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Individual Learning Packet

Teaching Unit

*Rosencrantz and  
Guildenstern are Dead*

by Tom Stoppard

written by Darlene Gilmore & Edwin F. Stevens

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# Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead

## INTRODUCTION

*Note to the Teacher: Because of the unusual nature of this play, we organized our Study Guide questions differently than we usually do.*

Since *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* is a literary allusion, the recommended use of this play is as an adjunct to Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. However, if the students have not read *Hamlet*, perhaps a synopsis of *Hamlet* should be given to them in the form of a narrative lecture with emphasis on the role of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern and Hamlet's attitude toward them. Another option could be to show a movie version of *Hamlet*. With this background, students could either discuss or write an answer to the following:

If you were in Rosencrantz/Guildenstern's position, how would you react to the situation in Elsinore? Specifically, how would you feel about being summoned to the court and being told by the King to spy on your friend? How would you view Hamlet and his "antic disposition"? Would you take your friend to his death, even if that execution were ordered by the King?

## EXISTENTIALISM

*Existentialism is a philosophy that views the individual as being unique and alone in an indifferent and even hostile environment.*

In emphasizing man's insecurity and loneliness, existentialists suggest that man has this anxiety because he has a sense of meaninglessness and that the world around him is meaningless. Since man does not have the ability to explain his existence, all he can do is try to face his experiences in a responsible way or escape them in weakness. The existentialist insists that the future is not fixed and humans are free to determine their own future. In so doing, man does not have any absolute values to guide him. The negative aspect of this is that, as man tries to act and make his experience meaningful, he feels absurd and, consequently, feels greater despair. The positive side is that man can challenge accepted principles and change society, if he acts from within and refuses to accept the assumptions of his society.

# Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead

## OBJECTIVES

*By the end of this unit, the student will be able to:*

1. discuss this play as tragi-comedy and in so doing
  - a. explain the tragic aspects
  - b. identify what is farcical
  - c. discuss the comical conversation. In this regard, the student should focus on
    - the witty use of language
    - dialogue as repartee
    - word games
2. determine the extent to which this play uses characteristics of *The Theatre of the Absurd*, (see activity page), and take into consideration the setting, characterization, and plot.
3. discuss the use of allusion in the play, and identify how this play is an allusion to Shakespeare's *Hamlet*.
4. discuss and explain the following themes:
  - a. Stoppard seems to suggest that man is living in the existential void where he has no sense of direction. Man can ask questions but can receive no answers; he can search for truth but can only make assumptions. Stoppard shows man to be a creative being confused by several levels of reality; he is a creature wondering what is "real."
  - b. People lose their identity as they get caught up in the motion and life of the group. Although people can make choices and exert "free will," they usually do not because they are being moved by forces they do not understand; as such, they are continuously caught "off balance."
  - c. Acceptance is the admirable and/or the heroic response of man hammered by forces that he is caught up in, cannot understand, and cannot seem to resist. One must admire the quiet dignity of man as he submits to these forces.
  - d. Because the play's protagonists, like the rest of us, are puppets or absurd clowns, they are the heroes of this tragi-comedy.
  - e. Stoppard seems to suggest death is only another aspect of the existential void; man just dissolves into darkness; therefore, death is defined as the absence of presence.
  - f. Like the existentialists, Stoppard questions the existence of God and he questions the belief that there is an omnipotent power watching over and caring for us.

# Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead

## STUDENT ACTIVITY SHEET (Teacher's Guide)

*After the questions are completed, the following summary activities can be given.*

1. Find three examples of dialogue that you find comical.

The following are three of the many possible answers:

*Pages 40-41*

*Rosencrantz: What do you think he means by remembrance?*

*Guildenstern: He doesn't forget his friends.*

*Rosencrantz: Would you care to estimate?*

*Guildenstern: Difficult to say, really—some kings tend to be amnesiac, others I suppose—the opposite, whatever that is...*

*Rosencrantz: Yes – but –*

*Guildenstern: Elephantine . . . ?*

*Rosencrantz: Not how long—how much?*

*Guildenstern: Retentive -he's a very retentive king, a royal retainer . . .*

*Rosencrantz: What are you playing at?*

*Guildenstern: Words, words. They're all we have to go on.*

*Page 70*

*Player: Well, it's [the dumb show] a device, really—it makes the action that follows more or less comprehensible; you understand, we are tied down to a language which makes up in obscurity what it lacks in style.*

*Pages 116-117*

*Guildenstern's description of Hamlet's madness – It really boils down to symptoms. Pregnant replies, mystic allusions, mistaken identities, arguing his father is his mother, that sort of thing; intimations of suicide, forgoing of exercise, loss of mirth, hints of claustrophobia not to say delusions of imprisonment, invocations of camels, chameleons, capons, whales, weasels, hawks, handsaws— riddles, quibbles, and evasions; amnesia, paranoia, myopia; day-dreaming, hallucinations; stabbing his elders, abusing his parents, insulting his lover, and appearing hatless in public—knock-kneed, droop-stockinged and sighing like a love-sick schoolboy, which at his age is coming on a bit strong.*

