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Scholarship on the Philosophical Situation in
Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead

When reading Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead, by Tom Stoppard, one is aware of the multiple angles that could be used to examine the play. The issues raised are many, and on such a large scale that it would be impossible for any two people to get identical interpretations. The relatively small amount of scholarship written on the play is quite varied in nature, due in part to the complexity of the play itself. I will examine Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead by questioning who the main characters are, and where they exist in relation to the real world and the multiple levels of fictional worlds created in Hamlet and Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead. By examining the spatial and temporal issues raised in the plays, an argument will be formulated about what can be inferred about art, existence, and the physical world. There are some, but very few articles that pertain directly to this subject. Therefore I will be drawing on the following sources creatively and comprehensively in order to comment on the situation of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern.

The first article I would like to introduce is “How Remote Are Fictional Worlds from the Real World?” by Kendall L. Walton. This article was printed in *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Volume 37, in 1978. This article deals with the idea of interplay between real and fictional worlds. The argument given is that fictional worlds can be understood as a collection of fictional truths. Therefore, in this sense, fictional

characters do exist, and artists are veritable Gods vis-à-vis fictional worlds. There were two views of interpretation discussed at length; with the one I have stated embodying the author's belief. It was very convincing, but was not written to be taken as concrete fact; therefore it will be necessary to compare and contrast it to other's beliefs on the fictional situation. It left room for further investigation, but was very clear on its own argument. This article is relevant to my project, and it played a role in the narrowing of my topic. It does not talk specifically about Stoppard, but is a large scale discussion about issues brought up in his plays. It will be useful in formulating an argument and explaining the critical topic of my project.

My next source draws on the ideas raised in Walton's article and applies them to two of Stoppard's plays, The Real Inspector Hound and Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead. The article is chapter six of June Schlueter's *Metafictional Characters in Modern Drama*, titled "Stoppard's Moon and Birdboot, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern". Schlueter expresses her regard for Stoppard's work as she examines the characters and their situations in these two plays. The discussion is first focused on The Real Inspector Hound, but quickly turns to the characters Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. The argument is based around the existence and realness of these characters in terms of their place and purpose. She examines how the meta-theatre in the play contextualizes the existence of the characters, as well as illuminating the role of art and how it pertains to life. It is concluded that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern fulfill their purpose by playing roles which can not exist outside of Hamlet. This is a detailed, well thought out argument, but is very complicated and touches on a number of subjects. It very clearly is pertinent to the topic that I am interested in, and it brought up many ideas I had not previously thought about. I

will use it to help structure my argument and as a springboard to further my own thoughts.

The first two articles are very helpful, but did not include very much specific reference to Shakespeare's Hamlet. "The Play-Life Metaphor in Shakespeare and Stoppard" by William Babula was printed in the December 1972 edition of *Modern Poetry*, Volume 3. This article does exactly what the first two did not. It closely compares the situation of the characters in Hamlet and Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead. It states that the lead characters in both plays are thrust into their situation, into the play that is their life. Babula believes these characters are trapped; their actions and entire lives are encased in art. This raises interesting questions about the relationship between art and life. Babula states that there is not much difference between a player acting in a play and a human living life. I question Babula on this last point, for it reads as if he is stating his own philosophical opinion, and imposing his belief over the article. The article is also questionable due to its length. It is only three pages long, substantially shorter than my other sources. I include it due to its focus on the character of Hamlet in comparison to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. I was not able to find anything else of this specific nature. There are points in this article that will be easily argued against, but it does contain some ideas that will further my cause.

My next source includes specific detail on both Stoppard's and Shakespeare's plays, using modern theories to explain the situation of the characters. John Freeman's "Holding Up the Mirror to Mind's Nature: Reading Rosencrantz 'Beyond Absurdity'", was published in the January, 1996 Volume of *The Modern Language Review*. This article discusses a specific type of world that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern exist in.

Freeman's purpose in this article is to refute the idea that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern exist in a purely Absurd world, void of all meaning. The argument states that Stoppard has gone beyond this Existentialist view by using the script of Hamlet as a reference source. In addition, recent modes of thinking, including cognitive science, are used to remove Rosencrantz and Guildenstern from Absurdity and place them in a world of conscience and perception. The article is very scientific on some points, and goes into detail about current views of metaphysics and how they pertain to the plays. The result is a wealth of information that I can use to tie in the modern physical world with the fictional worlds presented in the plays. One scientific issue raised is the modern idea of plural conceptualization rather than linear thinking. This argument can be applied in order to assimilate the multiple layers of worlds in the play. This article is the most recent of my sources, and is very heavily laden with scholarly resources. It has justified many of my intentions and shown them to be relevant to the physical world.

My final source is "'Hamlet' Andante and 'Hamlet' Allegro: Tom Stoppard's Two Versions", by Jill L. Levenson. This article was printed in volume 36 of *Shakespeare Survey* in 1983. This article is of a different nature than the previous four. The article discusses some of Stoppard's literary and philosophical influences, most importantly Shakespeare's Hamlet, Beckett's Waiting for Godot, and Wittgenstein's philosophy. Throughout the article, there are numerous quotes from Stoppard discussing his ideas and explaining his reasoning. The aspect of the article that I am most interested in is the relation of the play to Wittgenstein. Levenson compares Stoppard's playwriting with Wittgenstein's theory of how one learns a concept; using the "convergence of different threads" metaphor. This idea is very similar to issues brought up in Freeman's

article. This article did not have a sole argument, but was more of a combinatorial tool which could be very helpful in arranging Stoppard's ideas in this difficult play. Although there was no singular argument in the article, there were several very interesting ideas raised. These ideas were raised very clearly, and there was much use of previous scholarship to back up the claims.

These sources cover a lot of ground and create an interesting backdrop of material to draw from. With the exception of Babula's article, I feel confident in the quality and stability of these five works. Due to the lack of scholarship, current articles were difficult to obtain, resulting in older sources than I had hoped for. This does not, however, take away from the quality of ideas and arguments that are raised. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern exist in a many leveled universe, and can be discussed in relation to Stoppard's play, Hamlet, the plays within these plays, and the real physical world. It is a very exciting, if complicated situation. Along with the primary sources, these five articles present a solid base of information. Drawing on this array of information I will closely examine the situation presented in Stoppard's Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead, and formulate an argument that has not been previously raised.

Works Cited

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