

"play" in rosenkrantz  
and guildenstern are  
dead.



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A discussion of the implications of the various meanings of the word 'play' in Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*. Tom Stoppard's production *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* is highly intelligent in its linguistic style, capability of thought and manner of speech. The two 'main' characters, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern (R&G), engage in complicated word play as they comfort themselves in a world they do not comprehend. Their word-play, and the play on the word 'play', results in great comedy, as well as acting as a medium for Stoppard to explore the relation between the audience and cast. His absurdist theatre suggests existentialist theory as the bewildered R&G bumble through their indifferent, bizarre universe. Early on in the play, R&G decide to 'play' a game of questions, in the form of a tennis match. They believe that their 'ping-pong' enquires will help them interrogate Hamlet about his morose state. A highly entertaining battle of words ensues, reminiscent of the repartee of Hal and Falstaff in *Henry IV* and the stichomythia of Richard and Anne in *Richard III*: Ros: We could play at questions. Guil: What good would that do? Ros: Practise! Guil: Statement! One-love. (33) Unlike Richard, however, who won the hand of Anne, R&G's word-play leads to naught. It is Hamlet who "murders" them in the interrogation, as he makes them look "ridiculous" (47). The tennis-match allegory continues; according to Guildenstern, they were "caught on the wrong foot once or twice" (48). Likewise, their clever word-play also results in nothing, as every question is answered by another: Guil: Do you think it matters? Ros: Doesn't it matter to you? Guil: Why should it matter? Ros: What does it matter why? Guil (teasing gently): Doesn't it matter why it matters? Ros: What's the matter with you? Pause Guil: It doesn't matter" (36). Stoppard's clever pun on 'matter' may be alluding to *Hamlet*, 2. 2: 191

Polonius: What do you read, my lord? 192 Hamlet: Words, words, words. 193

Polonius: What is the matter, my lord? 194 Hamlet: Between who? 195

Polonius: I mean, the matter that you read, my lord. This witty banter continues throughout the play. One implication of this is that Stoppard blurs the boundary between R&G - they are consistently confused of their true identity. The only way we can perceive the difference in personality between R&G is through their speech - as Guildenstern says, "[w]ords, words. They're all we have to go on" (32). The entire play is based on discourse. To be without is like being "a mute in a monologue" (54). R&G are spontaneous in their speech - at least, they believe they are. However, Stoppard wrote their lines - there is nothing spontaneous about it. They 'play' with words in a desperate attempt to show their free will and to escape the 'play' they are unwillingly in. However, as the audience knows, their desire cannot be fulfilled. Stoppard ironically controls this seemingly random and bizarre banter between the two. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are just characters in a play. They are nothing more. The result of this is that an ironic discrepancy exists between what we know and the characters limited, misguided perception. As Rosencrantz says; "They'll have us hanging about 'till we're dead!" (85). R&G are ignorant of their fate; dramatic irony ensues to great comedic affect: "Player (to Guil): Are you familiar with this play? Guil: No. Player: A slaughterhouse - eight corpses all told" (75). This irony is both comical and decidedly morose. Stoppard plays a delicate balancing game between humour and horror; the play is both intellectual and hilarious. Their word play distracts them from the inevitable truth of their helplessness, but it is only a momentary reprieve. The light banter between them during most of the play seems to mask an insufferable anxiety that cannot be expressed

in dialogue. As Stoppard himself once said; " There are no words to say how much I love words". Stoppard mocks R&G as they fail to express what they are thinking. Words are just not enough. The result is frustration. With reference to Hamlet;" Ros: Stark raving sane. PausePlayer: Why? Guil: Ah. (To Ros) Why? Ros: Exactly. Guil: Exactly what? Ros: Exactly why. Guil: Exactly why what? Ros: What? Guil: Why? Ros: Why what, exactly? Guil: Why is he mad?! Ros: I don't know!" (60). Guildenstern shouts at Rosencrantz near the end of the play; " Do you think conversation is going to help us now?" (112). Their nonsensical discussion leads to nowhere. Probing questions such as "[i]s there a God?" are quickly refuted; " Foul!" (35). Instead of focusing on how to escape their fate, they ponder their ontological status, the ' who what why' in endless word-games that repeat and repeat in cyclic despair. To give an example, Guildenstern repeatedly plays with a line from the Lord's Prayer, referring to the necessities of life: " Give us this day our daily bread..." Guildenstern sardonically corrupts this and calls for theistic intervention, knowing that nothing will come:" Guil: Consistency is all I ask! Ros (quietly): Immortality is all I seek...Guil (dying fall): Give us this day our daily week..." (37). Guildenstern's play on the well-known prayer highlights the absence of ' basics' in their morose world. R&G are helpless and must supplicate to a higher order. They plea for " consistency"; something entirely lacking in the absurdist, whimsical world they inhabit. However, R&G seem to have no true belief in an underlying purpose - they care only about the plot because it involves their subsequent death. Their world is devoid of spirituality - all that is left is a ' place without any visible character' (1). This structure is repeated over, and over, and over again - pages 30, 37, 85, 93, 105 - each time more desperate than the time before.