2. Using the characteristics of Theatre of the Absurd, show how three of these characteristics are present in this play.
- a. *Lack of conflict between meaningful forces.* Rosencrantz and Guildenstern passively submit to the forces of Claudius and Hamlet, which they (Rosencrantz and Guildenstern) do not understand. Although they consider questioning Hamlet more assertively, there is no real conflict. In addition, there is no inner conflict since they do not resist following orders and only mention they might have said no.
  - b. *Vague Exposition.* The only thing we know about Rosencrantz and Guildenstern is that they were friends of Hamlet.
  - c. *Character Motivation.* Why Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are so willing to obey Claudius is unclear. There is suggestion that Claudius may pay them or “remember them.”
  - d. *Absurdity.* Students may mention several bizarre, unreal incidents and behaviors. At the least, they may point out the scene with the pirates.
  - e. *A Focus on the inner mind, not external reality.* The play explores the inner world of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern’s anxiety as they wonder, “why them?”
  - f. *Use of Metaphors.* Students may point out several metaphors, but probably will not overlook the probability motif. The play is a metaphor of moving towards darkness away from the sun. The messenger comes at dawn; the play ends in darkness.
  - g. *Inability of humans to communicate and/or language as inadequate for communication.* Fragmented thought and conversation is part of the play’s style.
  - h. *The View of Life.* The despair and sense of futility is apparent.
  - i. *The View of Man.* Completion of their mission, as absurd as it is, gives meaning to their lives.
3. Using the definition for tragi-comedy, list three ways this play is both tragic and comic. The following are a few suggested examples:

*Farcical* - page 118 - When the pirates attack the ship and the characters hide in barrels.

*Comical* - page 116 - In reference to Hamlet, Rosencrantz says, “A compulsion toward philosophical introspection is his chief characteristic, if I may put it like that. It does not mean he is mad. It does not mean he isn’t. Very often, it does not mean anything at all. Which may or may not be a kind of madness.

*Tragic* - The laughter when the pirates attack is echoed by sadness. It is clear that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern will face their death. Students may mention any one of the number of references to their approaching death.

*Guildenstern - (broken):* We've traveled too far, and our momentum has taken over; we move idly toward eternity, without possibility of reprieve or hope of explanation.

*Rosencrantz;* suppose we just go on.

*Guildenstern:* Go where?

*Rosencrantz:* To England.

*Guildenstern:* England! That's a dead end.

*Some critics consider Rosencrantz and Guildenstern heroes of dark tragedy because they face unavoidable death with quiet acceptance.*

# Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead

## STUDENT ACTIVITY SHEET

1. Find three examples of dialogue that you find comical.
  
2. Using the characteristics of Theatre of the Absurd, show how three of these characteristics are present in this play.
  - a. *Lack of conflict between meaningful forces.*
  
  - b. *Vague Exposition.*
  
  - c. *Character Motivation.*
  
  - d. *Absurdity.*
  
  - e. *A Focus on the inner mind, not external reality.*
  
  - f. *Use of Metaphors.*
  
  - g. *Inability of humans to communicate and/or language as inadequate for communication.*
  
  - h. *The View of Life.*
  
  - i. *The View of Man.*



3. Using the definition for tragi-comedy, list three ways this play is both tragic and comic.

*Farcical* -

*Comical* -

*Tragic* -

# Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead

## TEST

### I. Character Identification

*Directions: The following are descriptions of the characters. Identify which character is being described by writing the letter of the character's name beside the statement. Use each name only once.*

- |                 |               |
|-----------------|---------------|
| A. Rosencrantz  | D. Claudius   |
| B. Guildenstern | E. The Player |
| C. Hamlet       | F. Albert     |

- \_\_\_ 1. Orders the execution of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern
- \_\_\_ 2. Sends a messenger telling Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to come to the castle.
- \_\_\_ 3. Has no objection to pornographic performances.
- \_\_\_ 4. Is a young boy who plays female roles.
- \_\_\_ 5. Places his hand under a player's foot in an effort to be noticed, and then pleads with Guildenstern not to leave him.
- \_\_\_ 6. Defines death as a failure to reappear.

## II. Quotations

*Directions: Select 5 of the following quotations. Identify the speaker, state the character that is being addressed, and explain the meaning.*

1. All your life you live so close to truth that it becomes a permanent blur in the corner of your eye and something nudges it into outline. It is like being ambushed by a grotesque.
2. Words, words. They're all we have to go on.
3. Wheels have been set in motion, and they have their own pace to which we are...-condemned.
4. You don't understand the humiliation of it—to be tricked out of the single assumption that makes our existence viable—that somebody is watching.
5. Truth is only that which is taken to be true. It's the currency of living. One acts on assumptions.
6. Death is the ultimate negative. Not-being.
7. We've traveled too far, and our momentum has taken over; we move idly toward eternity, without possibility of reprieve or hope of explanation.
8. Relax. Respond. That's what people do. You can't go through life questioning your situation at every turn.
9. There must have been a point somewhere at the beginning when we could have said no. But somehow we missed it.
10. Ay, sir, (a sponge) that soaks up the King's countenance, his rewards, his authorities . . . He keeps them, like an ape in the corner of his jaw, first mouthed, to be last swallowed. When he needs what you have gleaned, it is but squeezing you, and sponge, you shall be dry again.
11. At least we can still count on self-interest as a predictable factor.
12. The only thing that makes it bearable is the irrational belief that somebody interesting will come on in a minute....

