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Advanced Placement in
English Literature and Composition

Individual Learning Packet

Teaching Unit

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead

by Tom Stoppard

Written by Stephanie Polukis

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Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead

Objectives

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

1. explain why *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead* is an existential play, addressing the following motifs:
 - the focus is on the concrete world.
 - existence precedes essence.
 - people are free, and freedom results in angst.
 - reason is an illusion.
 - people are isolated and alienated from one another.
 - absurdity is the natural state of existence.
2. analyze how puns work and explain how their use contributes to a theme in the play.
3. examine how stage directions help reveal the tone and intention of a line.
4. determine the conventions used to establish the setting and framework for the play's action.
5. explain how comedy is created in the play.
6. identify and explain the function of various literary devices in the text, including allusion, simile, and metaphor.
7. analyze the way dramatic irony heightens the level of suspense in the play.
8. respond to multiple choice questions similar to those that will appear on the Advanced Placement in English Literature and Composition exam.
9. respond to writing prompts similar to those that will appear on the Advanced Placement in English Literature and Composition exam.
10. offer a close reading of *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead* and support all assertions and interpretations with direct evidence from the text, from authoritative critical knowledge of the genre, or from authoritative criticism of the novel.

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead

Background Lecture

Tom Stoppard Biography

Sir Tom Stoppard, birth name Tomáš Straussler, was born July 3, 1937, in Zlín, Czechoslovakia. Straussler survived a chaotic childhood, emigrating around Europe and southern Asia throughout World War II. When Straussler was still an infant, the Nazis invaded his country, and his family, along with other Jews, was forced to leave and seek refuge in Singapore. Unfortunately, their residence there was also short, and when the Japanese invaded, his family made a second move to Darjeeling, India, in 1941.

While in India, Straussler went to school at the Mount Hermon School and received a standard English education. When his mother married Kenneth Stoppard, a major in the British army, Straussler adopted his surname, moved to Great Britain, and finished his education at the Dolphin School, Nottinghamshire, and the Pocklington School of Yorkshire.

Stoppard never went to college, and at age 17, he began writing for the *Bristol Evening World* newspaper. In 1960, he wrote his first play, *A Walk On the Water* (renamed *Enter a Free Man* in 1968), which was staged in Hamburg and broadcast on British Independent Television. From 1962-1963, he wrote as a drama critic for *Scene* magazine, and then resumed his career as a playwright, writing such plays as *The Real Inspector Hound* (1968), *Travesties* (1974), *The Coast of Utopia* (2004), *Rock 'n' Roll* (2006), and his most famous, *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead* (1966).

History of the Play

The first iteration of Stoppard's play was written in 1964, and, unlike its modern counterpart, was only one act long and under the title *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Meet King Lear*. Inspiration for the play came from a theater outing that Stoppard had with his agent Kenneth Ewing. The two men saw a performance of *Hamlet* at the Old Vic Theater in London, and Ewing commented that there should be a story about what happens to the two absentminded courtiers after they leave Denmark. Ewing joked that, depending on when in time one set the Hamlet legend, they might actually have encountered King Lear. Stoppard, using this idea as inspiration, created the play.

With the addition of two more acts to the play and a change in title, *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead* was performed at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe on August 24, 1966. Afterward, it debuted on the London stage at the Old Vic theater, premiering on April 11, 1967.

On October 9, 1967, the show opened on Broadway at the Alvin Theater. A year later, it moved to the Eugene O'Neill Theater. The play was an instant success, winning Tony Awards for Best Play, Best Scenic Design in a Play, Best Costume Design in a Play, and Best Producer. It closed on October 19, 1968 after 420 performances and with several accolades.

The play had a New York revival at the Union Square Theatre from April 29th-June 28th, 1987, and has since been performed frequently and nationwide by the American Shakespeare Center. It was also adapted into a film, directed by Tom Stoppard and starring Tim Roth, Gary Oldman, and Richard Dreyfuss.

Existentialism

Existentialism is a philosophy that was introduced in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, and its development is attributed to a variety of prolific thinkers and writers, including Søren Kierkegaard and Friedrich Nietzsche. However, there were great differences between the philosophies of the originators, and it was not until Gabriel Marcel united the ideas under the label “Existentialism” that the principles became unified into one philosophy.

While there are some differences in the philosophies of the prominent existentialist thinkers, the following are some of the basic tenets:

- **The focus is on the concrete world:** In the philosophy of existentialism, “What you see is what you get.” Nothing exists beyond the physical world or what can be perceived and experienced by the individual (existence). There is no God, transcendence, sublime ideas, archetypes, a greater good, or predestination.

In *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead*, observe how the main characters are restricted within the limits of the stage—the metaphoric concrete world. The main characters never leave it, and the conflict and other characters are brought onstage to them. If anything of importance occurs offstage, messengers present the courtiers with information of what has happened. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern never actively seek what exists beyond the stage, but instead, passively receive intelligence about it.

- **Existence precedes essence:** A person does not have an “essence” that determines who or what he or she is; instead, individuals are defined by what they do and how they think.

For instance, a woman is a painter because she paints; she does not have an innate quality or predetermined purpose driving her action. If, tomorrow, she decides to write, she will become a writer. In this way, a person creates his or her own purpose and meaning. On several occasions in the play, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern confuse themselves for one another, and they can be either “Rosencrantz” or “Guildenstern” at will. This suggests that there is no essence connected with either identity.

- **People are free, and freedom results in angst:** Since there is no predestination and people are free to create their own meaning, they alone are responsible for their actions. The individual controls how he or she will act in the environment and, more importantly, how he or she will perceive and understand it. This results in angst, for individuals cannot blame an outside influence for the consequences of their actions.

An example that Kierkegaard provides is a man standing on a cliff. Not only does he fear accidentally falling over the edge, but he dreads the possibility that he could throw himself off as well. Why would he do that, or more importantly, why would he not? The decision is the man's alone and is not influenced by any outside force. The man is entirely responsible for his actions, and it is not predetermined that he will not jump from the cliff, nor that he will.

On several occasions, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern express anxiety when given complete responsibility for their actions, and they wish they could be led or guided, instructed on what to do. Guildenstern temporarily deludes himself into thinking that fate, universal laws, or reason dictate cause and effect, but eventually finds that nothing exists but personal choice.

An especially relevant passage relating to this motif comes from Act I:

Guildenstern: ...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, even without the innocence, a child—it's like being given a prize, an extra slice of childhood when you least expect it, as a prize for being good, or compensation for never having had one...

- **Reason is an illusion:** Individuals find meaning in subjectivity, through their own individual experiences. Reason does not exist, because to believe in reason, a person must believe in underlying rules and principles that govern thought. To believe in reason, therefore, is to give responsibility to a force or idea other than the self. According to the existentialist, reason is only a scapegoat that people hold accountable for how and what they think. One scene that deals with this motif, in particular, is the coin-tossing scene at the beginning of the play: The coins all turn up heads, defying the law of probability. Guildenstern attempts to explain the phenomena through other natural, mathematical, and even economic laws, but he is always unsuccessful.
- **People are isolated and alienated from one another:** Although an individual acknowledges that there are other thinking, sentient beings around him or her, the individual is isolated and alone. There are no universal or societal rules connecting humankind, and there are no collective ideas or moral codes. Each person has a unique meaning and experience, and, as such, is dissociated from others. Notice the way in which Guildenstern frequently gives speeches on philosophical thoughts and ideas, but Rosencrantz is unable to comprehend him. Guildenstern is completely alone and isolated, unable to communicate his thoughts to another person, even his closest friend. The inability to communicate effectively is another motif addressed in this play, especially through the use of puns. When there is ambiguity about a word, characters may interpret a sentence in different ways and never understand the intended meaning. For instance, examine the pun in Act Three:

Rosencrantz: So we've got a letter which explains everything.

Guildenstern: You've got it. *Rosencrantz takes that literally. He starts to pat his pockets, etc.* What's the matter?

Rosencrantz: The letter.

Although Guildenstern means to ask whether Rosencrantz “got it,” meaning comprehending the idea, Rosencrantz thinks his friend is asking if he physically has the letter. Rosencrantz never discovers what his friend meant to say, and instead, the two courtiers have an argument about to whom Claudius gave the message.

- **Absurdity is the natural state of existence:** There are no morality and fairness in the universe, nor is there cause and effect. The individual must focus on the present situation instead of relying on past experience to predict future events.

For example, a man decides that he is going to throw a ball into the air. The last time he performed this action, the ball went into the sky and then plummeted back to the earth. In fact, the same thing happened the past five times he threw the ball. However, according to the existentialist, past experience does not dictate future events, and he could very well have an encounter with the absurd. This time, the ball could grow wings and fly away. Aside from the coin-tossing scene in Act I, most of the time when one of the courtiers asks the other what Hamlet is doing offstage, he asks whether Hamlet is doing something completely irrational. While Hamlet is mad, it appears as though these acts demonstrating absurdity are completely normal.

Guildenstern:What’s he doing?

Rosencrantz: Nothing.

Guildenstern:He must be doing something.

Rosencrantz: Walking.

Guildenstern:On his hands?

Rosencrantz: No, on his feet.

Guildenstern:Stark naked?

Rosencrantz: Fully dressed.

Guildenstern:Selling toffee apples?

Rosencrantz: Not that I noticed.

Guildenstern:You could be wrong.

Rosencrantz: I don’t think so.

Existentialism gained widespread acceptance in Europe around the time of World War II. Its principles were included in the works of several playwrights and fiction writers, including Jean-Paul Sartre, Franz Kafka, Fyodor Dostoevsky, Albert Camus, Samuel Beckett, Simone de Beauvoir, and Tom Stoppard.

The Theatre of the Absurd

The term Theatre of the Absurd was coined by theater critic and playwright Martin Esslin in 1961 to refer to a group of plays containing several of the following characteristics:

- tragicomedy – as the name suggests, an amalgamation of tragic and comedic elements
- a setting that is completely irrational and absurd
- stereotypical characters who often speak in colloquialisms and clichés
- a pair of main characters who are inseparable and dependent on each other
- puns, ambiguous words or phrases, and nonsensical speech, emphasizing the inability of human beings to form a true connection or understanding
- a generally cyclical plot filled with repetitive action, unresolved conflicts, and a focus on absence and nothingness

The best-known absurdist playwrights include Samuel Beckett, Harold Pinter, Jean Genet, and Tom Stoppard.

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead

Practice Free Response Questions

Practice Free Response Question #1

Novelists and playwrights often place their characters into situations devised to explore philosophical issues like the conflict between fate and free will. Write a well-reasoned and -supported essay in which you explore how Tom Stoppard creates and develops this conflict in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*. Do not merely summarize the plot.

Practice Free Response Question #2

Metafiction is a self-reflective type of fiction that discusses, describes, or analyzes itself and its conventions as a work of fiction, often posing questions about the relationship between fiction and reality. Write a well-organized essay in which you describe how Stoppard employs metafictional techniques in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* and analyze their purpose. Avoid mere plot summary.

Practice Free Response Question #3

It is very important for playwrights and novelists to create a unique voice for each character in the play or novel. Choose a character from Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* and write a well-supported essay in which you explain how this character's manner of speaking—not merely what he or she says—helps to characterize him or her.

Practice Free Response Question #4

Literature from the absurdist school of the early- to mid-twentieth century is often as much about *ideas* as it is about characters and events. In a well-reasoned and -organized essay, analyze Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* as a play of ideas.

Practice Free Response Question #5

Read the scene at the very beginning of Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* in which the two titular characters are playing their coin-toss game. Then, in a well-organized essay, analyze how this scene establishes the reader's expectations for what is to come in the play and how each character's role in the play is established. Do not merely summarize the plot.

Practice Free Response Question #6

Read the scene from Act 2 of Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* in which the two characters discuss the horror of death, beginning with Rosencrantz's line, "Nor do I, really . . . It's silly to be depressed by it," and ending with the grand procession of Claudius, Gertrude, Polonius, and Ophelia. Then write a well-reasoned and -supported essay in which you analyze the sources of comedy in the scene and how the comedy in this scene contributes to the overall meaning of the play. Do not merely summarize the plot.

Practice Free Response Question #7

Read the scene from Act 3 of Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* that begins with the opening of the act and ends with Rosencrantz's line, "But we've got nothing to go on, we're out on our own." Then, write a well-organized essay in which you examine Stoppard's use of language, rhetoric, and logic to establish sympathy for the characters with the audience. Examine especially the role of ambiguity, wordplay, and fallacy in creating Stoppard's intended effect.

