

Rosencrantz and guildenstern are dead: a quest for meaning



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Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* is a postmodernist adaptation of the lives of two seemingly appurtenant characters from Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. In the story, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern search for meaning in their isolated existence as they are dragged towards a preordained fate. Their attempts to understand occurrences and to escape from the metaphorical spiderweb that ensnares them are often thwarted as a result of their illogical methods. Throughout the play, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are tormented by confusion as they unsuccessfully search for meaning in their lives. An existentialist approach to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's plight suggests that they will be unable to influence their future or find meaning in the world no matter what approach they take. Stoppard suggests that part of their problem lies in their lack of personal identity. When they first encounter the Player, Rosencrantz has a moment of confusion about his identity, saying " My name is Guildenstern, and this is Rosencrantz...I'm sorry - his name is Guildenstern and I'm Rosencrantz" (Stoppard 22). Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's uncertain identities make it difficult for other characters to differentiate between and relate to them, which is detrimental to their social interactions. This adds to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's sense of isolation and confusion, especially when the other characters in the play, like Hamlet, have such a well-formed sense of identity. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's lack of identity contributes to their inability to form opinions about things and display effective judgmental abilities. For most people, memories are nothing more than personal reactions to events.

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, lacking identity, also lack the ability to form personal opinions about things. As a result, they remember nothing and live in a perpetual state of disorientation. At one point, while they are pondering their absence of memory, Guildenstern sums up their plight: “ We cross our bridges when we come to them and burn them behind us, with nothing to show for our progress except a memory of the smell of smoke, and a presumption that once our eyes watered” (Stoppard 61). This sums up their reason for being unable to find meaning in life; without a sense of time, space, or ethics, they are unable to form memories or opinions about their experiences.

One element of human psychology that appears in Stoppard’s play is people’s tendency to experience anxiety when they are conscious of the intimidating boundlessness that freedom offers. Self-identity, responsibilities, and ethical beliefs help us become more stable, setting more boundaries and narrowing the number of courses of action from which we are able to choose. Without these aids, we are constantly responsible for choosing and re-choosing our path in life. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern lack identities and a sense of ethics, so they are “ condemned to be free” and are perpetually insecure about their role in life. This could be part of the reason that they feel inclined to help Claudius; the responsibility of spying on Hamlet gives them a sense of direction in a life that lacks it.

On the other hand, several situations in Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead present evidence that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern’s fate is preordained. If their fate is set, then the need for stability and identity is an illusion because their path in life is unchangeable no matter what decisions <https://assignbuster.com/rosencrantz-and-guildenstern-are-dead-a-quest-for-meaning/>

they make. At one point, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are flipping coins, and each coin lands heads up instead of following the normal laws of probability. If even the laws of physics are worthless in the hands of fate, what power do Rosencrantz and Guildenstern have over their future?

Rosencrantz hopelessly describes his predicament: “ Inside where nothing shows, I am the essence of a man spinning double-headed coins, and betting against himself in private atonement for an unremembered past” (Stoppard 15). If they are at the mercy of a preordained fate, then Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are not free at all. As is the case with their coin that endlessly lands heads-up, the connection between cause and effect in their life is hopelessly skewed. Although some rules restrict freedom, a rule like the law of probability can be the stepping-stone between intention and result.

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern have no stepping-stones, and so they float on the periphery of Too Free and Not Free Enough, never experiencing the stable balance between freedom and law for which most people settle.

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern represent two different ways of coping with a life of confinement saturated with freedom. Rosencrantz, although regretful about the loss of his past, does not fight against the confusion of his life, choosing instead to play pointless games, much like a child. Guildenstern, on the other hand, never ceases asking questions and looking for information that will help him understand the circumstances that he and Rosencrantz find themselves in. Their distinct ways of coping with bewilderment display, in some ways, a divergence in the amount of success that they encounter. Guildenstern never finds answers, but Rosencrantz is able to play his word and coin-tossing games without failure.

Overall, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's inability to find meaning in life is a result of their lack of identity, preordained fate, and isolation from other characters.