### III. Multiple Choice

1. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern realize a sense of foreboding when
  - A. ninety-two coins spun consecutively have landed on heads.
  - B. the players lead them to Elsinore.
  - C. Claudius instructs them to find the cause of Hamlet's strange behavior.
  - D. Hamlet does not recognize them.
2. Throughout most of the play, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are
  - A. entertained by the players.
  - B. amused by Hamlet's antics.
  - C. waiting to be received by Claudius.
  - D. confused.
3. Who expects to be paid well by the King?
  - A. Alfred
  - B. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern
  - C. the messenger
  - D. Polonius
4. Hamlet's reaction to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern is one of
  - A. mistrust.
  - B. concern.
  - C. contempt.
  - D. Both A and C
5. The players are upset because
  - A. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern consider them vile for their offer of a performance with blood, violence and sex.
  - B. they feel no one is watching them.
  - C. the King was angered by their performance.
  - D. Both A and C
6. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are upset because
  - A. Hamlet does not recognize them.
  - B. they realize how painful Hamlet's situation is.
  - C. Claudius refuses to pay them.
  - D. they feel they are being used.

7. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern realize that they are only
  - A. a way for Claudius to antagonize Hamlet.
  - B. spectators; they have no control in the drama.
  - C. a way for Claudius to get rid of Hamlet.
  - D. Both A and C
8. The play explores the inner world of
  - A. Hamlet's torment.
  - B. the personality of the players.
  - C. the anger of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern.
  - D. the curiosity of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern.
9. It is clear that Stoppard has created Rosencrantz and Guildenstern as characters who
  - A. have no desire to understand truth.
  - B. have a death wish.
  - C. are caught in their own malicious scheming.
  - D. are unable to arrive at any understanding of their situation.
10. The reader knows Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are dead because
  - A. the player predicts it.
  - B. the messenger announces their death.
  - C. Hamlet orders it.
  - D. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are too foolish to be able to survive.

#### IV. Essay

1. Using the definition of existentialism given at the opening, write a well-supported multi-paragraph essay that explains how *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* may be considered an existential play.
2. Several references are made to the nature of "truth" throughout the play. Make a list of ideas or an outline that includes:
  1. the quotations where truth appears
  2. explanations of the meaning of these passages
  3. evidence in the play that supports the ideas expressed in the quotations. Each idea expressed should become a paragraph in your essay. Finally, conclude with your reaction to Stoppard's ideas on the nature of truth.

# Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead

## ANSWER KEY

### I. Character Identification

1. C
2. D
3. E
4. F
5. A
6. B

### II. Quotations

*Note to Teacher: If you are using essay #2, you may want to eliminate quotations #1 and #5. By including #1 and #5, some of the work of the essay has been done for the students.*

*Note: Since students may have difficulty remembering if Rosencrantz or Guildenstern made the statement, perhaps an acceptable answer could be Rosencrantz and Guildenstern speaking to each other. However, students should be able to distinguish the remarks of the player and Hamlet from those of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern.*

1. Page 39 - Guildenstern speaking to Rosencrantz: "The truth is too close to us for us to see it. When we do grasp an idea of it, we are startled."
2. Page 41 - Guildenstern speaking to Rosencrantz: "They don't really know what to expect, so all they can go on is what [the little] they have been told."
3. Page 60 - Guildenstern to Rosencrantz: "They are caught up in action; a chain of reactions, which they cannot control."
4. Page 63 - Player speaking to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern: "The player is upset because Rosencrantz and Guildenstern did not watch their performance earlier. Many critics feel that the player means that humans get a sense of worth from the feeling that others, including hopefully God, are aware of us all."
5. Page 67 - The player speaking to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern: "We do not know what is true, so we must make assumptions—come up with ideas of what we think is true."

6. Page 108 - Guildenstern speaking to Rosencrantz: "Rosencrantz is wondering if they are dead. Guildenstern's response is that the fact they are on a boat suggests that they still "are," that they still exist."
7. Page 121 - Guildenstern: "Quietly accepting the outcome of the situation, he feels he has no control over the forces; he cannot even hope for an explanation."
8. Page 66 - The player: Since man cannot know what is true or glean any answers to the questions he has, the player says just to respond to circumstances and not try to understand them.
9. Pages 125-126 - Guildenstern's final words: He realizes the possibility that he could have refused to do the King's bidding, the possibility that he could have exercised his free will. However, he points out that it did not occur to him to say no when he had the chance, so he missed his opportunity.
10. Pages 90-91 - Hamlet speaking to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern: He has called them sponges who are working for the King's favors. Hamlet points out to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern that once the King has used them they will be meaningless to him. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern do not understand him.
11. Page 14 - Guildenstern speaking to Rosencrantz: He means we can be sure that people will be motivated by self-interest. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are motivated by what they expect the King will pay them.
12. Page 41 - Rosencrantz speaking to Guildenstern: He is pointing out that humans hope for someone to interest them or provide relief from boredom or the sense of meaninglessness.