Practice Free Response Question #8

Read the scene from near the end of Act 3 of Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, beginning with Rosencrantz's line, "We have a letter—" and ending with his line, "We've done nothing wrong! We didn't harm anyone. Did we?" Then write a well-reasoned essay in which you demonstrate how this scene might contain the climax of the play. Do not merely summarize the plot.

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Practice Multiple-Choice Questions

Practice Multiple-Choice Questions 1 – 5

Carefully read the passage from Act I of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, beginning with Rosencrantz's line, "It couldn't have been real," and ending with "Indifferent." Then, select the best answers to the following multiple-choice questions.

1. Guildenstern "demolish[es]" the argument that "yellow is a mystical experience shared by everybody" by
 - A. revealing the impossibility of having a universal mystical experience.
 - B. showing that no human being has the ability to truly experience reality.
 - C. demonstrating that colors cannot be distinguished from one another.
 - D. exposing the person making the argument as incapable of deductive reasoning.
 - E. arguing that human beings cannot have a collective experience.
2. If the tragedians are intended to be a parody of a theater troupe during Shakespeare's time, Stoppard would be saying all of the following about Elizabethan tragedians EXCEPT that they
 - A. performed plays that were adapted from Italian ones.
 - B. exploited and abused young male actors.
 - C. tended to display scenes that were violent and sensual.
 - D. performed on public roads instead of in indoor theaters.
 - E. had to compete with child theater troupes.
3. Guildenstern's response, "He knew all along it was a band," expresses feelings of
 - A. melancholy.
 - B. acquiescence.
 - C. malevolence.
 - D. indifference.
 - E. disorientation.
4. It appears that Guildenstern is disgusted by the tragedians' performance of *The Rape of the Sabine Women* because it is
 - A. morbid.
 - B. commonplace.
 - C. inaccurate.
 - D. gauche.
 - E. perverted.

5. What is indicated in the Player's remark that the tragedians are not "not exclusively players" but are instead, "inclusively players?"
- A. The Player thinks the courtiers are fools and should be deceived.
 - B. The tragedians give exhibitions as part of their job.
 - C. The Player distrusts Rosencrantz and is unwilling to perform.
 - D. The tragedians give performances only to wealthy patrons.
 - E. The Player is eager to include lewd acts in the performance.

Practice Multiple-Choice Questions 6 – 10

Carefully read the passage from Act I of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, beginning with Rosencrantz's line, "I want to go home" and ending with "Words, words. They're all we have to go on." Then, select the best answers to the following questions.

6. The stage note "(the nursemaid)" indicates that Guildenstern says the subsequent lines in a manner that is
 - A. condescending.
 - B. immature.
 - C. comforting.
 - D. rational.
 - E. emotional.
7. When Guildenstern says that each of the names, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, "is...plausible, without being instinctive," which of the following existential ideas does he address?
 - A. People are isolated from one another.
 - B. Absurdity is the natural state of being.
 - C. Freedom results in angst.
 - D. Existence precedes essence.
 - E. Reason is an illusion.
8. When Rosencrantz says, "I'm sick to death of it," the "it" refers to
 - A. the inability to determine their identities.
 - B. being subservient to the royal family.
 - C. the evasion of truth and meaning.
 - D. being forced to interact with other individuals.
 - E. the lack of a clear sense of direction.
9. Guildenstern uses the simile "like being a child" to suggest that he wishes he were
 - A. naive.
 - B. carefree.
 - C. trusting.
 - D. helpless.
 - E. guided.
10. Without regard for *Hamlet*, the statement, "Words, words. They're all we have to go on" is an example of dramatic irony because Rosencrantz and Guildenstern
 - A. have difficulty communicating with each other.
 - B. are confined to acting and saying what is in the script.
 - C. use punning to provide comic relief.
 - D. frequently use words in incorrect contexts.
 - E. use simile and metaphor ineffectively.

Practice Multiple-Choice Questions 11 – 15

Carefully read the passage from Act II of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, beginning with Guildenstern's line, "I think we can say we made some headway," and ending with the stage direction, "Good pause." Then, select the best answers to the following multiple-choice questions.

11. Rosencrantz's line "Question and Answer. Old ways are the best ways," is said with the intent to
 - A. express disappointment.
 - B. insult Guildenstern.
 - C. distract the audience.
 - D. reiterate a common saying.
 - E. establish an analogy.
12. The pause between the lines, "...to his illuminating claim to tell a hawk from a handsaw" and "When the wind is southerly," is most likely used to show that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are
 - A. trying to recall the rest of Hamlet's statement.
 - B. attempting to uncover a hidden message.
 - C. envisioning a hawk and a handsaw.
 - D. discovering their problem discerning direction.
 - E. listening for some audible clue.
13. Rosencrantz accuses Guildenstern of being "dogmatic" because Guildenstern
 - A. wants to support every thought with a philosophical tenet.
 - B. dominates and oppresses Rosencrantz.
 - C. does not exercise sound judgment.
 - D. blindly accepts religious doctrine.
 - E. firmly and untenably believes that the direction is not south.
14. When Guildenstern says, "You won't find the answer written down for you in the bowl of a compass," the "answer" to which he is referring is the
 - A. cause of Hamlet's madness.
 - B. way fate intends a person to travel.
 - C. meaning of an individual's existence.
 - D. direction one is currently facing.
 - E. location of the sun in the morning.
15. Rosencrantz's reply, "There isn't any wind," accomplishes which of the following?
 - A. creates comedy
 - B. diminishes the tension
 - C. introduces a new problem
 - D. resolves the conflict
 - E. develops character

Practice Multiple-Choice Questions 16 – 20

Carefully read the passage from Act II of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, beginning with the stage note, “A FEMALE FIGURE, *ostensibly the QUEEN, enters,*” and ending with the Player’s line “—we shall never know!” Then, select the best answers to the following multiple-choice questions.

16. When the Player says, “We always use the same costumes more or less, and they forget what they are supposed to be *in* you see,” which of the following generalizations is implied?
 - A. Child actors need to be disguised in elaborate costumes.
 - B. Theater companies have small inventories.
 - C. Costume is of little importance in a theatrical performance.
 - D. Characters assume their identities from what they wear.
 - E. Audience members project identity onto the actor.
17. The Player-king’s line “Full thirty times hath Phoebus’ cart—” is most likely
 - A. the beginning of an epic poem.
 - B. an impromptu imitation of Claudius.
 - C. a parody of a choral ode.
 - D. the evocation of a deity.
 - E. the first line of a play.
18. When the Player says that the king’s actions are “Not exactly avuncular, as time goes on,” he foreshadows
 - A. Rosencrantz’s and Guildenstern’s deaths.
 - B. the king’s plot to have Hamlet executed.
 - C. the king’s rash and uninformed decisions.
 - D. Hamlet’s murder of Polonius.
 - E. Ophelia’s suicide by drowning.
19. According to the Player, which is NOT a characteristic of tragedy?
 - A. The majority of the main characters die.
 - B. Characters suffer, regardless of whether they are good or evil.
 - C. Tragedy conforms to a pre-existing formula.
 - D. The main character dies as a result of a tragic flaw.
 - E. It is predetermined who will die in the play.
20. The tone of the Player’s speech, beginning with “Lucianus, nephew to the king” is primarily
 - A. sarcastic.
 - B. unemotional.
 - C. inflammatory.
 - D. inquisitive.
 - E. humorous.

Practice Multiple-Choice Questions 21 – 25

Carefully read the passage from Act III of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, beginning with Guildenstern's line, "What a shambles!" and ending with Guildenstern's line, "Here we go." Then, select the best answers to the following multiple-choice questions.

21. Guildenstern's reply, "Just a conspiracy of cartographers, you mean?" indicates that he thinks Rosencrantz believes
 - A. there is no such thing as English culture.
 - B. nothing exists beyond Denmark.
 - C. the English isles do not exist.
 - D. nothing exists that cannot be sensed.
 - E. they will never arrive in England.
22. Rosencrantz's question, "But what good's a brick to a drowning man," reinforces the existential idea of
 - A. life's essential absurdity.
 - B. existence preceding essence.
 - C. each individual's isolation.
 - D. freedom's creating angst.
 - E. individual freedom.
23. Absurdity and the inability to communicate are illustrated in Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's conversation about boats arises by the
 - A. placement of the word "not."
 - B. placement of the word "be."
 - C. placement of the word "boat."
 - D. ambiguity of the word "be."
 - E. ambiguity of the word "boat."
24. Rosencrantz's reflection, "We... from our young days brought up with him [Hamlet]" is an expression of
 - A. gratitude.
 - B. regret.
 - C. resignation.
 - D. horror.
 - E. sympathy.
25. In Rosencrantz's reiteration of events, the passage beginning with "I'm assuming nothing," the rhetorical function of the short clauses, divided by commas is to
 - A. increase the pace of the passage.
 - B. suggest suspicion and paranoia.
 - C. emphasize uncertainty and confusion.
 - D. decrease the pace of the passage.
 - E. evoke a calm in the listener.

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Answers and Explanations

1. There is no evidence here to suggest (B). People can experience reality, but reality is meaningless and without purpose. Guildenstern never demonstrates that colors cannot be distinguished from one another (C). The answer stating that Guildenstern exposes the person making the argument as someone incapable of deductive reasoning (D) is false because the person who originally made the argument is never named or addressed. The idea that human beings cannot have a collective experience (E) is not an argument Guildenstern makes. Guildenstern's story about the unicorn illustrates that when an experience becomes more common, it loses its mystical qualities. While the second man's statement helps solidify the first man's belief that he saw a unicorn, each additional observation makes the experience less mystical until it is common and ordinary. The unicorn is no longer a mythical creature, but a horse with an arrow in its forehead. **Thus, through this story, Guildenstern reveals that there is no such thing as a universal mystical experience (A).**
2. (A) is true because the Player says that they can "do...a selection of gory romances...pirated from the Italian." The Player's ill-treatment and suggested prostitution of Albert exemplifies the exploitation and mistreatment of young actors (B), and the fact that Elizabethan tragedians tended to perform scenes that were violent and sensual (C) is obviously true based upon the advertisements the Player makes. (E) is also true, for the Player says, "A nest of children carries the custom of the town... they are the fashion. But they cannot match our repertoire." **While the tragedians meet Rosencrantz and Guildenstern on the road and put on an impromptu performance in the street, they do not demonstrate or say that Elizabethan tragedians did not perform in indoor theaters as well. Therefore, (D) is the best answer.**
3. When Guildenstern mocks Rosencrantz by saying "He knew all along it was a band," the stage directions remark that this is said "tiredly." Guildenstern does not threaten his friend or try to hurt him, eliminating (C). Even though Guildenstern does not know where he is going, this line does not show that he is disoriented (E). Melancholy (A) and indifference (D) are incorrect, for Guildenstern's repetition of Rosencrantz's line has an element of aggression to it, revealing that he is neither depressed nor unconcerned. **In this line, Guildenstern is showing signs of acquiescence (B); although he wants to have an intellectual conversation with Rosencrantz, he reluctantly accepts that his friend is dim-witted and rarely capable of comprehending complex thoughts.**

4. Because the theme of the play, while terrible, is not necessarily morbid, (A) is incorrect. Additionally, because Guildenstern does not compare the play's plot to a similar play or an actual event, it cannot be argued that he dislikes the play because it is inaccurate (C). The reader might be misled into thinking that Guildenstern's opposition to the play arises from its gauche (D) or perverted (E) displays, but his dislike of the play goes even deeper. **Guildenstern had prepared himself to see "a bird out of season," or "a tongueless dwarf standing by the road to point the way"—something to make him think, something he could not see in everyday life. Sex does not catch the audience off-guard because it has become so ordinary. He is disgusted by the performance because it is commonplace (B).**
5. Even though it is probable that the Player thinks Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are fools (A), his motive for correcting Rosencrantz is to convey a hidden message, not to deceive the two men. Because the Player is eager to perform—for a sum of money—(C) is incorrect. The tragedians perform in taverns as well as the court, so (D) is incorrect. Additionally, while the Player is eager to include lewd acts in the performance (E), this is not what is being implied in the correction. The key to understanding the Player's corrections of Rosencrantz comes in the previous lines. The Player invites the courtiers to get "caught up in the action," and makes the remark that, in better times, they were "purists." **Rosencrantz assumes correctly that the players also perform exhibitions. However, Rosencrantz seems to think that giving exhibitions is a job the tragedians hold in addition to being players, and therefore the tragedians are not "exclusively players." The Player says, instead, that they are "inclusively players," indicating that exhibition is an aspect of performance and the tragedians give exhibitions as part of the job of performing (B).**
6. The stage note (*the nursemaid*) is meant to indicate that Guildenstern is speaking to Rosencrantz like a woman hired to take care of children. Audience members may initially believe that the tone is condescending (A); however, there is no reason for Guildenstern to belittle his friend, especially when he shares the same anxieties. A nursemaid would not speak to a child in an immature manner (B) because she is older and more experienced, and there is nothing innate in the nursemaid figure that is blatantly rational (D) or emotional (E). **The word "There!" is used to calm Rosencrantz, much like a mother would say "there, there" today. Because the words are reassuring, it is correct to assume that Guildenstern is speaking in a comforting manner (C).**
7. The idea that people are isolated from one another (A) has no bearing on the question, and even though the world in which the courtiers live is absurd at times (B), there is nothing absurd about the names themselves or using them to refer to one another. Because human responsibility and the resulting anxiety are not addressed in this question, (C) is incorrect. Also, even though certain events in this play—such as the coin toss—seem to defy reason, reason and rationality are not mentioned or suggested in this remark; therefore, (E) is not the correct answer. **Because neither man has qualities that mark them as distinctly Rosencrantz or Guildenstern, they are at liberty to choose their own identity. The fact that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern can choose their own names—one being "Rosencrantz" one day and "Guildenstern" the next—supports the argument that existence precedes essence (D).**

8. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's response to the messenger's summons suggests that the courtiers are subservient (B), but Rosencrantz does not seem to be bothered by this point. When Guildenstern discusses how an individual, after having truth in his or her periphery for a long time, is startled and horrified once it comes into full view, it is probable that Rosencrantz does not understand Guildenstern's meaning. Even so, Guildenstern is not evading truth and meaning (C), he is trying to find it. Interaction with other people is not a subject discussed in this passage; therefore, being forced to interact with other individuals (D) cannot be a correct answer. The courtiers do not lack a clear sense of direction (E); they recall that they were summoned to the palace, and that is the direction they should go. **The "it" in this statement, while ambiguous, refers to the courtiers' inability to determine their identities (A). This explains why Rosencrantz gives his friend the honor of deciding which name, and which identity, he wants to assume. It also explains why Guildenstern says that he did not "come all this way for a christening."**
9. While a child is naïve (A), Guildenstern never says that the person being guided *needs* to be ignorant of the world around him. The person being led may be carefree (B) and ignorant of consequences, but Guildenstern does not say that the individual *should* be carefree as a general state of being. In fact, children are not always carefree. Trusting (C) is a comment on the relationship between the child and the guide rather than the act of being led. Helpless (D) has a negative connotation and implies that the child is being led against his will, making this an incorrect answer. **Guildenstern wishes to express how wonderful it would be "to be taken in hand and led, like being a child," as opposed to being left to one's own devices and forced to rely on subtle audible and visual cues for instruction. In this sense, it would be a reward to be guided (E).**
10. While there is evidence in the play that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern have difficulty communicating with each other (A), there appears to be some understanding between them here. They have been summoned to the palace to determine what is bothering Hamlet. Even though the courtiers use punning (C) to provide comic relief, they are not confined to wordplay, and they frequently express serious, enlightened thought. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern frequently use words in incorrect contexts (D), but it does not appear as though their incorrect use of words is what directs their action and speech in the play. To state that they use simile and metaphor ineffectively (E) would be incorrect, for not only do they effectively use these rhetorical devices to present a complex message, but their direction and fate is not restricted to these devices. **Within the context of this play, the phrase "Words, words. They're all we have to go on" is an example of dramatic irony because the two men are unaware that they are characters in a play and are confined to acting and saying what is in the script (B).**

11. The key things to note in this line are, first, that it is in quotation marks, and second, that the stage directions indicate that Rosencrantz speaks “derisively.” Therefore, the line indicates that someone—most likely Guildenstern—advised Rosencrantz to play the question-and-answer game to elicit information from Hamlet, and Rosencrantz is annoyed that this strategy failed. While (A) is partially true, Rosencrantz’s response is said in anger as well. (C) is nonsensical; the conversation between Rosencrantz and Guildenstern is the only action. He does not reiterate a common saying (D), for no such saying exists. Furthermore, he does not establish an analogy (E), for there is no analogy in this passage. **It would be correct to assume that Rosencrantz says this line in order to insult Guildenstern for the poor suggestion (B).**
12. After this line, the courtiers list the other remarks Hamlet made, suggesting that they are trying to recall the rest of Hamlet’s statement (A); however, the lines that follow suggest that they were instead trying to interpret his statement. The act of envisioning a hawk and a handsaw (C) would be a quick, natural response and would not require a pause. They do not discover their problem determining direction (D) until later in the passage. Because the courtiers never say that they expect to hear a sound offstage directing their action, it does not appear that they are listening for some audible clue (E). **When Guildenstern attempts to invert the logic of the statement in the line, “And when it isn’t, he can’t,” he reveals what is truly happening: They are attempting to uncover a hidden message (B).** Around the time this line is spoken, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are preoccupied with the source of Hamlet’s madness, and they are attempting to discern the meaning of what he is saying.
13. Rosencrantz is not expressing philosophical tenets here (A). He is, in fact, doubting almost everything. Although Guildenstern has the stronger personality of the two men and often chastises Rosencrantz for his stupidity, he does not dominate and oppress Rosencrantz (B). Even if he did, it is unlikely that Rosencrantz would notice. Guildenstern exercises sound judgment within the meaningless, existential realm in which they exist; therefore, (C) is incorrect. Even though Guildenstern occasionally alludes to God or fate, he neither says nor does anything that reveals he blindly accepts religious doctrine (D). **Rosencrantz accuses Guildenstern of being dogmatic when Guildenstern insists that the direction they are facing is not south, despite having no evidence to support his argument. Guildenstern firmly and untenably believes that the direction is not south (E).**
14. The reader or audience member may almost immediately eliminate answer (A), for while this is the topic that initiated the current discourse, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are now more concerned with determining the directions and which way the wind is blowing. If he wanted to know the way fate intends a person to travel (B), Guildenstern would be more interested in discovering “where [they] go” instead of their current location. The direction one is currently facing (D) seems like the correct answer, but that information *would* be found in the bowl of a compass. The courtiers already know the location of the sun in the morning (E), so this cannot be the information they are seeking. **Thus, it appears that when Guildenstern asks “where [they] stand,” he is questioning how they are viewed by the universe and what purpose they have. The meaning of an individual’s existence (C) is the correct answer.**

15. While Rosencrantz's line does diminish the tension in this scene (B), this is not the best answer. Since the problem remains how to discover the directions and which way the wind is blowing, no new problem has been introduced (C). The response does not resolve the conflict (D), nor does it help develop character (E). **Rosencrantz's line creates comedy (A) by providing a short, correct, and final answer to Guildenstern's great attempt to determine the position of the wind.**
16. Even though Alfred is a young actor, the use of the pronoun "they" indicates that the Player is referring to all of the tragedians instead of just one, so (A) can be eliminated. While the line indicates that this particular group of tragedians has a small inventory of props and clothing, (B) is incorrect because it makes a generalization about all companies and cannot be supported. (C) is incorrect, for the Player seems to think that what an actor wears is very important. The issue of the audience's role in theater is never addressed, and the reader cannot conclude that audience members project identity onto the actor (E). **One of the key points of existentialism is that existence precedes essence. Alfred becomes a "woman" (for the purposes of the tragedians' plays) only when he puts on a dress. He is defined by what he does and, in this case, what he wears. When in costume, the tragedians forget who they are outside the play, taking on new identities for the duration of the play. (D) is the best answer.**
17. (A) is tempting, but epic poems are not mentioned. The tragedians put on plays, after all. Although the Player-king is meant to represent Claudius, this is not an impromptu imitation of him (B), but a planned dress rehearsal. Choral odes (C) are also never mentioned. Phoebus, a god in the Greek pantheon, is mentioned, but not directly addressed, eliminating the evocation of a deity (D) as the correct answer. **After the Player-king says this line, he is interrupted by the Player, who chastises him for not putting on the dumb-show first. This indicates that the line is the first line of a play (E). This line is in fact taken from *Hamlet*, Act III, scene ii, and is the opening line of *The Murder of Gonzago*, the play Hamlet commissions to expose Claudius's guilt.**
18. The Player says, "Not exactly avuncular" in reply to Guildenstern's remark, "Not exactly fraternal," so the reader should assume that the Player is referring to another type of familial connection, just as fraternal is the relationship between two brothers. Because (C) does not involve a relationship of any kind, it can be eliminated. Similarly, since Claudius is not related to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, Hamlet is not related to Polonius, and neither Claudius nor Hamlet are related to Ophelia, (A), (D), and (E) can be eliminated as well. **This leaves (B) as the only correct answer.**

19. The Player lists these characteristics of tragedy:

(A) The majority of the main characters die. “Do you call that an ending?—with practically everyone on his feet? My goodness no—” (B) Characters suffer, regardless if they are good or evil. “The bad end unhappily, the good unluckily.” (C) Tragedy conforms to a pre-existing formula. “It never varies.” “We’re tragedians, you see. We follow directions—there is no *choice* involved.” (D) It is predetermined who will die in the play. “...we aim at the point where everyone who is marked for death dies.” **In a tragedy, the main character always dies as a result of his tragic flaw (D); however, this is not a characteristic the Player attributes to tragedy.**

20. Because there are no comedic elements to this speech, it cannot be humorous (E), and because the Player understands what happened and does not have any questions about the event, his tone cannot be inquisitive (D). No sarcasm (A) is involved, and because the Player intends to evoke interest, not violence or hostility, he is not speaking in an inflammatory (C) manner. **Although the Player occasionally makes a dramatic pause or pose to make his speech more intense, his tone is primarily unemotional (B). He is presenting the plot of the play in a very factual, informative manner.**

21. Guildenstern does not think his friend believes there is no such thing as English culture (A), since culture is not a topic addressed in this conversation. Answer (B) is ridiculous because at this point in the play they are outside of Denmark and on a ship. Rosencrantz says nothing to suggest that he thinks nothing exists that cannot be sensed (D). Although Rosencrantz means to say that he thinks they will not arrive in England (E), this idea has nothing to do with cartographers. **Cartographers design maps, so Guildenstern’s suggestion that England is “a conspiracy of cartographers” indicates he believes Rosencrantz thinks the English isles do not exist (C).**

22. The entire conversation that contains this rhetorical question is filled with ill-logic and *non sequiturs*. (B) does not apply to the particular case at hand. (C) and (D) are tempting, but while the drowning man might be seen to illustrate human alienation and angst, the addition of a brick into the equation does not strengthen the comparison. There is nothing in drowning (E) to suggest freedom. **To leap from grasping at straws to clutching a brick while drowning points to the absurdity of attempting to find meaning through reason. Thus (A) is the best answer.**

23. Though a tempting choice, (B) is not the best answer because the placement of the word “be” does not, by itself, change the meaning of the sentence. The word “boat” does not move, so the placement of the word “boat” (C) is also incorrect. There is no ambiguity surrounding the words “be” (D) or “boat” (E), so these are also incorrect answers. **The reason Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are having difficulty understanding each other arises from the placement of the word “not.”** The word “not” makes the word or phrase that follows it negative. Therefore, when Guildenstern says one “can’t not-be on a boat” he means to say that a person cannot not exist on a boat. Rosencrantz, however, says that he has frequently “not been on boats” meaning that he has often been in places other than on boats (for example: the road, the palace, his home, etc.). Guildenstern responds by saying, “...what you’ve been is not on boats.” The movement of the word “not” in this statement clarifies Guildenstern’s meaning and resolves the confusion. (A) is the best answer.
24. The context of the line establishes the tone. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern have just learned the true nature of their mission, and Rosencrantz has uttered the troubled complaint, “We’re his *friends*.” Clearly (A) can be eliminated as not fitting the troubling context. (B) and (E) are tempting, but neither reflects the strength of Rosencrantz’s reflection, beginning with “We’re his *friends*.” (C) is more appropriate to Guildenstern’s repeating the phrase when, a moment later, he is reviewing the situation. **Given Rosencrantz’s immediate and strong reaction, (D) is the best answer.**
25. Indicating a feeling of suspicion and paranoia (B) would be a secondary effect of the sentence arrangement, but even so, the content of the passage does not suggest that Rosencrantz is suspicious or paranoid. If the intent of the passage were to emphasize the speaker’s uncertainty and confusion (C), ellipses and pauses would most likely be used. If the grammar and punctuation were to decrease the speed at which the passage is read (D) or evoke a calm, relaxed feeling in the reader (E), there would most likely be ellipses separating the clauses or long, complex sentences. **The short clauses divided by commas increase the speed at which the passage is read (A).**

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead

Study Guide

Act One

1. What description does Tom Stoppard provide of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's dress, and what does it reveal about their characters?

