one another up. "Is that you?" Rosencrantz asks, and when Guildenstern says yes asks, "How do you know?" which exasperates Guildenstern. Rosencrantz pinches what he thinks is his own "dead" leg only to find out it's Guildenstern's. Sounds of sailors rise and it becomes clear Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are on a **boat**. They reflect that it is "dark for day" but write it off to the assumption that they've sailed north. Upstage, out of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's sight, Hamlet lights a lantern that brightens the stage enough to see. Light reveals "three large man-sized casks on deck, upended, with lids" and an enormous gaudy beach umbrella behind them. Guildenstern observes that he's "lost all capacity for disbelief."

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern wonder what to do and decide not to move. They wonder if someone will come in. "In where?" Rosencrantz asks. "Out here," Guildenstern explains. They reflect on how much they like **boats** and Guildenstern is pleased that, on a boat, one needn't "worry about which way to go, or whether to go." One is, he reflects looking out at the sea (in the audience's direction), "free on a boat." Rosencrantz asks how the water is. "Rough," Guildenstern replies. Guildenstern clarifies what he meant by free: "free to move, speak, extemporize" but not "cut loose" – they are still, as ordered, taking Hamlet to England.

The impending arrival of Fortinbras is carried over from [Hamlet](#). As usual, Hamlet turns any order of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's into an order of his own: though he consents to board the ship for England, he insists Rosencrantz go on ahead of him. Guildenstern's insistence on knowing where he is, even if that means knowing he's lost, demonstrates his desperate wish to exert his will and gain control (knowledge) of his situation. Yet Rosencrantz suggests that having some control (knowledge) of an undesirable situation is not as good as surrendering all control for the opportunity to escape that undesirable situation. These are their only options in this absurd world. And at the same time it describes human of the real world, who seem always to be forgetting that their fate is sealed: they are going to die.



Rosencrantz and Guildenstern have been mixing up their own identities since play's start, but this exchange provides particularly acute illustration of the way in which losing track of one's identity is akin to death: unsure of the bounds of his self, Rosencrantz worries that his leg (really Guildenstern's leg) is "dead." Underscoring the morbid mood are the three casks onstage, wooden man-sized containers reminiscent of coffins. By replacing the word 'belief' with 'disbelief' in a common phrase, Guildenstern registers just how absurd the situation has become. It seems to them that anything can happen.



Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's confused pronouns point to the illusion maintained by the theater – a play may treat a stage as an interior, private space but it is of course always external and public. Guildenstern sees a boat as a welcome relief from the anxiety of action on land: in the smaller, contained space of a boat, there are fewer opportunities for action and thus one needn't feel so guilty about passivity. Still, they will eventually have to disembark and return to duties on land.



Rosencrantz notices Hamlet upstage sleeping. "It's all right for him [to sleep]" Rosencrantz notes. "He's got us now," Guildenstern adds. Rosencrantz wonders what they should do and Guildenstern laments that their every action is just "sifting half-remembered directions that we can hardly separate from instinct." Rosencrantz reaches into his purse for a **coin** to hide between his fists. He extends his fists to Guildenstern for Guildenstern to guess which one the coin is in. Guildenstern guesses correctly and Rosencrantz gives him the coin. He repeats this trip several times and Guildenstern keeps winning, growing "desperate to lose." Rosencrantz inadvertently reveals that he had a coin in each fist every time. Guildenstern asks what the point of that was and Rosencrantz responds in a pathetic voice, "to make you happy."

Guildenstern asks Rosencrantz how much money Claudius gave him and Rosencrantz insists "the same as you" then asks Guildenstern how much Claudius gave him. They speak in circles. Guildenstern, exasperated, demands to know why Rosencrantz doesn't ever say anything original and blames Rosencrantz for their continued stagnation. "I can't think of anything original," Rosencrantz replies, "I'm only good in support." Guildenstern loses his anger and comforts the now tearful Rosencrantz.

Rosencrantz despairs that they have nothing, and Guildenstern reminds him that they're en route to England on Claudius' order, all the particulars of which Rosencrantz has forgotten. Rosencrantz asks Guildenstern about the letter and its contents and Guildenstern assures him it "explains everything." Guildenstern says "You've got it," meaning "you understand it," but Rosencrantz thinks Guildenstern means "you possess it" and panics, thinking he's lost the letter. After both get scared, Guildenstern remembers it's actually *he* who has the letter and remarks that they mustn't allow for such "loosening of the concentration." With the letter safe, Rosencrantz wonders why they were looking for it. Because "we thought it was lost," Guildenstern explains. There's a sense of deflation. "Now we've lost the tension," Rosencrantz notes.