### III. Multiple Choice

- |      |       |
|------|-------|
| 1. A | 6. D  |
| 2. D | 7. B  |
| 3. B | 8. D  |
| 4. D | 9. D  |
| 5. B | 10. B |

#### IV. Essay Questions

1. Teachers can have students research existentialism using reference materials like *A Handbook to Literature*, or they can use the definition provided in the introduction. With this, students should find several of the following connections between the play and existentialist philosophy:
  - a. *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are not part of Elsinore; they have been sent for. They point out their awkwardness several times by saying that they do not belong there and constantly are wondering why they are there.*
  - b. *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern feel a hostility toward them from Hamlet and an indifference from the King.*
  - c. *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are extremely insecure about what they should do; they even try to rehearse.*
  - d. *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern cannot avoid being called by the King, which leads to their involvement with Hamlet's situation.*
  - e. *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern do face their situation. They try to decide how they should deal with it—they do not just relax and respond. In the end, they face their deaths and the fact that they could have said no.*
  - f. *Students can point out any of the statements made on truth and explain that Stoppard has made clear that there is no absolute truth to guide us, only assumptions. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern continually wonder "what direction" to go in.*
  - g. *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern do feel absurd because, in their attempts to understand and be recognized, they have felt only more meaningless.*

*A quote students may point to is Guildenstern: "Practically starting from scratch . . . an awakening . . . We have not been picked out . . . simply to be abandoned . . . set loose to find our own way. We are entitled to some direction, I would have thought."*

*This an existential statement of man's position in the world.*

2. Students should be aware that Stoppard is pointing out man's inability to know truth, that there are no absolutes, only assumptions. The following quotes may be used for support:
  - a. Page 39. See #1 of Test Quotations
  - b. Page 67. See #5 of Test Quotations
  - c. Page 66. See #8 of Test Quotations



# Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead

## STUDY GUIDE TEACHER'S COPY

*Some of the following statements about the play are true and some are false. You decide which is which, and find specific evidence in the play to support your decision. Use quotes where appropriate. Other questions require you to respond or explain.*

### Act I

1. Just as the play *Hamlet* begins with a sense of foreboding, so, too, does *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern*. True or False?

*True. Students should point out that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are troubled by the fact that they have been sent for. Page 18 - Guildenstern, "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."*

2. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern do search for an explanation for "the suspension of the laws of probability." True or False?

*True. Guildenstern says, "At least we can still count on self-interest as a predictable factor." On page 16 Guildenstern says, "One: I'm willing it... Two: time had stopped dead... Three: divine intervention..."*

3. According to Guildenstern, "The scientific approach to the examination of phenomena is a defense against the pure emotion of fear." Explain why.

*This is one way man copes with his loneliness and fear in an empty world. Since he does not understand the forces that control him, man questions and philosophizes, and studies that which he can see in order to dispel the fear of the unknown.*

4. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are confused about their identity. True or False?

*True. Rosencrantz introduces himself as Guildenstern. Stoppard is pointing out the "identity crisis" that many people feel.*

5. The interaction that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern have with the players is polite and follows the accepted conventions of what is “socially appropriate.” Comment on this in terms of what you read.

*Comments on this interaction will vary, but students should be aware of the following: The stage directions say, “Guildenstern smashes the player across the face...” Guildenstern (shaking with rage and fright). Students may explain this as Guildenstern being upset that the player wanted to give a pornographic performance.*

*Page 24 – Player: “We’ll stoop to anything if that’s your bent.”*

*Page 27 - “It could have been a tongueless dwarf... to point the way... but it’s this, is it? No dignity. . . only this –a comic pornographer and a rabble of prostitutes. . .”*

*The idea the Rosencrantz and Guildenstern met the players only by chance again reinforces the idea that man has, or feels he has, little control over his life.*

6. The actor implies that people are mainly interested in seeing blood, violence, and sex enacted. Comment on this in light of what you have read.

*Students may question the way in which Alfred is offered to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. Pertinent quotes are as follows:*

*Page 28 – Player: “We 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.”*

*Page 33 – Player: “We’re more of the blood love, and rhetoric school... I can do you blood and love without the rhetoric, and I can do you blood and rhetoric without love... but I can’t do love and rhetoric without blood. Blood is compulsory.”*

*The player says he wants to do blood whether people want to see it or not. Or perhaps he’s implying that violence is an intrinsic part of both.*

7. The focus of the play now changes; Hamlet, Claudius and Gertrude have become the main characters. True or False?

*False. Hamlet, Claudius, and Gertrude are minor characters. Stoppard has Hamlet and Ophelia mime the scene from **Hamlet** in which the disheveled Hamlet comes to Ophelia’s room, sighs, and stares at her as he backs out of the room. In **Hamlet**, Ophelia describes this. Claudius and Gertrude simply state their purpose in sending for Rosencrantz and Guildenstern.*

*Note that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern point out that they will obey these would-be commands.*

8. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern realize they are caught up in a situation over which they have no control. Although they feel compelled to take part in this situation, they would rather not. Yes, No, or Maybe?

*Yes. Page 41 – Guildenstern: “They’ve got us placed now; if we start moving around, we’ll all be chasing each other all night.”*

*Page 39 - Rosencrantz (a dying fall): “I want to go home. Which way did we come in?. . . We don’t owe anything to anyone.”*

*Guildenstern: “We’ve been caught up. Your smallest action sets off another somewhere else, and is set off by it. Keep an eye open. . .”*

*Rosencrantz: “For how long?”*

*Guildenstern: “Till events have played themselves out. There’s a logic at work—it’s all done for you, don’t worry.”*

9. In their helplessness, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are bored. Is this consistent or inconsistent with the impression that you got while reading this part?

