Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead
By Tom Stoppard
Genre: play or drama
Full length play so underline title. (Quotations are for short plays of one or two acts.)

Plot Summary
The play is based on two minor characters of Shakespeare’s play Hamlet. The play opens with the two characters Rosencrantz and Guildenstern playing heads or tails. As they continue to do this a theatre troupe known as the Tragedians appear and offer them a show, and of that did not suffice they would offer them a “sexual” show instead. However, the main tragedian known as the Player claims that he has always known Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, leaving the two confused. Claudius then asks the two if they can find out as to what is wrong with Hamlet, who in the actual play of Hamlet pretends to be crazy. In the processes of trying practicing of how to talk to play a game of questions and answer ultimately confusing themselves. They talk to Hamlet and realized that he has become cray due to all that has happened, (his father being killed by his uncle and then marrying his mother.) The Tragedians that were talking to Ros, and Guil were hired by Hamlet to put on a play that exposes his uncle for doing all the things that he did (this actually happened in Hamlet). As the tragedians rehearse Ros and Guil see Hamlet yelling at a crying Ophelia to become a nun, and the next day Claudius asks Ros and Guil to find Hamlet because he killed Polonius (Ophelia’s father, who he killed by mistake thinking it was Claudius his uncle.) Later Hamlet, Ros, and Guil are on a boat to England, with Claudius ask the two to escort Hamlet. Claudius gives Guil a letter that has sentenced Hamlet to death, but in the process of talking about the letter the two get confused once again as to who has a letter and what exactly they are suppose to do and what to do beyond this voyage. In the middle of the night Hamlet switches the letter that now says that Ros and Guil are sent to death. That morning the tragedians emerge from barrels from the boat and talk about death once more and acting death is far better than actual death. Guil disagrees takes the Player’s knife and stabs him. Guil presumes that he had actually killed the Player but instead it was a stage knife and he was merely acting. Pirates come to boat leaving everyone all dispersed and lost. In the end Ros his breaking down about death and what will happen to them and Guil talks about death and how it is simply nothing and how people stop being, which results with him just disappearing. the play then ends with all the dead bodies: Claudius, Gertrude Hamlet and Laertes. horatio arrives and delivers the last speech.

Important quotes:

1. Rosencrantz: Did you ever think of yourself as actually dead, lying in a box with a lid on it?

2. Guildenstern: Are you deaf?
Rosencrantz: Am I dead?

Guildenstern: Yes or no?

Rosencrantz: Is there a choice?

3. Rosencrantz: Life in a box is better than no life at all, I expect. You'd have a chance, at least. You could lie there thinking, "Well. At least I'm not dead.'

4. Rosencrantz: Whatever became of the moment when one first knew about death? There must have been one. A moment. In childhood. When it first occured to you that you don't go on forever. Must have been shattering. Stamped into one's memory. And yet, I can't remember it. It never occured to me at all. We must be born with an intuition of mortality. Before we know the word for it. Before we know that there are words. Out we come, bloodied and squawling, with the knowledge that for all the points of the compass, theres only one direction. And time is its only measure.

5. Guildenstern: What's the first thing you remember?

Rosencrantz: [thinks] No, it's no good. It was a long time ago.

Guildenstern: No, you don't take my meaning. What's the first thing you remember after all the things you've forgotten?

Rosencrantz: Oh, I see... I've forgotten the question.
By: Victoria Pemberton

Tone: The general character or attitude of a place, piece of writing, situation, etc.

The opening scene sets tone for play

Coin game between Rosencrantz and Guildenstern creates humor and a few philosophical questions

Overall tone: witty, playful, sly sarcastic, humorous

The playful tone continues throughout the play, but during Act III the tone dramatically changes from playful to eerie.

Simile: A simile is a figure of speech in which two distinct things are compared by using “like” or “as”.

Guildenstern is thinking about the truth in life, then explains to Rosencrantz how humans don’t like to hear the truth because it usually ends up creating a disaster.

“. . . and when something nudges it into outline it is like being ambushed by a grotesque” (39).

The player compares the life of an actor to dependence because, in a play, they are dependent upon an audience’s presence. If there is no audience, then they have no reason to continue their acting.