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are dressed in a nondescript fashion. They wear Elizabethan dress—which denotes only the time period—and hats, cloaks, and sticks—which reveal that the two men are traveling. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's style of dress reveals not only that one man cannot be distinguished from the other, but that they are intended to have little significance within the play, making little impression on the other characters or the audience.

2. What does Guildenstern's reaction to the coin toss suggest about his values?

Guildenstern does not care that he is losing money to Rosencrantz, but is more concerned by the phenomenon of the coins all turning up heads. The coin toss is violating the laws of reason and probability, and Guildenstern wonders why this phenomenon is occurring and what the implications of it are. His character note reveals that he values knowledge, logic, and meaning over wealth.

3. Does Guildenstern trust Rosencrantz? How do you know?

The law of average would dictate that the coins would come up tails as often as heads, but this is not the case: After several throws, all of the coins have come up heads, and Rosencrantz is winning all of Guildenstern's money. Guildenstern, however, never considers that Rosencrantz is lying to him or has somehow fixed the coins. This detail, even though it is slight, shows that Guildenstern trusts his friend.

4. In the passage between "The law of probability, it has been oddly asserted..." and "What suspense?" How does Stoppard create comedy?

Based upon what Rosencrantz and Guildenstern say in this passage, it is apparent that neither man is listening to what the other is saying. Rosencrantz is completely immersed in the game and is oblivious to Guildenstern's philosophical musings, yet his lines sometimes complete Guildenstern's. For instance, when Guildenstern is trying to explain the law of averages, it is apparent that he is about to say that if six monkeys were thrown into the air, they would land on their tails as often as they would land on their heads; however, it is Rosencrantz who unknowingly supplies the last word of the sentence. Rosencrantz is merely informing Guildenstern about the result of the coin-toss, but the audience, who is witnessing the entire scene from an outside, objective viewpoint, sees that the lines fit together. The distinction between Rosencrantz's intent and the overall effect of his words create the comedy.

5. What are the existential implications in the scene thus far?

Although reason dictates, as Guildenstern notes, that the coins should turn up tails approximately fifty percent of the time, in the scene, the toss always results with the coin turning up heads. The existentialist believes that reason is an illusion; by attempting to explain such an improbable event through logical reasoning, Guildenstern is deluding himself. Additionally, in the passage noted in question four, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern act and speak independently of each other, paying little attention to what the other is doing and saying. This fact may illustrate the existential motif of isolation, for even though each man knows that the other exists and that they have the ability to communicate, they are almost entirely self-absorbed—Guildenstern in his reflections and Rosencrantz on the game.

6. The law of diminishing returns is an economic concept that says, in simplified terms, that a key amount of input yields the greatest amount of output. At a certain point, any additional input would actually yield less output. How does Rosencrantz conclude that the law of diminishing returns is not affecting the coin toss?

To bring up the law of diminishing returns at all is something of a non sequitur. It simply does not apply as there is neither input, nor effort, nor output.

7. In the passage between “Eighty-five in a row—beaten the record!” and “Well, I’d have a good look at your coins for a start!” why does Guildenstern become angry with Rosencrantz?

Unlike Guildenstern, Rosencrantz does not question the fact that all of the eighty-five coins have come up heads, and Guildenstern is disappointed in his friend for not being more inquisitive.

8. In existential terms, what is the greatest difference between the two courtiers?

Rosencrantz willingly accepts existential reality and the fact that the world is absurd. Guildenstern, on the other hand, tries to apply natural laws to reality in order to derive some transcendental meaning or purpose from existence. He, like the man who stands on the edge of the cliff and fears throwing himself from it, is frightened by the fact that there is no underlying meaning, and he alone is responsible for his action and the creation of his own purpose.

9. What are other reasons Guildenstern suggests for the coins' all turning up heads? What existential concept do his hypotheses emphasize?

- *The physical world responds to Guildenstern's desires, and he is willing all of the coins to turn up heads.*
- *The progression of time has stopped, but the characters are still thinking in terms of linear chronology. The same moment has been repeating, although they mistakenly believe that they are witnessing a sequence of events.*
- *A divine presence is intervening in the action, either rewarding Rosencrantz by allowing him to win the coins, or punishing Guildenstern by allowing him to lose them.*
- *Either side of the coin is just as likely to come up each time. Therefore, he should not be surprised either way.*

The unlikelihood of Guildenstern's hypotheses, yet his willingness to entertain each as "reasonable," emphasizes the absurdity of trying to find meaning in life.

10. What is the dramatic purpose of Tom Stoppard's opening the play with the coin-tossing scene? What is the thematic purpose?

By initiating the play with the coin-tossing scene, Stoppard establishes both suspense and confusion. The audience is given no exposition. The characters are not introduced, the nature of their journey is not really established, we are not allowed to witness either an inciting incident or the introduction of a conflict. Thus, the audience is prompted to wonder what is happening and why (suspense) while being given no clues with which to answer those questions (confusion). Thematically, Stoppard is establishing a framework for the rest of the play: The play is set in a reality that is essentially absurd, and there are no laws or a divine presence governing the action.

11. What is ironic about the basic concept of the play?

Even though Stoppard wants to suggest, by the absence of the law of probability, that reality is without meaning and purpose, the actions of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are fated. They are characters in Shakespeare's Hamlet, so there is already a plot framework within which they must act.

12. How does Rosencrantz's response to Guildenstern's question about the first thing he remembers demonstrate that he does not understand what a memory is?

When Guildenstern asks him about the first thing he remembers, Rosencrantz hilariously declares, "No, it's no good, it's gone." If his first memory is "gone," then it isn't a memory at all.

13. Guildenstern asks Rosencrantz whether he is happy. How does this scene link contentment and meaning?

If Guildenstern thinks like a rational person with one thought leading to another—and unlike his setting, is not absurd—his asking Guildenstern if he is happy is not a non sequitur, but is inspired by a previous thought or statement. Since Guildenstern's inquiry into Rosencrantz's contentment is juxtaposed to a lengthy discussion about meaning, it can be concluded that Guildenstern believes that happiness and contentment are derived from meaning.

14. In what way does Guildenstern's motive for his reasoning in the passage beginning with "The scientific approach to the examination..." and ending with "...relief to me personally" coincide with existential ideas?

An existentialist would argue that the only reason people use logical reasoning or, as Guildenstern calls it, "the scientific approach to the examination of phenomena" is to avoid the angst that arises from being personally responsible for creating an individual meaning. This is exactly the reason Guildenstern provides for entering into his convoluted syllogism. As he says, reasoning is "a defence against the pure emotion of fear."

15. What in Rosencrantz's statement about beards growing after death allows Guildenstern to misinterpret his meaning?

When Rosencrantz makes the statement about beards growing after death, he does not specify when the growing initiates. Guildenstern incorrectly assumes that the beard starts growing after death instead of before.

16. Based upon what Rosencrantz and Guildenstern recollect, what happened earlier that morning?

Before dawn, a messenger woke the courtiers up by banging on the shutters and calling their names. They were issued a royal summons and were told it was a "matter of extreme urgency." Rosencrantz and Guildenstern saddled up their horses and rode so quickly toward the palace that they outran the guides.

17. How does the courtiers' recollection of their mission raise suspense?

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern were told to ride to the palace in haste, for they were being given an assignment of utmost importance. They do not know what this assignment is. However, at some point along the way, they lost their momentum and ended up tossing coins. If they are to arrive in time, they must now ride quickly toward their destination. Because they have tarried, they may already be too late. The fact that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are dallying should make the audience uneasy and make them (the audience) anticipate negative consequences coming from the courtiers' tardiness.

18. What is comic about the characters' response to the urgency of their summons? What is existential about their response?

The comedy lies in the way they dally even while insisting that they must hurry. Their conversation is full of the absurdities and ambiguities reminiscent of a stand-up comedy routine: "We'd better hurry, before it's too late." "Too late for what?" "How do I know? We haven't got there yet." The absurdity of their response, the fact that they dally while insisting that they hurry, and the fact that an "urgent" summons results in ludicrous debate and delay point out the absurdity of life and the lack of intrinsic meaning in human endeavor.

19. How does Guildenstern's tone change in his line beginning with "Practically starting from scratch..."?

Initially, it appears as though Guildenstern is chastising his friend for forgetting where they are going, and his annoyance is expressed by his comment that he is "Practically starting from scratch" when he retells Rosencrantz the story. In addition, the ellipses between the phrases convey that the events of the story are retold with some impatience, for Guildenstern does not even bother to develop them into complete sentences. However, toward the end of the passage, Guildenstern's tone seems to change. He is no longer upset by Rosencrantz's poor memory, but by the existential crisis he is facing. He worries that he and Guildenstern have been put into motion without any direction or purpose, and they alone are responsible for deciding what they should do. When he concludes with "We are entitled to some direction... I would have thought," his tone is one of exasperation and anxiety. He laments that he has no direction, and, furthermore, that he is completely helpless to alter the situation.

20. In Guildenstern's argument in the passage between "The colours red, blue and green are real" and "It must have been mistaken for a deer," what arguments does he put forth about epistemology?

Guildenstern argues that collective experience validates truth but that it cheapens the personal experience. In the instance about the unicorn, when the lone man sees the creature, he is not sure whether he imagined it, but he feels as though he has experienced a unique, mystical experience. When the second man says that he has seen a unicorn, it helps solidify the first man's belief that he saw a unicorn, but the additional observation makes the experience less unique. Finally, when a group of people see the same creature, they almost entirely validate its presence, but observe that it is not a unicorn, but a horse with an arrow in its head. The mystical experience is now common, but "true."

21. How is the Player's comment about "a single coin" a pun?

The Player's comment centers on the ambiguity of the word jingle. On the one hand, it can be an example of onomatopoeia, an imitation of the sound that coins make when hit against each other. In this sense, the coin has jingle in it because of the sound it has the potential to make. On the other hand, a jingle could be a song or performance. A single coin could, therefore, buy a performance by the Players.

22. In what way does the confusion about Rosencrantz's and Guildenstern's names contribute to the existential theme?

An existentialist would argue that individuals do not have innate identities, only the identities that they create for themselves. Since names are a symbol of identity, the fact that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern can exchange theirs demonstrates that identities are mutable or alterable. Rosencrantz can be Guildenstern if he takes on his friend's name. Guildenstern may be Rosencrantz if he chooses. There is no innate "Rosencrantz" or "Guildenstern" essence, so this exchange of identities is entirely possible.

23. What are some common characteristics to the plays that the actors perform?

The plays that the actors perform are tragedies, and based upon what the Player says, they contain death, violence, supernatural occurrences, and heavy sexual overtones.

24. How does Guildenstern use the absurd environment the characters are in to manipulate the Player? Furthermore, how does this deviate from existential principles?

From past experience, Guildenstern knows that the coins tossed will always turn up heads. He asks the Player to play a game of heads or tails, and because he always plays heads, he always wins. An existentialist would argue that one cannot make a generalization about existence or reality based upon past experience. Therefore, even though the coin has always turned up heads in the past, that is no basis to predict that the trend will continue.

25. Stoppard writes that as soon as Ophelia enters, there is "a lighting change sufficient to alter the exterior mood into interior, but nothing violent." What does he mean?

Rather than using the lighting to help convey setting, as he has previously, Stoppard wants the lights in this scene to convey emotion, specifically, Ophelia's alarm and confusion at Hamlet's strange behavior.

26. What effects are created by Stoppard's quoting passages verbatim from Shakespeare's *Hamlet*? How do these powerful allusions emphasize his theme?

*By quoting directly from *Hamlet*, Stoppard is establishing that his two main characters are indeed the Rosencrantz and Guildenstern from Shakespeare's play. Their arrival at Elsinore occasions a change in language that suggests that they have been transported from the world in which we first met them into another, a different world. Their own language changes, indicating again that one's identity is not set and immutable, but one's identity is what one makes it to be. Finally, by taking Rosencrantz and Guildenstern out of their own play—in which the audience might not know what is going to happen—and placing them in *Hamlet*, Stoppard is emphasizing that their fates are indeed already established and well known.*

27. What are some possible reasons that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern begin confusing their clichés following Gertrude's, Claudius's, and Polonius's exit?

