

Workshop for written examiners 2019

Author and text:

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead by Tom Stoppard

How would you introduce this text?

An eclectic mix of Shakespearean drama and twentieth-century thought, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* is a comedy in which the foreground and the background are inverted, with minor characters from *Hamlet* taking center stage and Shakespeare's protagonist relegated to a series of appearances. This onstage/offstage reversal enables Stoppard to explore absurdist themes like existence, reality, life, death and art.

Are there any contextual elements that seem particularly important to this text (e.g. socio-historical, literary, artistic, scientific)?

- knowledge of *Hamlet* and knowledge of *Waiting for Godot*
- knowledge of comedy, tragedy, tragicomedy
- knowledge of **absurdism** (Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*) → conflict between the human need for meaning and our indifferent universe
- knowledge of the **Theatre of the Absurd** (Beckett, Pinter, Ionesco) → experimentation; usual features of drama missing; drama of futility but also comic diversion
- historical context → post-war crisis in faith, questioning of humanity, search for meaning...

What would you consider to be the main ideas or issues that animate the text?

Very similar to the ones listed for *Waiting for Godot*!

- **fate** (the title announces the outcome of the play) vs **free will/choice/control** vs **chance, arbitrariness**; freedom & confinement
- **the world as a stage**: waiting for purpose or "direction"; actors vs people; actors vs spectators; reality vs **illusion; immobility**
- **identity**: also an illusion?
- difficulty of **communication**; inadequacy of **language**
- **memory, the past, time**
- **faith**
- **death**, mortality
- **uncertainty, anxiety; confusion**, doubt, incomprehension
- the **meaning of life** and philosophical thought: existentialism, nihilism, absurdism...
- dependence, companionship

What literary features (e.g. style, structure, use of genre) make this text distinctive, and how are they used to convey ideas or create effects?

- **intertextuality** (*Hamlet*, *Waiting for Godot*...); intellectual references (literary, Biblical, philosophical...); diversity of language (from blank verse to vulgar, silly prose)
- **manipulation of language** (puns, plays on words and expressions, taking figurative expressions literally, sexual innuendo) → playful, clever, witty; Stoppard's "intellectual showmanship"
- **stichomythia**; Ros and Guil's "game of questions" → using language to pass the time
- breakdown of philosophical tools like syllogism → absence of logic, unreliability of methods
- **leitmotif**, echoes ("We were sent for.", "Give us this day our daily...") emphasize key ideas but also create a sense of circularity, going in circles
- comic **exaggeration** ("Well, if you're going to be dogmatic.") and **repetition** ("we came from roughly south according to a rough map." "Well, which way did we come in? Roughly.")
- **symbolism** and **metaphor**: the theatre; tennis; the coins; the boat ("our movement is contained within a larger one that carries us along as inexorably as the wind and the current...")
- **metatheatricity**: a play within a play (or even a play within a play within a play at times!); drawing attention to the stage, the actors, the playwright, the audience; breaking of the fourth wall → questioning living vs acting
- **absence of conventional features of drama** (no clear plot, exposition, settings, character development, conflict, action, evolution...)
- **simple/minimal stagecraft**
- **quick transitions** between settings → disorientation, confusion
- **dramatic irony** throughout the play ("He murdered us.") → incomprehension
- **mix of comic and serious**: physical, verbal, situational comedy vs darker philosophical reflection

Any other remarks about the text

Like for *Waiting for Godot*, beware of the overuse of the word "absurd".

Willingness to discuss complexity and ambiguity → more questions raised than answers offered. *R&GAD* is an intellectually challenging play, especially for teenagers.

Importance of the effects created: the play is fun and funny! According to Stoppard, **the play was written to be funny and must be produced that way**; if it isn't, "it just becomes rather pretentious and boring".