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's language unwittingly acknowledges the power dynamic of the situation and foreshadows the rest of the play: Hamlet is in control and will determine their fate.

Rosencrantz's coin trick at first seems to be the inverse image of the play's opening coin toss: Guildenstern, who couldn't stop losing the coin toss, can't stop winning the coin trick. But when Rosencrantz reveals he had rigged the odds, the image falls flat. Guildenstern has not truly won anything.



Their exchange about payment launches Rosencrantz and Guildenstern into a typical identity mix-up, but, for the first time, Guildenstern confronts Rosencrantz outright about it. In the resulting exchange, the two end up carving out more distinctive individual identities: Guildenstern is dominant while Rosencrantz is supporting.



Guildenstern twice demonstrates his newly-declared dominant role: he explains their situation to the forgetful Rosencrantz and confirms that he is the one entrusted with Claudius' letter. Rosencrantz's comment about losing "the tension" is meta-theatrical - in theater, actors will often talk about maintaining 'the tension' in a scene (i.e. maintaining the drama: the characters' motivation for it and the audience's interest in it). Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's scenes are constantly losing conventional dramatic "tension."



"We're not getting anywhere," Guildenstern exclaims. "Not even England," Rosencrantz laments, "I don't believe in it anyway." He explains that his mind remains blank when he tries to imagine the country and says that they're "slipping off the map." Guildenstern tries to look on the bright side, reminding Rosencrantz that Rosencrantz never believes anything until it's occurred, but Rosencrantz is unconvinced, saying they might as well be dead. He asks Guildenstern if death might be a **boat**. No, Guildenstern replies, "Death is the ultimate negative. Not-being. You can't not-be on a boat." Rosencrantz says he wishes he were dead and threatens to jump ship, thinking it'll disrupt Hamlet, Claudius, and co.. Guildenstern points out they may expect him to jump. Rosencrantz enraged by the futility of the situation shouts, "All right! We don't question, we don't doubt. We perform."

Still furious, Rosencrantz demands to know what they're going to say to the King of England and Guildenstern launches into a role-play with Rosencrantz as King of England and Guildenstern as Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. In the course of this role-play, Guildenstern presents the letter and as Rosencrantz reads it aloud they realize it orders Hamlet's beheading. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern separate onstage, stand in silence, then remark on the weather. After another pause, Rosencrantz points out, "We're his *friends*," but Guildenstern points out they only have others' word on this.

Guildenstern long-windedly justifies letting Hamlet be killed – he would, being mortal, have died anyway, and is just "one man among many." Besides, he goes on, death could easily be "very nice" and it's a release from life's burdens. He adds that he and Rosencrantz "are little men" and shouldn't "interfere with the designs of fate." He concludes that they shouldn't intervene to save Hamlet. When Rosencrantz questions this conclusion, he urges Rosencrantz not to "apply logic" "or justice." Rosencrantz describes "the position as I see it" by recounting a list of the action of the play thus far. Then concludes, "Good. We're on top of it now." Hamlet blows out the lantern and the stage goes black. Then moonlight appears to show Rosencrantz and Guildenstern asleep. Hamlet creeps up and removes the letter from them, reads it behind the umbrella, then replaces it with a different letter.

Rosencrantz's declaration of disbelief in England is absurd: he has chosen to doubt one of the few elements of the play that exists in the "real world" of the audience. Indeed, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern have fallen off the map of any locatable reality. Guildenstern's explanation places death outside of the realm of human imagination, as something that therefore cannot be described. His advice to Rosencrantz suggests how totally they may be controlled by the [Hamlet](#) plot: they may lack even the basic free will to kill themselves. Rosencrantz makes another metatheatrical comment, as "perform" can be understood both to mean 'behave obediently' and to mean 'act.'



The play's climax. Light-heartedly acting out other identities, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are unexpectedly snapped back into the full confusion and anxiousness of their selves. They realize that they have all along been Claudius' execution assistants. As usual, their instinct is to act passively, ducking responsibility. Still, Guildenstern is correct to say they have no personal experience of being Hamlet's friends.



This moment marks a defining turning point in the play: though the play's trajectory has been pre-scripted by Shakespeare's [Hamlet](#), Rosencrantz and Guildenstern themselves are ignorant of that fact and so, for them, this moment presents a real opportunity for action. They could choose to try and save Hamlet's life. But Guildenstern's speech holds them back from any such action, justifying passivity with arguments that use the rhetoric of rationality but are really just cowardice disguised.