There are a few explanations that students may present, including the following:

- *The confusing language and “mixed clichés” rhetorically suggest that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are shifting from Shakespeare’s language back to modern-day English, slowly becoming re-acclimated to their own words and expressions.*
- *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern’s speech reflects their internal confusion about Hamlet’s lunacy.*
- *The language suggests that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are experiencing some symptoms of insanity, making them characters parallel to Hamlet.*

28. What is ironic about Rosencrantz’s remark that it is “all stopping to a death, it’s boding to a depth, stepping to a head, it’s all heading to a dead stop—”?

*While Rosencrantz is unaware of what he has just said, his speech approaches dramatic irony because it reveals the outcome of the play: Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are heading to a **dead** stop. Audience members who are familiar with the plot of Hamlet should realize that by agreeing to help Claudius and Gertrude, they have commenced the series of actions that will lead to their executions. This line also addresses an existential motif: All human beings, despite the meanings and purposes that they assign themselves, move inevitably toward death and nothingness.*

29. What does the stage note next to Guildenstern’s reply indicate about his tone?

The stage note next to Guildenstern’s response says, “the nursemaid,” suggesting that Guildenstern delivers this line as a nurse would to a child. The tone Guildenstern uses, therefore, is calm and comforting.

30. How does Guildenstern explain truth in the passage between “You did, the trouble is...” and “we are presented with alternatives”?

Truth, for Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, comes in the form of the messenger who arrived that morning and called their names; the messenger is an outside element that partially validates their identities. Because they respond to the names “Rosencrantz” and “Guildenstern,” it is apparent that those are the men’s names, but there is no indication of which name belongs to which man. Based upon this, Guildenstern concludes that their names preceded them, and their purpose was revealed by truth in the form of an external, objective presence.

31. What does Guildenstern mean when he says that they are presented with alternatives, but not choice?

While, on the one hand, the words alternative and choice can be synonyms, there is a clear distinction in that choice involves action and intention. Guildenstern is speculating that, while each is potentially either Rosencrantz or Guildenstern—they have been presented with alternatives—neither can really choose which one he is.

32. To what does Guildenstern's remark "Give us this day our daily mask" allude, and why might the rewriting of this allusion be significant within the play?

Guildenstern's remark alludes to the line in the Christian Lord's Prayer, "Give us this day our daily bread." The altered phrase could have several meanings within the context of the play. First, bread is used for physical sustenance in the original prayer; in the altered version, masks, or identities, provide psychological sustenance. Second, because the word "daily" is placed before the term mask—and "mask," itself, differs from the term "identity" in that it is pretended and illusionary—the line plays upon the existential concept that existence precedes essence and an individual's identity is not fixed, but can be changed at will.

33. How does the ambiguity of Rosencrantz's line "I've lost my sense of direction" present two distinct and different ideas?

"Direction" is the word in Rosencrantz's line that creates the ambiguity. On the one hand, it could indicate a physical direction of motion, a movement between Point A and Point B. On the other hand, the term "direction" could also refer to purpose and meaning. While Rosencrantz means to say, "I don't remember the way we came into this room/onto the stage and where we're supposed to go to leave," while Guildenstern misinterprets his friend's line to mean, "I forgot what my purpose is and what I'm supposed to do with my life," to which he responds that the only real purpose is to live and die.

34. Based upon what Guildenstern says, what is the main difference between a child and an adult?

Children are given instructions on what to do and how to act. Adults, however, are responsible for their own actions.

35. To what does Guildenstern allude when he says, "Words, words?"

Guildenstern unintentionally alludes to Hamlet's line in Hamlet, Act II, scene II, "Words, words, words." If this conversation between the two courtiers were placed within the original play, Guildenstern's delivery of this line would likely be delivered around the same time Hamlet is speaking to Polonius.

36. How does the question game contribute to the existentialist framework?

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern ask questions, which instead of yielding answers, present additional questions. An existentialist would argue that all of the important questions, such as whether individuals have choices, whether God exists, and whether people have distinct identities, cannot be answered, and attempting to answer them through deductive reasoning only raises more questions.

37. Why do Rosencrantz and Guildenstern feel triumphant when Hamlet enters and walks across the stage?

When Guildenstern calls Rosencrantz's name to call his attention to the fact that Hamlet has entered, Rosencrantz responds "instinctive[ly]." As a result, the men feel they finally know their actual names.

38. How is the triumph destroyed?

When Guildenstern addresses Rosencrantz as "Guildenstern," Rosencrantz responds; therefore, it becomes apparent that Rosencrantz has no idea what his name is, but instead responds to both names.

39. In what way is Rosencrantz's questioning of Guildenstern—portraying Hamlet—an example of dramatic irony?

While Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are unaware of it, they have exposed the reason behind Hamlet's behavior: Hamlet's father died, and instead of the throne being passed to Hamlet, who is the rightful heir, it was usurped by Claudius, Hamlet's uncle. Additionally, Claudius quickly (and suspiciously) married Hamlet's mother after the king's death.

Act Two

1. What does Hamlet mean when he says, "Let me comply with you in this garb, lest my extent to the players (which I tell you must show fairly outwards) should more appear like entertainment than yours"?

Hamlet means to say that he must warmly greet and shake hands with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern or else it will appear as though he is happier to see the players than his own friends.

2. Why is this statement ironic?

Hamlet actually is happier to see the players than his own friends. Hamlet knows that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern have been asked by his enemies, Gertrude and Claudius, to discover the cause of his madness; the players, however, are Hamlet's own device, brought in to expose Claudius's guilt. Hamlet would naturally act more favorably toward the players than to his old friends.

3. In this particular scene, some lines of the original text are omitted, following Hamlet's statement, "The great baby you see there is not yet out of his swaddling clouts..."

Rosencrantz: Happily he's the second time come to them; for they say an old man is twice a child.

Hamlet: I will prophesy he comes to tell me of the players; mark it—You say right, sir: o' Monday morning; 't was so indeed.

Why might Stoppard have intentionally eliminated these lines?

Rosencrantz's line, if included in the play, would create character inconsistency. Guildenstern has shown himself to be inquisitive and intelligent, but Rosencrantz has played the fool, or, at least, the more foolish of the two men. For dramatic purposes, Rosencrantz's inability to understand Guildenstern's philosophical musings has permitted Guildenstern to explain existentialism, not only to his friend, but to the audience as well. Rosencrantz also illustrates some of the ideas Guildenstern presents by not being able to remember his own name and identity. Speaking this line would be out of character for Rosencrantz, because by understanding Hamlet's metaphor, he would be demonstrating a higher level of intelligence than Stoppard intended him to have.

4. Why is Rosencrantz's repeated line "He murdered us," significant?

While Rosencrantz means to say that Hamlet beat them at their own game by asking more questions than he answered, the courtier is unintentionally foreshadowing the future. Hamlet does, in fact, indirectly murder Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. He rewrites the letter they deliver to the King of England so it orders their execution instead of his.

5. How does Rosencrantz indicate that he understands Hamlet's statement that he is "mad north north-west; but when the wind is southerly [he] know[s] a hawk from a handsaw" literally?

Rosencrantz sarcastically says that Hamlet's statement was "illuminating," indicating that he believes Hamlet meant the statement to be interpreted literally, and he (Rosencrantz) thinks it was a blatantly obvious thing to say. Additionally, when Rosencrantz does try to interpret what Hamlet means, he does not try to understand the hidden meaning of Hamlet's statement, but instead tries to determine whether the wind is blowing southerly.

6. How would the audience explain why Rosencrantz and Guildenstern cannot determine "which way they c[a]me in"?

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern began the play on the stage, and since then, have never left it. The "scenes" change when the other characters enter and exit the stage. Furthermore, the other characters bring the conflict to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. The reason the two courtiers cannot determine where they came from or where to go is that they have remained in the same space the entire play.

7. How might the placement of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, as discussed in the previous question, illustrate an existential idea?

The two characters never leave the limits of the stage, and this fact could metaphorically portray the idea that humans do not move toward some meaningful end or goal: They live, age, and die, but never escape the earthly plane or their purposeless existence.

8. What two facts must Guildenstern know in order to correctly ascertain which direction is north?

In order to determine which direction is north, Guildenstern must know the location of the sun and what time of the day it is.

9. Why is the draught in the room not helpful in determining the direction?

There are two reasons students should present:

- The draught is coming from the floor, which is not a direction.*
- Rosencrantz and Guildenstern do not have a marker that would help indicate the directions; even if the draught were coming from a wall, the men would not know which direction that wall faced.*

10. How do Guildenstern's ideas in the passage beginning with "Wheels have been set in motion..." reveal his existential angst?

Guildenstern fears his own personal responsibility and the idea that he alone creates his identity and gives the world meaning. To remedy his angst, he projects responsibility onto a scapegoat, fate, and seeks comfort in the idea that there is an ultimate goal and that the actions taken to reach that goal have meaning and purpose.

11. What problem did the Chairman of the T'ang Dynasty face?

The Chairman, who was a philosopher, had a dream that he was a butterfly. After that dream, he could not determine whether he was a philosopher dreaming of being a butterfly or a butterfly dreaming of being a philosopher.

12. What is significant about Guildenstern's statement, "Envy him; in his two-fold security"?

Guildenstern is alluding to the fact that the Chairman had two possible identities: He was either a butterfly or a philosopher. Similarly, the two courtiers have "two-fold security" because each man can be either Rosencrantz or Guildenstern.

13. How does Rosencrantz's yelling the word "fire" define the boundary between the play and the theater?

When Rosencrantz yells that there is a fire, the only person who responds is Guildenstern. The audience, from what Rosencrantz indicates and is most likely true, sits motionless, not believing that there is a fire in the theater. The viewers know that they are witnessing a play, in which the characters and the plot are fictitious. From the observations about the response, it can be concluded that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's reality encompasses the audience, but the audience's conception of reality stops at the stage.

14. Rosencrantz argues that "demonstrating the misuse of free speech... prove[s] it exists." Why does Rosencrantz's logic not prove the existence of free speech in this case?

Rosencrantz does not exercise misuse of free speech: no one in the audience suspects that there is a fire, and there is no disorder or chaos as a result of Rosencrantz's exclamation. Therefore, according to Rosencrantz's logic, he did not misuse free speech, and, as a result, cannot prove it exists.

15. How does the Player's rant reflect existential angst?

Just as the tragedians were devastated when they realized Rosencrantz and Guildenstern had left, individuals have a crisis when they realize that there is no spectator (God) watching their actions. Additionally, it should be noted that individuals are compared to players, and as such, the things that they do ("stripp[ing] naked in the middle of nowhere and pouring [them]selves down a bottomless well," for example) are absurd.

16. How is the Player's presence in this scene an example of dramatic irony?

The Player tells Rosencrantz and Guildenstern that they need to "concentrate on not losing [their] heads," and he says that he does not speak from "knowledge" but from "precedent." An astute audience member would know that the player does, in fact, speak from precedent, and he has been in Elsinore before—in the original play, Hamlet. According to the text, the Player performed in Hamlet, knows its plot, and as such, is aware that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are going to be killed in England.

17. What advice does the Player give Rosencrantz and Guildenstern on how to live their lives?

The Player tells the courtiers to relax and respond to their environment; rather than question whether they have a purpose, they should trust and assume that they do.

18. What words in the Player's statement "The old man thinks he's in love with his daughter" create ambiguity, and what are three possible interpretations of this line?

The words that create ambiguity are "he" and "his" since they can refer to either Polonius or Hamlet. The three interpretations are as follows:

- *The old man thinks he (Hamlet) is in love with his (Hamlet's) daughter.*
- *The old man thinks he (Polonius) is in love with his (Polonius's) daughter.*
- *The old man thinks he (Hamlet) is in love with his (Polonius's) daughter.*

19. Why does Rosencrantz believe it is pointless to be depressed by the thought of being dead and buried in a coffin?

According to Rosencrantz, it is pointless for people to become anxious by the thought of being dead and buried because they overlook one essential idea: They will not be conscious of their state.

20. Where in Rosencrantz's argument does he make a mistake in his reasoning and regain his anxiety about postmortem burial?

Rosencrantz compares being dead in a coffin to being asleep. When Rosencrantz initially makes the analogy, it is implied that he is referring specifically to an individual's consciousness. A person is as conscious when he or she is dead as when he or she is asleep. However, when Rosencrantz contemplates his own analogy, he wrongly misinterprets it to refer to a person's general state of being, and, as a result, considers other factors like breathing. He then imagines death as being buried alive, but asleep, in a coffin, and the thought of suffocating and dying within a coffin gives him dread.

21. Why does Rosencrantz argue that being buried alive is better than being dead?

According to Rosencrantz, if a person is buried alive, he or she can contemplate a worse state of being—being dead. Additionally, people who are buried alive can maintain the hope that someone will find them.