Without morals, represented in the form of religion, life is nothing – R&G live in a repetitious world at the “ mercy of caprice that reason cannot explain” (Robinson 88). Thus, Stoppard abandons all didactic purpose and writes ‘ anti-theatre’ – lack of logic dominates in his bizarre production, suggestive of Samuel Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot* and other absurdist plays. He paints a postmodernist picture where ultimate values have been lost, primarily through the outright horror of WWII. Stoppard’s portrayal of R&G’s bleak, indifferent universe has been influenced by this existentialist theory. R&G ask fundamental questions about their existence but receive no answers in return. Their word-play, the constant questions answered by questions, help reinforce this feeling of absurd despair:“ Guil (seriously): What’s your name? Ros: What’s yours?...Guil: What’s your name when you’re at home? Ros: What’s yours?... Guil (seizing him violently): WHO DO YOU THINK YOU ARE?” (35). What eventuates is an inherent absurdity in all their word-play, an irony as we realize the insignificance of their words in a world that they are the centre of. Stoppard brings two marginal characters to the attention of the play. However, their roles are still peripheral to the plot; their words do not rock the metaphorical “ boat” of their unavoidable demise. They are not in control. The Player recognizes this; knowing that nothing will ever change, he salvages a small freedom by resigning himself to that necessity. R&G entertain hope through their witty repartee that something will change for the better. This, simply put, does not occur. Through this eclectic, pointless conversation we do find sympathy for them, but a detachment still exists between audience and character. R&G attempt to traverse this gap – Guildenstern once calls out “ Fire!” to the audience – but, once again, their dialogue is not enough. R&G are trapped in an “ undiscovered country”, <https://assignbuster.com/play-in-rosenkrantz-and-guildenstern-are-dead/>

devoid of humanity. The audience gets a feel for this living nightmare through the repeating word-play, which frustrates the spectators as much as R&G. However, we passively watch the show in a dream-like state. RGAD and other absurdist productions subvert conventional theatre and blur the boundary between us and them. Stoppard make us consider our own "country" - whether it too is meaningless - but some boundaries cannot be crossed. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are stuck. Their only defense is wit, as Kenneth Tynan observes: " While it is clear that none of [Stoppard's] characters control their own destiny... it is equally obvious that their unsinkable quality, their irrepressible vitality and eccentric persistence, constitute what Stoppard feels to be an authentic response to existence" (Robinson 88). The audience knows that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern will die - the title states so. The Player comments: " Audiences know what to expect, and that is all they are prepared to believe in" (76). The presupposed knowledge, that they are dead, effectively makes R&G ' ghosts' stuck in a Hamlet-like purgatory. Their fate, suggested by the boat, is set to such a degree that Rosencrantz ironically states; " we might as well be dead" (99). Their banter can distract them from this truth, but it cannot defeat it. Their all-too-human limitations result in injustice, defeat, and finally death. They do what " actors do best" (75); they play their part then die. To conclude, the major implication of Stoppard's word-play is the discovery that it is inherently pointless. Their words may be humorous, but they cannot stop the irrevocable destiny that awaits. Death will come for R&G - and also for ourselves. Stoppard's realistic portrait of R&G perhaps suggests a link between R&G's pointless acts and our own - perhaps, with such a pessimistic, existentialist outlook to life, he believes that we too are already

dead. Stoppard, through the word play, puts a mirror up for us to consider our own seemingly predestined and repetitive existence. All we can do, as Tynon suggests, is laugh.