*Page 41 - Rosencrantz: “I feel like a spectator, an appalling business. The only thing that makes it bearable is the irrational belief that somebody interesting will come on in a minute.”*

*Rosencrantz and Guildenstern amuse themselves with word games and flipping coins as they wait to be moved like pawns in a chess game where they are the playing pieces, not the players.*

10. Guildenstern sums up their situation by saying, “What a fine persecution, to be kept intrigued without ever quite being enlightened.” What is his point?

*He is expressing the theme of alienation. Man’s suffering is the result of his desire to understand his circumstances, of which he has no inability to control .*

11. Rosencrantz is disturbed by the fact that he does not know the answers to life’s questions. Guildenstern describes truth (page 39) as, “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.” Explain this and comment on it.

*This is a paradox that seems to imply that, although it is very close, most of the time man is unable to see truth; Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are unable to find answers to the questions they ask about what is confusing them. When certain realizations come, the truth frightens them.*

12. As Rosencrantz and Guildenstern rehearse how they can deal with and question Hamlet, they realize that they have no understanding of Hamlet's position. True or False?

*False. They are aware of the circumstances surrounding the death of Hamlet's father and the usurping of both crown and queen by Hamlet's Uncle Claudius.*

## Act II

*Note: The stage directions say that the conversation between Hamlet, Rosencrantz, and Guildenstern is "indecipherable." As far as the reader knows, this "indecipherable" conversation is the same conversation that they had in Hamlet.*

1. Upon reflection, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern feel that during their conversation with Hamlet, they were assertive and able to win Hamlet's trust. True or False?

*False. Hamlet has all the control. Rosencrantz says, "He murdered us." In the contest of wit, Rosencrantz feels that the score was 27-3, in Hamlet's favor. Rosencrantz goes on to point out that they could not "wade" Hamlet or "delve" into Hamlet's mind in any way.*

2. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are aware that they have lost their direction; as such, they are no longer able to determine the course of events in relation to themselves. Since they are being led and do not have or know their purpose (direction), it seems that they are reluctant to take any initiative in this action. In fact, they indicate that for them to assert their wills would be to make a show of power. In so doing, they would upset the course of events. Comment on this. Check page 60.

*On page 60 Guildenstern says, "Wheels have been set in motion, and they have their own pace, to which we are... condemned. Each move is dictated by a 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..."*

3. Stoppard points out that people stay passive even in the face of danger. True or False?

*True. Rosencrantz bellows, "Fire!" at the audience. As expected, the audience does not move just as Rosencrantz and Guildenstern do not "run" from the danger of being caught between the "fires" of Hamlet and Claudius. As Rosencrantz says, "He regards the audience with contempt. . . Not a move. They should burn to death in their shoes."*

*According to Stoppard, the question is — if there had been a real fire, would the audience have finally moved or moved in enough time?*

4. The players are profoundly disturbed by the fact that they feel no one is watching them, not even God. True, False, or Maybe?

*True. Page 63, Player: "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."  
The question students may want to discuss is, —Is man in a godless universe?*

5. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are offended by the pornographic aspects of the players. True or False?

*True. On page 65 Rosencrantz says: "By that, I don't mean your usual filth; you can't treat royalty like people with formal perverted desires. So give him [Hamlet] a good, clean show suitable for all the family."*

6. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are discussing and questioning "what is real." In their uncertainty about the meaning of things, they express confusion about reality. What specific things do they question, of what are they unsure or in doubt?

*Students should be aware that, in terms of the plot, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are unsure of the following:*

- the sincerity of the King's concern for Hamlet, as well as the King's intentions for them*
- Hamlet's position—the cause of Hamlet's antic disposition. Is Hamlet really mad?*

*If students have read Hamlet, they should be reminded of the thematic idea of appearance versus reality. The surface appearance is contrasted to the deeper or hidden reality. For example, while Claudius appears to be a concerned, competent King, he is guilty of murder, etc. In addition, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern appear as concerned friends to Hamlet but are really acting as "the King's men."*

*Consider also the levels of reality in terms of appearances versus what really is. Stoppard's point is that we are confused not only by appearances but also by what is real under the appearances!*

7. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are anxious to die and escape their meaningless lives. True or False?

*False. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern prefer to live under any circumstances. On page 71 Rosencrantz says: "Life in a box is better than no life at all."*

*Guildenstern: "But we don't know what's going on, or what to do with ourselves. We only know what we're told, and that's little enough. And for all we know, it isn't even true."*

*Player: "For all anyone knows, nothing is. Everything has to be taken on trust; truth is only that which is taken to be true."*

8. The advice the player gives Rosencrantz and Guildenstern is to “Relax. Respond. That’s what people do. You can’t go through life questioning your situation at every turn.” The player points out that “One acts on assumption since it is impossible to be sure of what is true.” Do you think people should question what is true; or should they, as the player suggests, just respond to events as they are on the surface and accept the assumptions that are honored by others as truth?

*Opinions will vary, but Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are clearly searching for the truth in respect to the following:*

- they want to know what is their “mission” , why they were summoned*
- they search for their own identity*
- they attempt to determine what is the cause of Hamlet’s “unusual” behavior*

9. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are disturbed because they think they are being used, that they are insignificant. True or False?

*True. Rosencrantz, page 71, “They don’t care. We count for nothing. We have no control. They’re taking us for granted!”*

10. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern point out that most people have illusions about their own importance because most people do not realize they will die. True or False?