22. What is comical about Rosencrantz's remark to Guildenstern, "I wouldn't think about it, if I were you. You'd only get depressed."

Rosencrantz is being hypocritical. He is the one obsessing over death and being buried alive, not his friend, and he continues to talk about death even after his remark.

23. The beginning of Act III, Scene I of *Hamlet* is omitted from Stoppard's play. It is as follows:

Claudius: And can you, by no drift of circumstance
Get from him why he puts on this confusion,
Grating so harshly all his days of quiet
With turbulent and dangerous lunacy?

Rosencrantz: He does confess he feels himself distracted;
But from what cause he will by no means speak.

Guildenstern: Nor do we find him forward to be sounded,
But, with a crafty madness, keeps aloof,
When we would bring him on to some confession
Of his true state.

What are some reasons why Stoppard may have eliminated this text?

Hamlet's lunacy, as it appears in this play, does not seem "turbulent and dangerous;" therefore, Claudius's remark would create inconsistency. Furthermore, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are doubtful that Hamlet is mad, and they have devised rational motives for Hamlet's strange behavior: unrequited love and depression over his father's death and his uncle's usurpation of the throne.

24. How does Stoppard alter the text of Act III, Scene I that he includes, and for what purpose?

While the language in this section of the play is identical to the original text, Stoppard uses stage directions to adapt the text of Hamlet to fit his play, keeping the characterization and the plot consistent. The fact that Guildenstern moves across the stage to speak to Claudius, but then quickly crosses the stage toward Gertrude to "take up" the conversation reinforces the idea that of the two courtiers, Guildenstern is the most dominant. It appears as though he does not trust his friend to correctly inform Gertrude of Hamlet's situation or that he is too proud not to be included in the conversation with the queen. In addition, while in the original text of the play Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are portrayed as complete morons, oblivious to the fact that Hamlet is deceiving them and evading their questions, in this play the courtiers are aware that they are nowhere near discovering the cause of Hamlet's madness. For this reason, Stoppard adds the stage direction that reveals Rosencrantz knows what he is telling Gertrude is a lie.

25. How do Guildenstern's questions regarding Hamlet's actions offstage convey existential ideas?

One idea associated with existentialism is that anything is possible, even things that would be considered absurd. It is perfectly understandable, therefore, for Guildenstern to wonder whether Hamlet is walking on his hands, naked, and selling toffee apples.

26. What do the ellipses in Rosencrantz's speech suggest?

The ellipses suggest uncertainty and indecision. It appears as though Rosencrantz does not know how to approach Hamlet, and at the ellipses, or the pauses in his speech, he is reevaluating what he has said or is devising another explanation or stage in the plot to obtain information from Hamlet. There are other clues in the text that indicate Rosencrantz's uncertainty and confusion, such as his repetition of the word "Yes," mixed-up clichés ("No point in looking at a gift horse till you see the whites of its eyes..."), and hesitation to move toward Hamlet.

27. To what are the stage directions referring when they say that Hamlet is "weighing up the pros and cons of making his quietus."

The stage directions refer specifically to Hamlet's "To be, or not to be" soliloquy, which he delivers before he speaks to Ophelia. In the soliloquy, he debates whether a person should endure the pains of life or make his "quietus" by committing suicide.

28. Why does Rosencrantz compare the stage to a public park?

While Rosencrantz and Guildenstern remain stationary, the other characters walk on and off the stage, passing through the scene in the same way that people walk through a public park.

29. Why does Rosencrantz put his hand under the Player's foot? What might this act of "absurdity" illustrate?

In the previous act, as Rosencrantz and Guildenstern left the tragedians behind, Rosencrantz noticed that the Player had one of their coins under his foot, and he bent down to retrieve it. When the Player lifts his foot in this act, even though a significant amount of time has passed, Rosencrantz mistakenly believes that the Player is standing on another one of their coins and puts his hand under the Player's foot to pick it up. Rosencrantz's actions emphasize the existential notion that the past cannot be used to predict the future.

30. Why is it significant that the players specialize in death, as they state in both Act I and this Act?

It appears as though Stoppard is poking fun at tragedies, for at their resolution, almost all of the main characters die. For this reason, it is important for the players—self-declared tragedians—to excel in portraying death.

31. What does the Player foreshadow when he says that the king's actions are "not exactly avuncular, as time goes on"?

When Guildenstern says that the usurper king is "Not exactly fraternal," he means to say that there is no fraternal love between the king and the sleeper, since the fact that the sleeper is the king's brother does not make him reluctant to pour the poison in his ear. When the Player says that the king's actions are "not exactly avuncular" he means to say that the king demonstrates no love toward his nephew. Because the king represents Claudius and the sleeper represents the deceased King Hamlet, the nephew in question would be Prince Hamlet. The player's remark foreshadows that Claudius will plot against Hamlet and will eventually cause his death.

32. How is the Player's discussion of tragedy an example of dramatic irony?

While the Player is speaking specifically about the actors, who, while performing, speak and act in a way that is predetermined by the playwright, the audience knows that everyone in the play, from the tragedians to the royal couple, is a character within another play, Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead. Furthermore, the idea that all people are actors in some great play can be extended to encompass even the audience members and present an idea that counters existentialism. Whether people know it or not, they may be acting out a prewritten life, dictated by fate; both the good people and the bad people are destined to die, and so, according to the Player's definition, life is a tragedy.

33. Who are the two accomplices that the Poisoner dispatches to England with Lucianus? How do you know?

The cloaked accomplices are Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. Each of the players is wearing the same clothes as the courtier he represents.

34. What does Rosencrantz's line, "Yes, I'm afraid you're quite wrong. You must have mistaken me for someone else" suggest?

The key issue here is that the tragedian playing Rosencrantz's double never speaks to Rosencrantz and, more specifically, never claims to know who Rosencrantz is. However, the real Rosencrantz seems to recognize the player or an aspect of the player, and he tries to discern who or what the player is. While it seems startling and absurd that Rosencrantz acts as though the player is the person questioning their acquaintance, the line suggests that Rosencrantz subconsciously knows that the Player represents him. This knowledge permits Rosencrantz to rhetorically trade places with the player, a copy of Rosencrantz, and become the questioner instead of the questioned.

35. According to the Player, why did the audience not respond to the live hanging on stage?

The Player explains, "Audiences know what to expect, and that is all they are prepared to believe in." The audience expects that everything that happens in the play is fictitious, and they do not believe that anything occurring within the play is real. This idea was previously illustrated when Rosencrantz screamed "fire" at the audience; according to Rosencrantz, the audience does not move at all, presumably because they believe that Rosencrantz's exclamation is part of the play.

36. What does the Player say about the realism and believability of art? Why might this idea be true?

Oftentimes, art is more believable than reality. This idea is supported by an anecdote which the Player relates:

"I had an actor once who was condemned to hang for stealing...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!"

There are two main possibilities why this actual death on stage appeared less real to the audience than a dramatized death would have:

- As demonstrated by Rosencrantz's inability to recall the moment when he learned that he will someday die, people tend to repress their thoughts about death, and in order to avoid the pain of acknowledging that their lives are finite, choose to ignore or not to believe in death.*
- As the Player notes, "Audiences know what to expect, and that is all that they are prepared to believe in." The Player's thieving actor was out of character while going to his (very real) death. In a scripted play, an actor who is out of character will destroy the audience's belief in the atmosphere the play creates.*

37. Why is the farce of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's moving around the stage and their attempt to trap Hamlet with their belts an example of comic relief?

While Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's actions are comedic—they cannot decide which direction to go, and when they plan to trap Hamlet as he enters from one direction, he comes in from another—the key element that makes this scene comic relief is the fact that it follows a tragic scene: Polonius's death.

38. In the context of the play, why is Guildenstern incorrect when he claims that people learn by experience?

According to existentialists, one cannot assume that simply because a particular stimulus had incited a specific response in the past, the same stimulus will incite that response again. Rosencrantz learned this when he put his hand under the Player's foot to grab the coin. Within the framework of the play, no one can learn by experience.

39. How does Hamlet compare Rosencrantz to both a sponge and a nut in an ape's mouth? What idea unites the metaphor and simile?

Rosencrantz, who represents courtiers in general, absorbs gifts and services from the king, but the king can take them back at will. In this sense, a courtier is like a sponge absorbing water: It can always be squeezed dry again. A courtier is also like a nut in an ape's mouth; while the king keeps the officer close, like an ape keeps the nut against its cheek, he will eventually be destroyed—in this case, swallowed. The idea combining these devices is that an obsequious courtier, while believing himself to be privileged, is only being used and will be destroyed after he has served his purpose.

40. What does the stage direction when Rosencrantz says, "What else?" indicate about his mood?

Rosencrantz says the phrase in a high tone, indicating that he is annoyed. Given the context of the question—just before which Rosencrantz expresses a sense of relief that they no longer have to look after Hamlet, then, realizes Hamlet is approaching—it would make sense for Rosencrantz to be annoyed, as he is being called back to his duties when he thought they were complete. Additionally, Rosencrantz mentions that watching over Hamlet has been "a trying episode"; this also indicates that he has found this experience extremely annoying.

41. What is peculiar about Guildenstern's statement, "We're taking him to England"? What does it indicate about Rosencrantz's previous line "they've done with us now"?

Claudius has not told the courtiers that they will be escorting Hamlet to England; therefore, Guildenstern has preternatural knowledge of future events and the plot of Hamlet. Furthermore, if Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are escorting Hamlet to England, Gertrude and Claudius are not "done" with the courtiers; Rosencrantz's line, therefore, cannot be factually correct and must be interpreted differently. When Rosencrantz says "they've done with us now," he means that Gertrude and Claudius need nothing more from the courtiers and that their mission is complete. Strangely, Guildenstern follows Rosencrantz's line by saying, "Done what?" Because Rosencrantz uses the contraction "they've" instead of "they're," Guildenstern misinterprets the line; he asks Rosencrantz what it is that Gertrude and Claudius have done with—or to—the courtiers. Knowing that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are executed at the end of Hamlet, this misinterpretation takes on a sinister meaning. Ironically, Guildenstern's misinterpretation is more factually correct than Rosencrantz's original statement. Rosencrantz's use of "they've" instead of "they're" indicates that he seems to know, if only on a subconscious level, that the series of actions that will result in the courtiers' deaths have been set into motion. Additionally, Rosencrantz says, "they'll have us hanging about till we're dead," which could use the cliché "hanging around" to mean "waiting;" however, it could also foreshadow the courtiers' execution.

Act Three

1. How does Guildenstern help Rosencrantz determine that he is, in fact, alive?

Guildenstern helps Rosencrantz acknowledge that he is able to think, talk, and feel.

2. What word creates ambiguity, and comedy as a result, in Guildenstern's question, "What are you feeling?"

The ambiguity in this sentence lies within the word "feeling." The term could refer to physical touch, somatosensory perception, or emotional or physical well-being. When Guildenstern asks Rosencrantz what he is feeling, he means to ask what sort of sensory information he is receiving, which will help prove to him that he is alive and conscious. Rosencrantz, however, thinks his friend is asking him what he is touching, to which he replies, "A leg."

3. Why does Guildenstern yelp? How does the action that prompts Guildenstern's yelp contribute to an existing motif in the play?

The leg Guildenstern tells Rosencrantz to pinch is actually his (Guildenstern's) own. Initially, Rosencrantz believed that the leg was his own, but since it felt unfamiliar to him—and his leg could not sense his fingers touching it—he believed that his leg was dead. However, when he pinches the leg and Guildenstern yelps, the mystery is solved: The reason the leg felt unfamiliar and "dead" to Rosencrantz was that it was not Rosencrantz's. The fact that Rosencrantz mistakes Guildenstern's leg for his own reflects back on the idea that the courtiers constantly confuse themselves for each other. Guildenstern sometimes believes he is Rosencrantz, and Rosencrantz sometimes believes he is Guildenstern. Returning to the tenets of existentialism, since existence precedes essence and identity is intangible, nothing fixes identity to each man. However, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern exaggerate this idea, confusing their physical bodies for each other's as well. This idea is presented again, a few lines later, when Rosencrantz suggests that they stretch each other's legs.

4. How do Rosencrantz and Guildenstern determine their location?

The two courtiers awake in total darkness and with no perception of their environment. However, they determine their setting by synthesizing auditory and visual clues. The nautical instructions, such as "Hard a larboard" and "Keep her steady on the lee," suggest that they are on a ship. In addition, once the lantern is lit, they can discern rigging and parts of the ship.