Morning rises on Rosencrantz and Guildenstern with Hamlet behind them reading on a deck chair beneath the umbrella. Rosencrantz announces he's "assuming nothing" and describes "the position as I see it." This time it's a list of all their assumptions: the direction of the ship, the fact that Claudius paid them equally, the idea that they don't know what's in the letter and that they'll hand Hamlet over to the English King and then be finished and "at a loose end." He is mildly pleased with this list and says they could have done worse and that he doesn't think they "missed any chances."

A recorder sounds and Guildenstern, excited, calls it a sound "out of the void" and the promise "that something is about to happen." It is a sailor piping, he says, and "could change the course of events." He tells Rosencrantz to go investigate. Rosencrantz procrastinates, then finally hunts around for the source of the music and tracks it down (to his great befuddlement) to the middle cask onstage. Music starts to come from the other two barrels and resolves into the familiar tune of the Tragedians. Rosencrantz, anguished, cries out "Plausibility is all I presume!" and the Player cheerfully pops out of a barrel followed "impossibly" by the Tragedians in the costumes they wore for the dumb-show.

The Player explains to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern that they had to hide in the barrels to escape as stowaways after Claudius was offended by their play and stopped it. They couldn't pay their way as no one ended up paying them for the play and they lost so much money "betting on certainties. Life is a gamble, at terrible odds" the Player says, "if it was a bet you wouldn't take it." He asks Rosencrantz and Guildenstern if they're surprised to see the Tragedians. Guildenstern says he'd known it wasn't the end. "With practically everyone on his feet," the Player adds.

The Player asks Rosencrantz and Guildenstern if they've spoken with Hamlet. They reply: "it's possible" but "pointless." Guildenstern explains that they are without restrictions and can speak whatever they like to whomever they like – "within limits," Rosencrantz adds. The Player, Rosencrantz, and Guildenstern watch as Hamlet comes downstage, spits into the audience, and wipes off his eye as if spit on in return. Hamlet goes back onstage.

Though Rosencrantz claims not to be making assumptions, he assumes broadly, thus inadvertently subscribing to the Player's worldview (to act on assumptions). Their refusal to act to save Hamlet could also be seen as inadvertently adopting the Player's cynicism. Guildenstern's satisfaction is ironic – they have just missed the largest chance of all: the chance to try and save a life (at least for a time).



Guildenstern is excited to welcome a new character who would be a sign of a new reality, and would imply that they've truly left their old sphere behind. Yet the return of the Tragedians' reveals that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are still firmly grounded in the groundless and absurd world they've occupied since play's start.



Again, the Tragedians' play parallels the play-within-a-play in [Hamlet](#), which infuriates Claudius and is shut down. The Player's seemingly absurd quip about life is, upon reflection, profoundly accurate: life tries to preserve itself - to win out over death - but death wins 100% of the time. To bet on life, then, is to bet on a certainty, to make a losing bet. The Player furthers that idea with his quip that it certainly can't be the end if everyone is still standing. Things always end only one way, for everyone: with everyone dead.



Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's description of their lightly constrained freedom is wishful thinking and shows how ignorant they are of their own pre-scripted fates. By having Hamlet spit into the audience and get spit on in return, Stoppard jolily demonstrates what the "limits" on free speech that Guildenstern refers to might be. There are lines that an actor in a play can cross that will make the audience become active participants in the play. An spit upon audience member likely will, for instance, spit back.



Rosencrantz describes Hamlet's condition: "A compulsion towards philosophical introspection...It does not mean he is mad. It does not mean he isn't. Very often, it does not mean anything at all." Guildenstern lists a long list of his symptoms ("pregnant replies, mystic allusions," "invocations of camels, chameleons, capons," "stabbing his elders, abusing his parents" etc.). "And talking to himself," Rosencrantz adds, and Guildenstern repeats. They move off and converse among themselves in fragments recounting the Player's situation: offending Claudius, dodging arrest, meeting Rosencrantz and Guildenstern taking Hamlet to England, etc. Rosencrantz, indignant, complains that all they get is "incidents" and longs for "a little sustained action."