*False. Rosencrantz says, “We must be born with an intuition of mortality.” However, he says that humans desire a sense of worth while they live. Most people believe they will have an eternal life.*

11. When Hamlet appears, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern want to confront him directly and honestly about what is going on. Do they? Explain.

*No. On page 74 Rosencrantz says: “A chance... one might well... accost him. . . something on the lines of a direct informal approach.” Stage directions (he has moved toward Hamlet, but his nerve fails. He returns.) “We’re overawed, that’s our trouble!”*

12. As the players return to rehearse, once again Rosencrantz and Guildenstern feel lost and insignificant in the midst of so much “purposeful” activity. What do they do and why?

*Rosencrantz deliberately puts his hand under the player’s foot. Then he grabs Guildenstern and says, “Don’t leave me.” They want attention.*

13. At the same time, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern realize that they are only spectators in the drama between Claudius and Hamlet; they have no chance of influencing the action. True or False?

*True. When Rosencrantz goes up to Ophelia, Guildenstern says, “Keep back, we’re spectators.”*

14. The next pages are a description of the mime of the players and, at the same time, a summary of Hamlet. The focus this time is, however, the outcome of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern in the drama. Stoppard is suggesting that as “art is a mirror of life,” in life no person is a minor character; we are all major characters in the drama of our own lives. The player points out the question of the drama of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern when he says of them, “Traitors hoist by their own petard or victims of the gods?—we shall never know!” In your opinion are Rosencrantz and Guildenstern traitors or victims?

*“Hoist by their own petard”—suffering harm as a result of one’s own cleverness or scheming. Are Rosencrantz and Guildenstern responsible for their own demise in their efforts to gain the King’s favors (probably material gain), or are they victims of a malicious King? Students may point out that “we will never know.”*

15. At the end of the mime Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are, in a sense, looking at their own death. Do they see death as a glorious, dramatic event?

*No. Guildenstern’s description of death is, “It’s just a man failing to reappear; that’s all—now you see him, now you don’t.” (Pg. 84)*

16. When Hamlet confronts Rosencrantz and Guildenstern with what Hamlet considers their betrayal of him, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern clearly do not understand what Hamlet means. True or False?

*True. On pages 90-91 Rosencrantz: “Take you me for a sponge, my lord?”*

*Hamlet: “Ay, sir, that soaks up the King’s continence, his rewards, his authorities. But such officers do the King best service in the end. . .”*

*Rosencrantz: “I understand you not, my lord,”*

*Hamlet: “I am glad of it; a knavish speech sleeps in a foolish ear.”*

17. At this point in the play Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are shown to be helpless. Yes, No, or Maybe?

*Opinions will vary. Students may point out that Claudius is giving Rosencrantz and Guildenstern orders which they try to obey; however, they are thwarted by Hamlet. Then, in the scene where Hamlet leads Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to bow to the King, who is not there, Hamlet turns and walks off. When the King enters behind them, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are startled.*

18. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are completely perplexed at the end of this act. They do not know why they are bringing Hamlet to England or if they will return. They have a sense of their own death. True or False?

*True. Page 94, Guildenstern: “Autumnal—nothing to do with leaves. It is to do with a certain brownness at the edges of day... Brown is creeping up on us, take my word for it. If we go, there’s no knowing.”*

*Rosencrantz: “No knowing what?”*

*Guildenstern: “If we’ll ever come back.”*



## Act III

1. Since this scene “opens in pitch darkness,” it signifies that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are convinced that they are dead. True or False?

*False (page 97). They know they are alive because they can think, talk, and feel.*

*Guildenstern, “You can feel, can’t you?”*

*Rosencrantz, “Ah! There’s life in me yet!”*

2. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are convinced that they are free of Hamlet and Claudius. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern believe that they will not have to deal with either Hamlet or Claudius again. True or False?

*False. They realize they are free only for a time. Guildenstern says, “We have not been cut loose... we are brought round full circle to face the single immutable fact that we, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, bearing letters from one king to another, are taking Hamlet to England.”*

3. Acting for the King has given Rosencrantz and Guildenstern a sense of purpose; they seem committed to following it through. True or False?

*True. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern speak of being at loose ends when this mission is finished.*

*Rosencrantz: “We take Hamlet to the English King, we hand over the letter; what then?”*

*Guildenstern: “There may be something in the letter to keep us going a bit.”*

*Rosencrantz: “And if not?”*

*Guildenstern: “Then that’s it, we’re finished.”*

*Rosencrantz: “At a loose end?”*

4. Guildenstern defines death as, “the ultimate negative. Not being.” What does that mean?

*At this point, students may discuss physical death vis a vis life of the spirit. Teachers could bring up the following question: Do you think Stoppard is suggesting there is no eternal spiritual life? Students should be reminded that earlier in the play the idea that there is a God watching us is questioned.*

5. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern believe the only thing for them to do is to perform the task set down for them. True or False?

*True. Rosencrantz: “All right! We don’t question, we don’t doubt. We perform.”*

6. When Rosencrantz and Guildenstern read the letter from the King and realize it is an order for Hamlet’s death, they decide to act as Hamlet’s friends and destroy the letter. True or False?

