

As if having long and confusing names are not enough, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* in the play by Tom Stoppard. Or so it seems. Being dead implies a previous state of existence or of being alive, yet these two are but a figment of Shakespeare's imagination, showing up as two minor characters in *Hamlet*. Then, how real, within the context of Stoppard's play, are Rosencrantz and Guildenstern? As uncertainty and illusions present themselves throughout the play, everything, including reality as a whole, can be brought into question, leaving one to also wonder about reality in our own lives. And with the shattering of reality in our lives, the reality of death becomes meaningless too.

Many aspects of the play help present an illusory effect and the feeling that reality may not be what it seems. From the beginning, arguably, no reality exists, or at most only a very confusing reality exists. Confused and bewildered, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern feel as if they are "within un-, sub- or supernatural forces" (17), struggling to discover a purpose and meaning to their existence. Taking place in a vague setting in "a place without any visible character" (11), the play generates a slightly unrealistic setting and tone. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern find themselves in a place where natural laws are suspended and where just about anything can happen. For example, defying the laws of probability, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern flip coins, only to find that more than a hundred heads turn up consecutively. This is the first indication that there may be something strange in the reality that they perceive. Even though "the run of heads is impossible" (11), Rosencrantz, initially, just accepts this as a fact of reality. He sees nothing wrong with flipping heads over and over. Guildenstern, however, needs answers, asking, "No questions, not even a pause?" (14).

Answers, though, are one thing that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are not able to find in the hazy reality in which they find themselves. Nothing is certain in their lives, not even their own identities, as they confuse even their own names. Their life parallels their game of questions

in that no answers are allowed or no answers are ever provided to them. Rosencrantz says, “I remember when there were no questions ... there were answers to everything” (38). This state of knowing all the answers is the unreachable goal sought by Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. Not remembering anything that happened before the play began and without any previous experiences to rely upon, they are essentially in the same state as that of a newly born baby, meeting the world for the first time. They are both physically and mentally lost, with nothing to help them find their way. Even once handy tools, like compasses, are useless to them in finding the right direction: “Pragmatism?!—is that all you have to offer? You won’t find the answer written down for you in the bowl of a compass” (58).

Another hindrance to their quest for answers is their unawareness of the bigger scene in which they unknowingly play a role. From the moment Rosencrantz and Guildenstern find themselves confused and dazed, all their actions, lines, and even deaths have been written in the play of *Hamlet*. Rosencrantz complains that they “have no control. None at all” (71). Unknown to them, they are only actors within the larger Shakespearean play, following a script that has already been written. The Player says, “We follow directions—there is no choice involved” (80). These two suffer from Shakespeare’s words from the beginning of the play to the very end. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern feel as if they are being controlled by an unseen force: “We can move, of course, change direction, rattle about, but our movement is contained within a larger one that carries us along as inexorably as the wind and current...” (122). Even though it may seem that there are different options available to them, they are not free to choose among them: “At least we are presented with alternatives....but not choice” (39). Their life is similar to their coin flipping, which lead to the inordinate number of consecutive heads. When flipping a coin, there are two equally possible outcomes, but during their run of heads, it seems as if there is no choice in the matter. It will turn up heads, even though it has already turned up heads a hundred

times in a row. Just as it is determined that heads will show up again and again, the lives of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are similarly determined. Their deaths are also determined like the results of the coin tosses. Immediately after the coin finally shows tails after the long series of heads, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are introduced to Claudius in their first appearance in *Hamlet*, which eventually causes them to lose their heads. Everything that does and will happen to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern in Stoppard's play has already been written and determined hundreds of years ago, leaving them with little control over their lives.