At that moment, pirates attack and everyone on stage runs around frantically shouting with swords out in a great hullabaloo. Eventually, Hamlet, the Player, and Rosencrantz with Guildenstern jump into the three barrels on stage to hide. Lights dim, sound fades out, and lights rise again revealing that the middle barrel (in which Rosencrantz and Guildenstern had hidden) is missing. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern emerge from the right-hand barrel. The Player emerges from the barrel Hamlet had hidden in. Noticing Hamlet is gone, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern panic and question whether he's dead or if he'll come back. The Player calmly deflects their questions. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are hysterical as they fear they'll never escape their own situation without having Hamlet to turn over to the King of England. The Player calmly advises them just to turn in the letter anyway. The Player then turns away and lies down.

Rosencrantz tries to make conversation about the weather but Guildenstern shouts at him to shut up. "Do you think conversation is going to help us now?" he demands. Rosencrantz tries to strike up talk again, this time by betting Guildenstern all his own money that his birth year doubled is odd. Guildenstern moans, then strikes Rosencrantz down. Guildenstern reflects in a broken voice that they've "travelled too far...momentum has taken over; we move idly towards eternity, without possibility of reprieve or hope of explanation." Rosencrantz commands Guildenstern to at least be happy since they survived. Picking himself off the ground, he suggests they just go on to England and report to the king as planned. Guildenstern balks, saying he doesn't believe in England and that they'll have nothing so say to the king.

Rosencrantz's description of Hamlet's condition evokes the Player's earlier description of the drama itself as "meaninglessness" out of which people may "extract meaning." Rosencrantz and Guildenstern go into a huddle as if making a plan of action but they in fact only list off facts, passive as ever. They don't even offer opinions. Again, Rosencrantz finishes by offering a metatheatrical critique of the scene he's in, by treating himself as an actor even though he, as a character, does not think he is an actor (but, of course, really is an actor).



As if the punch line to a theater joke, Rosencrantz's complaint that the scene lacks "sustained action" is immediately met with the frenzied hyperactive scurry of a pirate attack. (Though this attack is actually scripted into [Hamlet](#) – it's not performed on stage in Shakespeare's play but is alluded to). Once again, Hamlet has eluded Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's grasp. Fearing that they could only escape their absurd reality by turning Hamlet in, they despair. Lying down, the Player makes a theatrical half-exit: he is absent from the drama though present physically.



Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's relationship begins breaking down as Rosencrantz's efforts to please Guildenstern fall flat and Guildenstern turns violent against him. Guildenstern's description of their situation proves an accurate account of the universally absurd experience of human mortality: propelled by life's momentum, moving involuntarily but inexorably towards death. Where earlier it was Rosencrantz who lost his belief in England, now Guildenstern loses it as he gives up all hope of escaping their situation.



Rosencrantz, trying to convince Guildenstern they can still go through with the plan, points out they still have the letter, which Guildenstern snatches from Rosencrantz and reads aloud. It orders Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's execution. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern reread it in speechless shock. The Player rises and kicks his barrel shouting into it "they've gone!" The Tragedians emerge and form "a casually menacing circle" around Rosencrantz and Guildenstern.

"Where we went wrong," Guildenstern says quietly, "was getting on a **boat**. We can move, of course, change direction, rattle about, but our movement is contained within a larger one that carries us along as inexorably as the wind and current..." Rosencrantz reflects that the others must have planned for their death from the beginning – "who'd have thought that we were so important?" Guildenstern is in anguish, wondering who they are that their deaths should be important. "Who are we?" he asks the Player, who responds with their names. When Guildenstern protests that's not enough explanation, the Player retorts, "In our experience, most things end in death."

With "fear, vengeance, scorn" Guildenstern balks at the experience of "actors" and grabs a dagger from the Player's belt that he holds at the Player's throat. Guildenstern makes a speech saying he's talking about death "and you've never experienced *that*. And you cannot *act* it." He pushes the blade into the Player's throat to the hilt and the Player clutches at the wound, weeps, and falls to his knees dying. Guildenstern announces to the Tragedians' that this was the Player's destiny and that if there were no explanations for Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, there should be none for the Player either.

After the Player lies silent, the Tragedians applaud appreciatively and the Player rises. "You see," he tells Guildenstern, "it is the kind [of death] they do believe in." He reveals the dagger he was stabbed with has a trick blade. "For a moment you thought I'd—cheated," he says. Rosencrantz laughs nervously and applauds. The Player animatedly advertises all the deaths the Tragedians' can perform ("Deaths for all ages and all occasions! Deaths by suspension, convulsion, consumption" etc.) while the Tragedians' mime them onstage. Light fades on them.

Hamlet must have replaced the letter when he secretly read it earlier in the act. Just as they must suddenly confront their imminent death, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are surrounded by a "menacing" circle of actors. The ring of actors can be seen as a metaphor for the noose of the drama, [Hamlet](#), that has pre-scripted Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's all along, or the noose of life, which always ends in death.