*False. Guildenstern: “We are little men, we don’t know the ins and outs of the matter. There are wheels within wheels, etc. It would be presumptuous of us to interfere with the designs of fate or even of kings. . . .”*



7. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern realize that Hamlet has taken the letter ordering his death and replaced it with another. True or False?

*False (page 112). Hamlet does this while Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are sleeping. Rosencrantz says the next morning: "The position, as I see it, then... we don't know what's in the letter; we take Hamlet to the English King..."*

8. When Rosencrantz and Guildenstern discover that the players are on the boat, they understand that the King has sent the players to secure Hamlet's delivery to the English King and death. True or False?

*False. The player explains, "Our play offended the King... We had to run for it just as we were."*

9. What do Rosencrantz and Guildenstern decide about Hamlet?

*They say he has symptoms of madness.*

*Rosencrantz: "A compulsion toward philosophical introspection is his chief characteristic... It does not mean he is mad."*

*Guildenstern: "It really boils down to symptoms."*

10. After Hamlet escapes with the pirates, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern feel compelled to complete their mission, even when they realize the new letter is ordering their death. True, False, or Maybe?

*True (page 121). Guildenstern (broken): "We've traveled too far, and our momentum has taken over; we move idly toward eternity, without possibility of reprieve or hope or explanation."*

*Guildenstern: "Where we went wrong 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..."*

11. Again, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern discuss the significance of death. This time, as they approach their death, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern decide they will die a heroic death; they conclude that death is romantic. Is this consistent or inconsistent with your interpretation?

*Inconsistent. Guildenstern says: "Dying is not romantic, and death is not a game which will soon be over... Death is not anything..."*

12. The play ends with the announcement of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's deaths. However, before Guildenstern disappears, he says, "There must have been a moment, at the beginning, where we could have said no. But somehow we missed it. Well, we'll know better next time. Now you see me, now you—" Do you believe that they, that people, could refuse to be passive to the pressures of conformity and "take arms against a sea of troubles, and by opposing, end them"?

*Opinions will vary, but students should be encouraged to discuss the issue of free will and man's ability to, as Rosencrantz puts it, "put a spoke in their wheel."*

# Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead

## STUDY GUIDE STUDENT COPY

*Some of the following statements about the play are true and some are false. You decide which is which, and find specific evidence in the play to support your decision. Use quotes where appropriate. Other questions require you to respond or explain.*

### Act I

1. Just as the play *Hamlet* begins with a sense of foreboding, so, too, does *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern*. True or False?
2. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern do search for an explanation for “the suspension of the laws of probability.” True or False?
3. According to Guildenstern, “The scientific approach to the examination of phenomena is a defense against the pure emotion of fear.” Explain why.
4. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are confused about their identity. True or False?
5. The interaction that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern have with the players is polite and follows the accepted conventions of what is “socially appropriate.” Comment on this in terms of what you read.

6. The actor implies that people are mainly interested in seeing blood, violence, and sex enacted. Comment on this in light of what you have read.
7. The focus of the play now changes; Hamlet, Claudius and Gertrude have become the main characters. True or False?
8. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern realize they are caught up in a situation over which they have no control. Although they feel compelled to take part in this situation, they would rather not. Yes, No, or Maybe?
9. In their helplessness, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are bored. Is this consistent or inconsistent with the impression that you got while reading this part?
10. Guildenstern sums up their situation by saying, "What a fine persecution, to be kept intrigued without ever quite being enlightened." What is his point?
11. Rosencrantz is disturbed by the fact that he does not know the answers to life's questions. Guildenstern describes truth (page 39) as, "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." Explain this and comment on it.
12. As Rosencrantz and Guildenstern rehearse how they can deal with and question Hamlet, they realize that they have no understanding of Hamlet's position. True or False?

## Act II

1. Upon reflection, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern feel that during their conversation with Hamlet, they were assertive and able to win Hamlet's trust. True or False?
2. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are aware that they have lost their direction; as such, they are no longer able to determine the course of events in relation to themselves. Since they are being led and do not have or know their purpose (direction), it seems that they are reluctant to take any initiative in this action. In fact, they indicate that for them to assert their wills would be to make a show of power. In so doing, they would upset the course of events. Comment on this. Check page 60.
3. Stoppard points out that people stay passive even in the face of danger. True or False?
4. The players are profoundly disturbed by the fact that they feel no one is watching them, not even God. True, False, or Maybe?
5. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are offended by the pornographic aspects of the players. True or False?
6. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are discussing and questioning "what is real." In their uncertainty about the meaning of things, they express confusion about reality. What specific things do they question, of what are they unsure or in doubt?

7. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are anxious to die and escape their meaningless lives. True or False?
8. The advice the player gives Rosencrantz and Guildenstern is to “Relax. Respond. That’s what people do. You can’t go through life questioning your situation at every turn.” The player points out that “One acts on assumption since it is impossible to be sure of what is true.” Do you think people should question what is true; or should they, as the player suggests, just respond to events as they are on the surface and accept the assumptions that are honored by others as truth?
9. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are disturbed because they think they are being used, that they are insignificant. True or False?
10. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern point out that most people have illusions about their own importance because most people do not realize they will die. True or False?
11. When Hamlet appears, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern want to confront him directly and honestly about what is going on. Do they? Explain.
12. As the players return to rehearse, once again Rosencrantz and Guildenstern feel lost and insignificant in the midst of so much “purposeful” activity. What do they do and why?

