

# Tom Stoppard's Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead

## JOURNALS (rev. 2008)

You must do 3 out of the 4 listed topics—a total of 15 JOURNAL points Ask your teacher how to label these!

### R&G (R and G Are Dead) #1: Personal Response

[The following is from the text of a lecture prepared by Ian Johnston of Malaspina University-College, Nanaimo BC, and delivered in LBST 402 on April 10, 1997. This document is in the public domain, released June 1999]

*With Stoppard's play at first we seem to be in quite a different world. A common reaction to a script like that of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead is confusion. Where are we? What are the rules of this world we are in? How am I supposed to understand exactly what is going on and why, when I'm not sure at any particular moment about what's going on, what sort of reality I'm dealing with, and why characters are behaving the way they are. Too much of this seems either incomprehensible or just a silly game, the point of which escapes me. So what's going on? Where is the horizon of significance that I'm used to confronting?*

[...]

*The play itself is full of references to that fact that it is a play (from the opening comment during the initial coin flipping "There is an art to the building up of suspense") Thus, as we watch a play, we see within that fiction a professional seller of fictions offering something that is lacking in the main represented fiction. Much of the intellectual delight we get from the play comes from this tension--what exactly is real here? Stoppard's treatment of this aspect of the play is dazzling, entertaining, and very thought-provoking (for some people at least).*

What thoughts were provoked in you as you worked your way through the play? Describe your personal response. What messages does the play hold for you? Has it revealed anything new to you about Hamlet?

### R&G (R and G Are Dead) #2: Choose a Theme

Several important themes in the play:

- **Existentialism** - why are we here? Why should Rosencrantz and Guildenstern do anything unless someone asks them to? They find themselves as pawns in a gigantic game of chess, yet make no effort whatsoever to escape.
- **Free will vs. determinism** - is it their choice to perform actions, or are they fated to live the way they do? The implication the play gives is that it doesn't matter what choices Rosencrantz and Guildenstern make, they are trapped within the logic of the play, and cannot escape, being fated to follow a destiny determined by the plot. *Hamlet* ends with the news of their deaths, so they have to die.
- **Search for value** - what is important? What is not? Does anything matter? If we are all going to die, why do we continue to live?

Explore **one** of these themes making specific reference to the play.

### R&G (R and G Are Dead) #3: 4 Critical Opinion

Roger Ebert--From a 1991 review of the movie adapted and directed by Tom Stoppard

*The rewrite would play just as successfully on the stage as the original, I suspect, and the anachronisms did not bother me, and the direction is competent and the casting defensible on the grounds that Oldman and Roth have been interesting before and will be interesting again. No, I think the problem is that this material was never meant to be a film, and can hardly work as a film.*

What do you think of Ebert's point? What aspects of the play make it difficult to move it to the screen? Do you agree or disagree with Ebert's contention? (support your answer)

### R&G (R and G Are Dead) #4: Extra Credit or Required?

Take up the idea of this being an extra credit option during our study of Hamlet, not a required assignment. After reading Rosencrantz & Guildenstern are Dead, thinking about it, and doing 2 of the aforementioned journals, do you think this should be extra credit or required? Give a full account as to why it should be required or extra credit.