5. Why are the courtiers unable to ascertain the time of day? Why is their logic faulty?

As in the previous Act, when Rosencrantz and Guildenstern attempt to discover what time of day it is and which direction is south, the courtiers rely on the sun to determine the time of day. However, when the men awaken aboard the ship, they are immersed in total darkness. However, Guildenstern remarks that they could have sailed north and ended up in the "[l]and of the midnight sun." However, if they sailed to the the land of the midnight sun, there would be no night or darkness, and it would be light on the boat.

6. Why does Guildenstern like boats, and how might this eliminate his angst about personal responsibility?

Guildenstern likes boats because they are “contained;” because a person must remain within the limits of the boat—or else fall into the water and drown—he or she does not have to contemplate which direction to travel. With personal choice and responsibility eliminated, an individual does not have to worry about his or her purpose and meaning.

7. How might an existentialist argue that Guildenstern would still encounter angst?

Guildenstern is surrounded by water, and if he chooses to jump over the side, chances are that he will drown. In a sense, Guildenstern’s presence aboard the boat is similar to Kierkegaard’s example of a man standing on the cliff. Just as the man worries that nothing can prevent him from throwing himself over the edge, no force can prevent Guildenstern from jumping over the side of the boat.

8. What does Guildenstern mean when he says that one is “free” on a “contained” boat?

There are two explanations students might give to resolve this paradox.

- *One is free to wander about the boat at will, while still obligated to go wherever the boat takes him.*
- *One is contained within the limits of the boat, and as a result, is free from personal responsibility.*

9. Why does Guildenstern check which direction the wind is blowing? How does this action eliminate the divide between the audience and the stage?

Rosencrantz says that he is going to be sick, and Guildenstern, within the fiction of the play, checks which direction the wind is blowing so Rosencrantz’s vomit will not blow back aboard the boat. However, the divide between the play and reality is eliminated by this action as well, for Guildenstern leads Rosencrantz upstage and away from the audience so that they, too, will not be vomited upon.

10. What are the literal “one fixed star” and the “drift” to which Guildenstern refers?

The “one fixed star” is the North Star, used by sailors to navigate while out at sea. The drift is the movement of the boat on the water.

11. How is Guildenstern's statement in the passage beginning with "Free to move..." and ending with "taking Hamlet to England" ironic?

Guildenstern does not understand the full meaning of his words. He means to say that the ship is not free to go wherever it chooses, but is bound within limits. The North Star always remains in the same place and serves as a navigational guide for sailors, and while the ship moves in various directions, the star's position remains fixed. While Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are given the liberty to say and do whatever they please while aboard the ship and within the limitations the setting and their previous characterization places on them, they are still bound to the plot. All of their actions move them toward a predetermined ending outlined in the original play: They will take Hamlet to England, and as the result of a trick played by Hamlet, be put to death in his place.

12. Why is Hamlet able to sleep?

Hamlet can sleep because he does not have to wonder what to do or which direction to travel. He is like a child, carefree in the sense that he has other people to lead and instruct him, those others being Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, who are bringing him to England.

13. Claudius gave the courtiers an equal amount of money. Guildenstern explains this by saying, "He wouldn't discriminate between us." What ambiguous word in this statement adds humor and reinforces the idea that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern lack separate identities?

The ambiguous word is "discriminate." Guildenstern uses discriminate to mean "to show partiality," but discriminate can also mean "to observe a difference." Rosencrantz later repeats Guildenstern's line, and Guildenstern responds, "Even if he could." The king cannot observe a difference between the two courtiers.

14. What does Guildenstern say will happen when they get to England?

When they get to England, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern will take Hamlet and the letter to the English king. The letter, Guildenstern believes, will tell them what to do from there, and once the instructions are followed and the objectives completed, they will be given full responsibility for their actions once more.

15. How could the confusion over who has the letter have been avoided entirely? Why?

In Guildenstern's response, "You've got it," the "it" is ambiguous. While Guildenstern means the pronoun to refer to the idea, Rosencrantz thinks it refers to the letter. If Guildenstern had said, "You've got the idea," the confusion would have been avoided.

16. Why does Rosencrantz not believe in England, and why is his reasoning faulty?

Rosencrantz does not believe in England because he cannot visualize it. He cannot see the “little harbour,” the “horses on the road,” “the English king,” etc., but the fact that he can express these images in words implies that he visualizes them; therefore, there is no reason why he should not believe in England.

17. How and why is not-being on boats different from being not on boats?

The key word in these phrases is the word “not,” and its placement creates the confusion between Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. “Not” negates what is placed next to. When Guildenstern talks about not-being on boats, “being” is negated, and subject of the sentence does not exist on a boat. When not is placed next to the prepositional phrase, “on boats,” the placement of the subject is negated; therefore, the individual exists, but he or she is somewhere other than on a boat.

18. What reasons does Guildenstern provide to support the idea that they should not worry about Hamlet's impending execution?

- All men and women are destined to die, and Hamlet's execution is only making a natural, unavoidable occurrence happen sooner.*
- Hamlet is one man among many, and his individual death is not of great significance.*
- As Socrates argues, since people do not know what death is, they have no rational reason for fearing it. For all the living know, death could be a positive and rewarding experience.*
- Death is a release from the burden of life.*
- Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are “little men” who do not know “the designs of fate or even of kings.” Being ignorant of the inner workings of politics and life in general, they do not know enough to intervene.*

19. What does Guildenstern mean when he says, “They won't notice the broken seal, assuming you were in character?”

Guildenstern means to say that as long as Rosencrantz does not betray the fact that he knows the letter has been opened, the king will not notice. However, another meaning behind this phrase is that no one will notice the letter is opened if Rosencrantz accurately portrays his character in Hamlet. If both men say their lines correctly and act as if they have no knowledge of the letter's contents, the plot will continue exactly as it does in Shakespeare's play.

20. Guildenstern speaks at length about the sound of a pipe aboard the ship. How does Rosencrantz's response, "It's someone playing a pipe," function as comedy?

Guildenstern gives a lengthy speech, in which he eloquently expresses the joy at having music break the silence aboard the boat, signaling that some event, foretold by the music, will break the monotony and lack of action aboard the ship. He also describes, in grandiose language, how the sailor breathes into and manipulates the instrument to create beautiful music. When Guildenstern asks Rosencrantz to find out what the music is coming from, the audience expects Rosencrantz to return with an equally long-winded and wordy answer. However, Rosencrantz answers quite simply, "It's someone playing a pipe," therefore diminishing the effect Guildenstern's speech would otherwise have had. Equally comedic is the follow up to Rosencrantz's remark: Guildenstern does not seem disappointed at the way his friend has responded, but instead, responds to the answer as if it were acceptable. "Go and find him," Guildenstern responds. When Rosencrantz asks "And then what?" presenting Guildenstern with the opportunity to delve into another discourse, he responds, "I don't know—request a tune," making the dialogue simplistic once again.

21. Why are the tragedians aboard the ship?

The tragedians are aboard the ship because Claudius and Gertrude did not like the performance, and when their arrest was ordered, they fled and stowed away on the ship.

22. How does the Player clarify that the play, *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead*, is a tragedy?

When Guildenstern says, "I knew it wasn't the end," the Player adds, "With practically everyone on his feet." The Player has already compared life (in general) to a tragedy, but he now focuses specifically on the action within the play. The play cannot be over because, with the exception of Polonius, everyone is still alive. Since a common feature of tragedy is that the main characters die, if the Player makes the effort to point out that almost everyone is still alive, he must be implying that this play, like Hamlet, is a tragedy and will result in multiple deaths.

23. What makes Guildenstern's list of Hamlet's symptoms comedic?

Every symptom that Guildenstern lists directly references something Hamlet has done or said in the original play, and Guildenstern simplifies them all so they conform to specific medical ailments or more commonplace exhibitions of lunacy. For instance, when Guildenstern says that Hamlet has "delusions of imprisonment," he is alluding to Hamlet's remark in Act II, Scene ii that "Denmark's a prison." Hamlet's "invocation of camels," refers to Act III, Scene II, when Hamlet asks Polonius, "Do you see yonder cloud that's almost in shape of a camel?" Hamlet's talking to himself most likely refers to the character's soliloquies. While in the original play, these instances of madness have greater meaning, even if that meaning lies in Hamlet's intent, Guildenstern's oversimplification of the instances makes them comedic.

24. Rosencrantz cries, “Incidents! All we get is incidents! Dear God, is it too much to expect a little sustained action?!” What is the difference between incidents and sustained action?

Incidents are short and quick, problems that are initiated and resolved quickly, without revealing a deeper theme or message. Additionally, once one incident is complete, another one begins, but no unifying idea connects the two. Sustained action allows a problem or conflict to develop, often revealing some latent idea about human nature or universal meaning.

25. How does Stoppard simulate a pirate attack without having actors portray pirates?

Students should comment on the following:

- *There are auditory cues from off stage, the shouting of the word “Pirates,” etc.*
- *Hamlet, the Player, Rosencrantz, and Guildenstern all draw their swords, suggesting the presence of some enemy they must fight against.*
- *After rushing back and forth across the stage, Hamlet always going one way and the other three characters going the other, all four charge upstage, “see something they don’t like, waver, [and] run for their lives downstage.” Each party—one being Hamlet, the other being Rosencrantz, Guildenstern, and the Player—acts independently, and their identical response to what they see offstage solidifies the idea that something or someone is present who/that is causing alarm.*
- *The characters all hide in barrels, feeling as though their safety is threatened.*

When the lights dim and come up again, the middle barrel is missing, and the remaining two have switched positions, suggesting that there has been a scuffle on stage.

26. Why is the Player’s response to Hamlet’s departure problematic?

The Player has demonstrated, or at least hinted, that he knows the outcome of the play. In the original play, Hamlet boards the pirate ship and becomes the pirates’ sole prisoner. They show him mercy and return him safely to England in exchange for a favor. On the one hand, it appears that the Player is reluctant to agree with Rosencrantz that Hamlet’s absence indicates his death. Instead, he equivocates, saying that Hamlet is “Lucky,” that he is “Hardly” coming back, and that he (the Player), Rosencrantz, and Guildenstern are dead as far as Hamlet is concerned. After all, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern will be executed, but the plot of Hamlet will continue, the main character caring nothing about the deaths of his childhood friends. However, there are also indications within the text that the Player either does not know future events, or has only a limited knowledge of them. He takes off his hat “in mourning” suggesting that he, like the courtiers, believes that Hamlet’s disappearance implies his death. Also, in response to Rosencrantz’s question, “Is he dead?” the Player says, “Who knows?” There appears to be an inconsistency in the Player’s amount of foresight.

27. What is the significance of Guildenstern's statement, "Can't you see—the pirates left us home and high—dry and home—drome... The pirates left us high and dry!"

This line brings the text full circle, referring back to Guildenstern's lines in Act I, right after Claudius and Gertrude ask him and Rosencrantz to find out what is causing Hamlet's lunacy. Furthermore, in Act I, after Guildenstern messes up the high and dry cliché, Rosencrantz inadvertently predicts his and Guildenstern's deaths when he says, "It's all heading to a dead stop." With Hamlet's disappearance and the courtiers' continued journey to England, they are heading to a "dead stop." The letters they carry will command their executions.

28. According to Rosencrantz, what is the most important thing in life?

Even though there may not be such a thing as purpose or meaning, people should live their lives in happiness. After all, if one is not happy, why bother surviving?

29. How does the previous sentiment expressed by Rosencrantz compare to Hamlet's "To be; or not to be" speech?

Hamlet shares Rosencrantz's belief about life and happiness, but takes the idea a step further. If life is "a sea of troubles," "the heartache and the thousand natural shocks that flesh is heir to," full of the "whips and scorns of time, the oppressor's wrong, the proud man's contumely, the pangs of despised love, the law's delay, the insolence of office" and more, it is better to not exist, or even to commit suicide.

30. Toward the end of the play, when Guildenstern talks about England, how does he, in a sense, become Rosencrantz?

At the end of the play, Guildenstern reiterates an absurd idea that was originally Rosencrantz's: England does not exist. It does not have a shore or a harbor, and once he and Rosencrantz arrive, there will be no one to direct them to the King. While previously in the play, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern had separate personalities and thoughts but confused their names, and at one point, their bodies, now it appears as though their personalities cannot be distinguished from each other.

31. How do Rosencrantz and Guildenstern discover that the letter they hold condemns them to death?

Just as before, when Rosencrantz and Guildenstern used role-playing to determine what they were going to say to the King of England, one of the courtiers—this time Guildenstern instead of Rosencrantz—while in character of the King, opens the letter and reads it.