Even without control over one's life, one can still exist and not question reality. However, in the case of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, it is not so obvious that they exist at all, and how much of what they go through is not an illusion. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern think, within the play, that reality includes their own existence, as shown by their beliefs in their future non-existence or death: "Now you see him, now you don't, that's the only thing that's real: here one minute and gone the next and never coming back" (84). One theory of existence comes from Descartes, who knows he exists because he thinks. Do not Rosencrantz and Guildenstern think within the framework of the play? Do they not hold conversations and make decisions? Guildenstern says, "You can still *think*, can't you? You can still *talk*. You can *feel*, can't you?" (97). Although the two of them might be able to think and talk, that does not necessarily mean that they exist and are real. No matter what Rosencrantz or Guildenstern do, they will always be only two characters from Shakespeare's imagination.

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are only actors caught in the play of *Hamlet*. But if they are only actors within the play of *Hamlet*, how real are their lives within Stoppard's play? The Player, understanding this role of actors, exclaims, "We're actors—we're the opposite of people!" (63) A character in a play that is performed by an actor cannot really be considered to exist. Similarly, the characters of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern cannot be considered to exist, or

at least do not have as much reality as the cause of their existence, namely Shakespeare. The many things that “couldn’t have been real” (20) should include their own existence in this play, as they are controlled and conceived from a source entirely outside of them.

If, within the play, the lives of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are illusions, then what becomes of their deaths? Their deaths cannot be any more real than their lives. Guildenstern says, “The only beginning is birth and the only end is death – if you can’t count on that, what can you count on?” (39) However, the only sense in which Guildenstern and Rosencrantz are born or can die is in words. If one can question one’s own existence, as Rosencrantz and Guildenstern can, death becomes quite meaningless. “Death is not anything...It’s the absence of presence, nothing more” (124), so if there is already the absence of presence, death means little. Something that does not really exist can not really die. “But you’re not dead” (18), Guildenstern remarks, but “we might as well be dead” (108). They will come back each time *Hamlet* is performed and also die each time the curtain falls. We must conclude, then, that their deaths in Stoppard’s play have as little reality as their lives. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are not really dead; they never existed to properly die.

Our lives are not very dissimilar, paralleling the lives of these two characters in many ways. We may have shorter and less confusing names, but we also do not have all of the answers. Seeking the same answers that are denied Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, we ponder questions such as “how did we get here?” and “what are we doing here?” (20) Our lives are a search for answers that are never fully revealed to us. Do we exist any more than these actors from the play do? When asked, “Aren’t you going to change into your costume?” the Player responds, “I never change out of it, sir” (33). We may all be actors always in costume. We seem to have control over our bodies and what we do. It seems real to us, but how can we be sure? Rosencrantz and Guildenstern never realized that they were only characters in the middle of a larger play. What

makes us any surer of our existence? We may not know if we are in a play or in something that has a greater meaning, but there is the possibility that we are just like Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. “By this time tomorrow we might have forgotten everything we ever knew” (22), and the play might have ended, taking our characters with it.

If nothing is certain, then how does one find any truths? The Player sees how little reality there may be in truth: “Truth is only that which is taken to be true....There may be nothing behind it, but it doesn’t make any difference so long as it is honored” (67). If “uncertainty is the normal state” (66), as he professes, then perhaps we cannot ever know for certain the answers. “You can’t go through life questioning your situation at every turn” (66), so what can you do? Accepting what is probable could be a beginning to finding truth: “Plausibility is all I presume!” (114). But even probable truths cannot always be taken to be true. It is probable that one would find at least one tails in a hundred coin tosses, yet this is clearly not the case in the play. This implies, that very little, or perhaps nothing, we know is for certain. In particular, death may mean nothing, for we do not have enough to make judgments about either death or our own existence.

This play shows clearly that we should be skeptical of things around us, even things like our own reality and existence. There does not seem to be anything that can be counted upon to be real or true. Our perception of reality could be as erroneous as the perception that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern had of their lives. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern did not know that they were actors, and our lives may not be any different. Our life may be nothing more complicated or meaningful than a scene in a play. And if reality is all based on an illusion, then death must also be an illusion. This lack of reality and illusion of death may play a more important role than we might think in our own lives. The curtain can fall at any time ending this play and, with it, everything we believe to be real.