Again, Guildenstern's description of his and Rosencrantz's situation ends up describing the universally absurd human experience of mortality: within the context of a life, a human being can "move...rattle about" but no one can affect or impede his life's "larger" movement towards death. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are unable to reconcile their own senses of identity with the immense ("important"-seeming) abstraction of death.



Guildenstern's fury at the insufficiency and falseness of theatrical death fuels his first proactive action in the play. Having the missed the opportunity to act to try and save Hamlet's life, Guildenstern suddenly acts to kill the Player. Yet he immediately shirks responsibility for that action, claiming it was just the Player's destiny.



Guildenstern's one proactive action proves ineffectual and ends up contradicting the very point about death he killed the Player to demonstrate. An acted death can, as the Player proves, be believable, and Guildenstern, who claimed otherwise, has just believed one. The clarification about the trick blade establishes that, though the world of the play may be absurd, the humans in it are still mortal.



In an exhausted but still impatient voice, Guildenstern protests that death isn't like that "for us," that it's not "romantic" or "a game," that it's "not anything...is not...It's the absence of presence...a gap you can't see." Upstage is now entirely dark, leaving only Rosencrantz and Guildenstern visible near the front of the stage. Rosencrantz's applause falters and stops. Rosencrantz speaks, wondering what it was all about, asking why they couldn't "just stay put," crying that they've "done nothing wrong!" "didn't harm anyone. Did we?" Guildenstern says he can't remember. Rosencrantz, resolved now, says he doesn't care and is in fact relieved. Rosencrantz disappears but Guildenstern doesn't notice at first. When he does, he starts to call Rosencrantz's name, then his own. "Well, we'll know better next time," Guildenstern says, "Now you see me, now you—" and disappears.

"Immediately" the entire stage lights up and reveals the corpses of Claudius, Gertrude, Laertes, and Hamlet sprawled in court as in the last scene of [Hamlet](#). The corpses are in the same positions that the Tragedians' bodies were when they were playing dead. Horatio holds Hamlet while Fortinbras stands by with two ambassadors from England. Speaking actual lines from [Hamlet](#), one ambassador regrets having come too late to report to Claudius that, as ordered, "Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are dead." Horatio replies that Claudius never ordered their deaths. Horatio calls for "these bodies high on stage be placed to the view" and announces that he'll recount the events that brought this bloodbath about: "so shall you hear of carnal, bloody and unnatural acts," he says, "of deaths put on by cunning and forced cause, and, in this upshot, purposes mistook fallen on the inventors' heads." As Horatio speaks, the lights fade out and the play is overtaken by dark and music.

Yet in spite of having just been fooled by the Player's acted death, Guildenstern still maintains that death is unknowable, isn't actable. The utter unimaginability of death makes the absence of description ("a gap you can't see") the best possible description of it. Indeed, both Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's deaths are marked by each man's sudden disappearance, evoking Guildenstern's earlier characterization of death as "a man failing to reappear." Rosencrantz is at first upset by death's senselessness - that neither the events of their lives nor the fact of their deaths seems to be "about" anything specific. Yet unable, of course, to resist death, he vanishes.



The play ends with the bloodbath that concludes [Hamlet](#) and that the Player has alluded to all along. Shakespeare's script, which Rosencrantz and Guildenstern have experienced throughout the play as a non-negotiable force of control, has, as predicted, prevailed over them and commands the stage even after they've disappeared. The uttering of Stoppard's play's title by the English ambassador (combined with Horatio's promise to pass on the story) suggests a return to the play's beginning, triggering a potentially endless cycle of repetition (which is, of course, literally accurate: this play will be performed again and again). Guildenstern's penultimate words ("we'll know better next time") could be read as an allusion to the next production. And, of course, they won't know better: they'll do all the same things, be just as controlled by the play, and they will die.





HOW TO CITE

To cite this LitChart:

MLA

Ross, Margaret. "Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead." *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 18 Dec 2013. Web. 21 Apr 2020.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Ross, Margaret. "Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead." *LitCharts* LLC, December 18, 2013. Retrieved April 21, 2020. <https://www.litcharts.com/lit/rosencrantz-and-guildenstern-are-dead>.

To cite any of the quotes from *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* covered in the Quotes section of this LitChart:

MLA

Stoppard, Tom. *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*. Grove Press. 1967.

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Stoppard, Tom. *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*. New York: Grove Press. 1967.