32. What might be the link between acting and knowledge? What might this link say about plays in general?

On two occasions, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern learn the future through reading Claudius's letter to the King of England. Both times, they are in character, one man acting as if he were the king. Similarly, the Player, a tragedian by vocation, appears to know the outcome of the play. It is possible that these facts are not coincidental. Stoppard may be trying to make the point that while reality, to a casual observer, seems meaningless and without purpose, art reveals that there is a plot and direction to life. While Rosencrantz's and Guildenstern's actions may have appeared episodic, each event meaningless in itself, the revelation of future events shows that each of their nonsensical actions was meaningful, bound to the plot of Hamlet, and inevitably led to the predetermined outcome of the play: their deaths.

33. How does the Player's "death" refer back to an idea previously raised in the play?

In Act II, the Player says that theatrical deaths are the only ones that people believe. His "death" illustrates this point: Guildenstern believes, without a doubt, that the Player is dead. Furthermore, while Guildenstern was firmly convinced that he had killed the Player, he cannot come to terms with the fact that he is going to die.

34. How is the way Stoppard theatrically presents Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's death appropriate?

In the play, Guildenstern repeatedly remarks that real death is not a spectacle, filled with blood and violence such as in the tragedians' plays. It is, instead, "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..." In order to be consistent with this view of death, Stoppard has the stage fade to black and all sound fade out. The audience is then informed of Rosencrantz's and Guildenstern's deaths by the Ambassador, in a passage taken from Hamlet, Act V, Scene II.

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead

Study Guide

Act One

1. What description does Tom Stoppard provide of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's dress, and what does it reveal about their characters?

2. What does Guildenstern's reaction to the coin toss suggest about his values?

3. Does Guildenstern trust Rosencrantz? How do you know?

4. In the passage between "The law of probability, it has been oddly asserted..." and "What suspense?" How does Stoppard create comedy?

5. What are the existential implications in the scene thus far?

6. The law of diminishing returns is an economic concept that says, in simplified terms, that a key amount of input yields the greatest amount of output. At a certain point, any additional input would actually yield *less* output. How does Rosencrantz conclude that the law of diminishing returns is not affecting the coin toss?

7. In the passage between “Eighty-five in a row—beaten the record!” and “Well, I’d have a good look at your coins for a start!” why does Guildenstern become angry with Rosencrantz?

8. In existential terms, what is the greatest difference between the two courtiers?

9. What are other reasons Guildenstern suggests for the coins’ all turning up heads? What existential concept do his hypotheses emphasize?

10. What is the dramatic purpose of Tom Stoppard’s opening the play with the coin-tossing scene? What is the thematic purpose?

11. What is ironic about the basic concept of the play?

12. How does Rosencrantz's response to Guildenstern's question about the first thing he remembers demonstrate that he does not understand what a memory is?

13. Guildenstern asks Rosencrantz whether he is happy. How does this scene link contentment and meaning?

14. In what way does Guildenstern's motive for his reasoning in the passage beginning with "The scientific approach to the examination..." and ending with "...relief to me personally" coincide with existential ideas?

15. What in Rosencrantz's statement about beards growing after death allows Guildenstern to misinterpret his meaning?

16. Based upon what Rosencrantz and Guildenstern recollect, what happened earlier that morning?

17. How does the courtiers' recollection of their mission raise suspense?

18. What is comic about the characters' response to the urgency of their summons? What is existential about their response?

19. How does Guildenstern's tone change in his line beginning with "Practically starting from scratch..."?

20. In Guildenstern's argument in the passage between "The colours red, blue and green are real" and "It must have been mistaken for a deer," what arguments does he put forth about epistemology?

21. How is the Player's comment about "a single coin" a pun?

22. In what way does the confusion about Rosencrantz's and Guildenstern's names contribute to the existential theme?

23. What are some common characteristics to the plays that the actors perform?

24. How does Guildenstern use the absurd environment the characters are in to manipulate the Player? Furthermore, how does this deviate from existential principles?

25. Stoppard writes that as soon as Ophelia enters, there is “a lighting change sufficient to alter the exterior mood into interior, but nothing violent.” What does he mean?

26. What effects are created by Stoppard’s quoting passages verbatim from Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*? How do these powerful allusions emphasize his theme?

27. What are some possible reasons that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern begin confusing their clichés following Gertrude’s, Claudius’s, and Polonius’s exit?

28. What is ironic about Rosencrantz’s remark that it is “all stopping to a death, it’s boding to a depth, stepping to a head, it’s all heading to a dead stop—”?

29. What does the stage note next to Guildenstern’s reply indicate about his tone?

30. How does Guildenstern explain truth in the passage between “You did, the trouble is...” and “we are presented with alternatives”?

31. What does Guildenstern mean when he says that they are presented with alternatives, but not choice?

32. To what does Guildenstern’s remark “Give us this day our daily mask” allude, and why might the rewriting of this allusion be significant within the play?

33. How does the ambiguity of Rosencrantz’s line “I’ve lost my sense of direction” present two distinct and different ideas?

34. Based upon what Guildenstern says, what is the main difference between a child and an adult?

35. To what does Guildenstern allude when he says, “Words, words?”

36. How does the question game contribute to the existentialist framework?

37. Why do Rosencrantz and Guildenstern feel triumphant when Hamlet enters and walks across the stage?

38. How is the triumph destroyed?

39. In what way is Rosencrantz's questioning of Guildenstern—portraying Hamlet—an example of dramatic irony?

Act Two

1. What does Hamlet mean when he says, “Let me comply with you in this garb, lest my extent to the players (which I tell you must show fairly outwards) should more appear like entertainment than yours”?

2. Why is this statement ironic?

3. In this particular scene, some lines of the original text are omitted, following Hamlet's statement, “The great baby you see there is not yet out of his swaddling clouts...”

Rosencrantz: Happily he's the second time come to them; for they say an old man is twice a child.

Hamlet: I will prophesy he comes to tell me of the players; mark it—You say right, sir: o' Monday morning; 't was so indeed.

Why might Stoppard have intentionally eliminated these lines?

4. Why is Rosencrantz's repeated line “He murdered us,” significant?

5. How does Rosencrantz indicate that he understands Hamlet's statement that he is “mad north north-west; but when the wind is southerly [he] know[s] a hawk from a handsaw” literally?

6. How would the audience explain why Rosencrantz and Guildenstern cannot determine “which way they c[a]me in”?

7. How might the placement of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, as discussed in the previous question, illustrate an existential idea?

8. What two facts must Guildenstern know in order to correctly ascertain which direction is north?

9. Why is the draught in the room not helpful in determining the direction?

10. How do Guildenstern's ideas in the passage beginning with “Wheels have been set in motion...” reveal his existential angst?

11. What problem did the Chairman of the T'ang Dynasty face?

12. What is significant about Guildenstern's statement, “Envy him; in his two-fold security”?

13. How does Rosencrantz's yelling the word "fire" define the boundary between the play and the theater?

14. Rosencrantz argues that "demonstrating the misuse of free speech... prove[s] it exists." Why does Rosencrantz's logic *not* prove the existence of free speech in this case?

15. How does the Player's rant reflect existential angst?

16. How is the Player's presence in this scene an example of dramatic irony?

17. What advice does the Player give Rosencrantz and Guildenstern on how to live their lives?

18. What words in the Player's statement "The old man thinks he's in love with his daughter" create ambiguity, and what are three possible interpretations of this line?

19. Why does Rosencrantz believe it is pointless to be depressed by the thought of being dead and buried in a coffin?

20. Where in Rosencrantz's argument does he make a mistake in his reasoning and regain his anxiety about postmortem burial?

21. Why does Rosencrantz argue that being buried alive is better than being dead?

22. What is comical about Rosencrantz's remark to Guildenstern, "I wouldn't think about it, if I were you. You'd only get depressed."

23. The beginning of Act III, Scene I of *Hamlet* is omitted from Stoppard's play. It is as follows:

Claudius: And can you, by no drift of circumstance
Get from him why he puts on this confusion,
Grating so harshly all his days of quiet
With turbulent and dangerous lunacy?

Rosencrantz: He does confess he feels himself distracted;
But from what cause he will by no means speak.

Guildenstern: Nor do we find him forward to be sounded,
But, with a crafty madness, keeps aloof,
When we would bring him on to some confession
Of his true state.

What are some reasons why Stoppard may have eliminated this text?

24. How does Stoppard alter the text of Act III, Scene I that he includes, and for what purpose?
- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____
25. How do Guildenstern's questions regarding Hamlet's actions offstage convey existential ideas?
- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____
26. What do the ellipses in Rosencrantz's speech suggest?
- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____
27. To what are the stage directions referring when they say that Hamlet is "weighing up the pros and cons of making his quietus."
- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____
28. Why does Rosencrantz compare the stage to a public park?
- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____
29. Why does Rosencrantz put his hand under the Player's foot? What might this act of "absurdity" illustrate?
- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____
30. Why is it significant that the players specialize in death, as they state in both Act I and this Act?
- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____

31. What does the Player foreshadow when he says that the king's actions are "not exactly avuncular, as time goes on"?

32. How is the Player's discussion of tragedy an example of dramatic irony?

33. Who are the two accomplices that the Poisoner dispatches to England with Lucianus? How do you know?

34. What does Rosencrantz's line, "Yes, I'm afraid you're quite wrong. You must have mistaken me for someone else" suggest?

35. According to the Player, why did the audience not respond to the live hanging on stage?

36. What does the Player say about the realism and believability of art? Why might this idea be true?

37. Why is the farce of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's moving around the stage and their attempt to trap Hamlet with their belts an example of comic relief?

38. In the context of the play, why is Guildenstern incorrect when he claims that people learn by experience?

39. How does Hamlet compare Rosencrantz to both a sponge and a nut in an ape's mouth? What idea unites the metaphor and simile?

40. What does the stage direction when Rosencrantz says, "What else?" indicate about his mood?

41. What is peculiar about Guildenstern's statement, "We're taking him to England"? What does it indicate about Rosencrantz's previous line "they've done with us now"?

Act Three

1. How does Guildenstern help Rosencrantz determine that he is, in fact, alive?

2. What word creates ambiguity, and comedy as a result, in Guildenstern's question, "What are you feeling?"

3. Why does Guildenstern yelp? How does the action that prompts Guildenstern's yelp contribute to an existing motif in the play?

4. How do Rosencrantz and Guildenstern determine their location?

5. Why are the courtiers unable to ascertain the time of day? Why is their logic faulty?

6. Why does Guildenstern like boats, and how might this eliminate his angst about personal responsibility?

7. How might an existentialist argue that Guildenstern would still encounter angst?

8. What does Guildenstern mean when he says that one is “free” on a “contained” boat?

9. Why does Guildenstern check which direction the wind is blowing? How does this action eliminate the divide between the audience and the stage?

10. What are the literal “one fixed star” and the “drift” to which Guildenstern refers?

11. How is Guildenstern’s statement in the passage beginning with “Free to move...” and ending with “taking Hamlet to England” ironic?

12. Why is Hamlet able to sleep?

13. Claudius gave the courtiers an equal amount of money. Guildenstern explains this by saying, “He wouldn’t discriminate between us.” What ambiguous word in this statement adds humor and reinforces the idea that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern lack separate identities?

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15. How could the confusion over who has the letter have been avoided entirely? Why?

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29. How does the previous sentiment expressed by Rosencrantz compare to Hamlet's "To be; or not to be" speech?

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32. What might be the link between acting and knowledge? What might this link say about plays in general?

33. How does the Player's "death" refer back to an idea previously raised in the play?

34. How is the way Stoppard theatrically presents Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's death appropriate?

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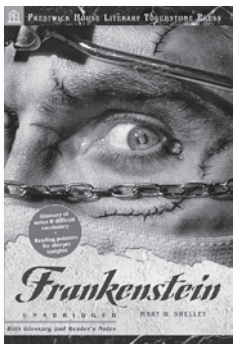
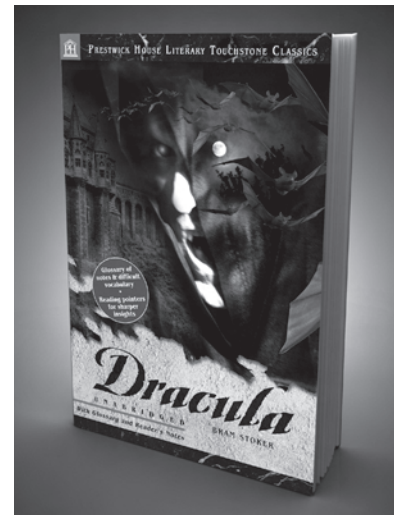
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