13. At the same time, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern realize that they are only spectators in the drama between Claudius and Hamlet; they have no chance of influencing the action. True or False?
14. The next pages are a description of the mime of the players and, at the same time, a summary of Hamlet. The focus this time is, however, the outcome of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern in the drama. Stoppard is suggesting that as “art is a mirror of life,” in life no person is a minor character; we are all major characters in the drama of our own lives. The player points out the question of the drama of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern when he says of them, “Traitors hoist by their own petard or victims of the gods?—we shall never know!” In your opinion are Rosencrantz and Guildenstern traitors or victims?
15. At the end of the mime Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are, in a sense, looking at their own death. Do they see death as a glorious, dramatic event?
16. When Hamlet confronts Rosencrantz and Guildenstern with what Hamlet considers their betrayal of him, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern clearly do not understand what Hamlet means. True or False?
17. At this point in the play Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are shown to be helpless. Yes, No, or Maybe?
18. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are completely perplexed at the end of this act. They do not know why they are bringing Hamlet to England or if they will return. They have a sense of their own death. True or False?

### Act III

1. Since this scene “opens in pitch darkness,” it signifies that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are convinced that they are dead. True or False?
2. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are convinced that they are free of Hamlet and Claudius. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern believe that they will not have to deal with either Hamlet or Claudius again. True or False?
3. Acting for the King has given Rosencrantz and Guildenstern a sense of purpose; they seem committed to following it through. True or False?
4. Guildenstern defines death as, “the ultimate negative. Not being.” What does that mean?
5. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern believe the only thing for them to do is to perform the task set down for them. True or False?
6. When Rosencrantz and Guildenstern read the letter from the King and realize it is an order for Hamlet’s death, they decide to act as Hamlet’s friends and destroy the letter. True or False?



7. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern realize that Hamlet has taken the letter ordering his death and replaced it with another. True or False?
8. When Rosencrantz and Guildenstern discover that the players are on the boat, they understand that the King has sent the players to secure Hamlet's delivery to the English King and death. True or False?
9. What do Rosencrantz and Guildenstern decide about Hamlet?
10. After Hamlet escapes with the pirates, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern feel compelled to complete their mission, even when they realize the new letter is ordering their death. True, False, or Maybe?
11. Again, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern discuss the significance of death. This time, as they approach their death, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern decide they will die a heroic death; they conclude that death is romantic. Is this consistent or inconsistent with your interpretation?
12. The play ends with the announcement of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's deaths. However, before Guildenstern disappears, he says, "There must have been a moment, at the beginning, where we could have said no. But somehow we missed it. Well, we'll know better next time. Now you see me, now you—" Do you believe that they, that people, could refuse to be passive to the pressures of conformity and "take arms against a sea of troubles, and by opposing, end them"?

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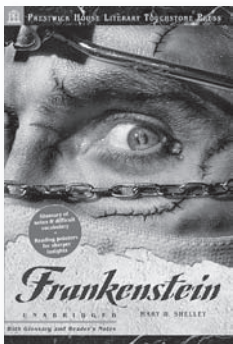
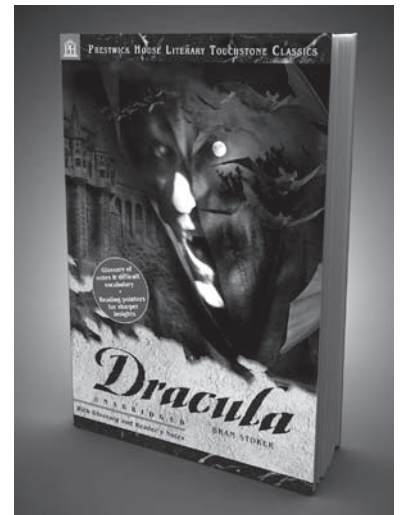
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ITEM NO	TITLE	QUANTITY	X	PRICE	=	TOTAL

### Method of Payment (Choose one)

☐ Check or Money Order Enclosed

☐ Visa ☐ MasterCard ☐ Discover Card ☐ American Express

☐ Purchase Order Enclosed

We accept purchase orders and authorized orders charged to institutions. Personal orders not on a credit card must be accompanied by a check.

Signature \_\_\_\_\_

Telephone # \_\_\_\_\_

Exp. Date \_\_\_\_\_

Credit Card #

<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>
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Because charges for air delivery are based on weight and distance, heavy packages can be expensive to ship air freight. Typographic and photographic errors are subject to revision. Prestwick House is the sole source of all proprietary materials listed in this catalogue. Please be sure to include a street address. FedEx ground/UPS will not deliver to a P.O. Box.

Subtotal \$ \_\_\_\_\_

Shipping 12% S&H (\$6.00 minimum) \$ \_\_\_\_\_

Total \$ \_\_\_\_\_

### Shipping & Handling

For orders of \$50.00 or less, please add \$6.00 for shipping and handling charges. For orders from \$50.01 to \$799.99 add 12%. For orders of \$800.00 and more, add 10%.

### Delivery Service

Most orders are shipped FedEx and you can expect delivery within 7-10 working days. Items in stock are usually shipped within one working day of receiving your order.

### Expedited Delivery

for expedited delivery ask about the following options:

- Overnight Air
- 2nd day air
- 3 Day Select