Ex: “. . . until like runaway carts they dragged to a halt” (64).

Aposiopesis: An abrupt discontinuation of a sentence, usually occurring when one character interrupts another or when one character interrupts themselves with a new stream of ideas.

Throughout the entire play, but primarily in Act 2 regarding the “Players,” the device Aposiopesis is used.

Rosencrantz is continually interrupting himself and bouncing along from one train of thought to another, the continual scattering of thoughts prove how perplexed he is by the entire mass of events unraveling around him.
Ex: “Well, if it isn’t---! No, wait a minute, don’t tell me--- it’s a long time since—where was it...? (82)

When Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are interrupting each other, it shows how close they are and how easily they can finish each other’s sentences or interrupt each other without feelings of guilt. This shows how long they have known each other, which is parallel to how long they have known Hamlet, making their betrayal even greater.

Repetition: The return of a phrase, word, stanza form, or effect in any form of literature.

In Act 1, Rosencrantz & Guildenstern dive into a game of coins; Guildenstern tosses the coin and Rosencrantz guesses whether it is heads or tails.


This childish game of coins clearly showcases the two characters’ immaturity in being entertained by such a juvenile activity.

Foreshadowing: Using thematic elements to cue readers to an ominous event that is lurking in the distance, adding to an air of intrigue and mystery.

Rosencrantz does not realize the fact that the actors are preforming about the events surrounding him, and the spy who he cannot recognize is actually himself.

The play adds an ironic twist and doubles as a foreshadowing, playing out the fates of both Rosencrantz and Guildenstern in front of the entire court.

The recognition failure of themselves in the play adds to the comedy and further highlights the theme of the obscurity of the world.

Ex: “Yes, I’m afraid you’re quite wrong. You must have mistaken me for someone else. (82)
Allusion: The act of making an indirect reference to something where the source is not specifically identified.

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern decide to play a game of questions in order to practice for their job of figuring out what has made Hamlet go mad. They reference the scoring of the game by the rules of tennis.

Their quick-witted responses allude to the act of hitting a ball back-and-forth during in a tennis match.

Ex: “One—love...two—love...three—love” (42).

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead: Literary Devices

- Stoppard utilizes the literary device of non-sequitur to prevent the audience from figuring out the deeper meaning from the conversations.

- Allusions:
  - In the play Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead, Stoppard references a few lines from Shakespeare’s Hamlet. The main characters, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, speak in modern English. However, they change from modern English to Shakespearean English when speaking to other characters from the play. Their inability to control their language symbolizes the lack of control Rosencrantz and Guildenstern have over their fate.
  - In the play, Guildenstern quotes the Lord’s Prayer, calling for their “daily” “mask,” “week,” “round,” or “cue” (Stoppard 18, 25, 55, 61). In asking for a “daily week,” for example, Guildenstern actually asks for a longer life, which
foreshadows Rosencrantz and Guildenstern’s untimely death.

- Metaphors:

  - Example- “...a gap you can’t see” (Stoppard 75)

  - With this metaphor, Guildenstern states that death is invisible. Therefore, Stoppard is implying that it is impossible to predict the future or something that cannot be seen. In this case, no one, not even Rosencrantz or Guildenstern, can tell when they are destined to die.

  - In the play, Rosencrantz thinks that he knows the spy, but later admits that the spy

  - His inability to recognize himself is ironic, but the major irony in this situation

  - With dramatic irony, Stoppard enables the reader to realize how clueless could be himself.

  - is the spy’s fate in the play. Stoppard uses the play to foreshadow Rosencrantz and Guildenstern’s deaths, but Rosencrantz does not even realize his fate is being played right in front of him.

  - Rosencrantz and Guildenstern really are. This further emphasizes one of the themes of the play, which is the incomprehensibility of the world.

Frankenstein- Frame story

Jane Eyre- Bildungsroman

Ceremony- Frame story; author uses a combination of flashbacks, narratives, and glances into the future, as well as rhymes and chants
Heart of Darkness - Frame story

Hedda Gabler - Play; author incorporates foreshadowing

Fences - Play; divided into two acts

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead - Play; organized into three acts