

Reflections:

A Student Response Journal for...

*Rosencrantz and
Guildenstern Are Dead*
by Tom Stoppard

written by Rebecca Challman

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Background/Pre-reading

1. Tom Stoppard began his writing career, at the age of seventeen, as a freelance journalist and theatre critic. He loved the theatre, but thought he would be better at creating art than he was at critiquing it. He wrote his first play at the age of twenty-three. He did not have a major hit, however, until he reintroduced theatre audiences to the characters Rosencrantz and Guildenstern in 1967. It is ironic that a man who loves the theatre should become famous for a play that pokes fun at it. For, *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern are Dead* is not so much a story as it is a dialogue, which cleverly skewers the artificial nature of theatre.

Imagine you are a playwright and you have written a scathing play about one of society's cornerstones: family; religion; community; education; politics; or the legal system. Write a character monologue that clearly delineates your opinion.

2. *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern are Dead* is a black comedy based on a Shakespearean tragedy. In it, Tom Stoppard reveals how the events of *Hamlet* unfold for two of the play's minor characters. He basically asks himself, "What if the two spies from *Hamlet* had personalities? What if audiences could see events through the eyes of Ros and Guil?"

What if you could take two of literature's minor characters and turn them into stars? What original text and characters would you choose? Write a brief synopsis of the new work detailing your choices and the reasons behind them.

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3. Stoppard reveals the outcome of his play in the title that reads like a headline: *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern are Dead*. Of course, readers of *Hamlet* already know what happens to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. Think about the titles of other books and plays you have read. How often are they complete sentences? How many of them are one-word titles? Which makes for a better title, subjects or verbs? Is it better to name the protagonist in the title or the action of the plot?

Based on your own experience as a reader, how important is the title of a literary text? How much should it reveal about the plot? Imagine you have written your autobiography. Write a list of five titles that include a subject and a verb. Then write some one-word titles.

4. A blurb is the paragraph that describes the book one is about to read. The blurb for *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern are Dead* informs potential readers that the play made Tom Stoppard famous. It compares the book to Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*. The blurb also hints at both the comedic and tragic elements of the text and connects it to its source material, *Hamlet*.

A blurb should intrigue the reader, but not spoil the read by revealing too much. Write a blurb for the dust jacket that accompanies the story of your life. With what literary work would it compare?

Publishers select the best lines from the best reviews of a book to boast on the dust jacket. Write an emphatic, glowing three-line review of your autobiography.

5. The invisible forces of fate oppose Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. This opposition creates conflict, and conflict is essential to moving the play forward. As you read the play, keep in mind that fate, rather than a flesh and blood enemy, will prove to be the duo's ultimate antagonist.

In the story that is your life, what is your invisible antagonist? Do you battle time, body weight, laziness, procrastination, bad luck? Write a dialogue between you and the force that opposes you. Begin with the phrase, "You are the ruin of my existence because..."

Act One

6. The play opens on Rosencrantz and Guildenstern betting on a coin toss. Guildenstern loses repeatedly, as Rosencrantz always calls heads. Guildenstern displays his nervousness as he mutters about the laws of probability. These characters obviously feel confused about who they are and what they are doing. In a futile attempt to comprehend what is happening, Guildenstern asks Rosencrantz to tell him the first thing he remembers. Rosencrantz replies that he cannot remember, because “it was so long ago.” Thus, Stoppard highlights the fact that much of one’s sense of self comes from one’s memories.

Free write about your earliest memory. What role does it play in your identity? Separate the memories suggested to you by relatives and friends or family photos from events you clearly remember.

7. While Rosencrantz mulls over mundane matters, perpetually growing fingernails and non-growing toenails, Guildenstern turns out to be a philosopher. Philosophy is the critical study of a basic belief and its foundation, and to philosophize is to expound upon a philosophy or system of belief. Guildenstern philosophizes about the nature of illusion, probability, and reality. He seems, however, to do this to no effect. His musings do not lead to answers for him and his pal Rosencrantz.

Drawing on your own life experience, write an essay in which you philosophize about the nature of education. Can one receive an education only in a classroom? What is the purpose of getting an education? In what way is education necessary for a happy life? What constitutes a good education?

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8. Ros and Guil finally assemble enough pieces of their puzzling existence to establish that the king has summoned them. “It was urgent-a matter of extreme urgency, a royal summons, his very words: official business and no questions asked...”

Suppose the President of the U.S. summons you on an undisclosed matter. How would you respond? Write a journal entry detailing the preparations you would make.

9. Twice, Guildenstern uses a syllogism in an attempt to understand what is happening concerning the unlikely coin toss and the royal summons. A syllogism is a system of argument that employs a major and a minor premise, and a logical conclusion based on the veracity of those premises. For example: All humans will eventually die (major premise). You are a human (minor premise). Therefore, you will eventually die (conclusion). Construct your own syllogism to support your beliefs about a topic relevant to the themes of *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern are Dead*.
10. When the Player proffers his troupe for a private pornographic performance, Guildenstern, already nervous about his plight, loses his temper. Stoppard writes in the stage directions, “GUIL smashes the PLAYER across the face. The PLAYER recoils. GUIL stands trembling...” Stoppard further describes Guil as “shaking with rage and fright.”

Write a letter of apology to a friend to whom you have revealed a darker aspect of your character, such as anger, fear, resentment, or jealousy. Recount the event that triggered the negative emotion or behavior.

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11. At Elsinore, Guildenstern and Rosencrantz are uncomfortably aware that they are merely pawns, but they do not know who decides the next move. They want to decide what is wrong with Hamlet, as Claudius has requested, collect their reward, and go home. However, they feel as if they must remain where they are and await further instructions, so as not to exacerbate the confusion. Meanwhile, they mark time by playing a game of questions.

Team up with a classmate, and write your own game of wits in which you communicate only in questions. Remember, the game has no object other than to introduce new questions. Avoid statements, rhetoric, and repetition.

12. King Claudius reunites Rosencrantz and Guildenstern with their old school chum, his nephew, Hamlet. Hamlet welcomes them warmly, although he suspects they are there to do his uncle's bidding. Write Hamlet's diary entry about the meeting.
13. "This made for a kind of harmony and a kind of confidence. It related the fortuitous and the ordained into a reassuring union which we recognized as nature. 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...and for the last three minutes on the wind of a windless day I have heard the sound of drums and flute..."

Write a free-verse poem based on the above passage of Guildenstern's dialogue from the play. Employ metaphor, imagery, and sound.

14. Guildenstern uses the sighting of a unicorn to illustrate the nature of illusion. A unicorn, mystical when it appears to one, becomes a horse with an arrow in its head when seen by many.

Examine Guil's premise that illusion ceases to be mystical when it becomes the common experience. Drawing on experiences from your own life, write a short, short story about the magical morphing into the mundane.