Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead
Concept Analysis

Literary Text: Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead by Tom Stoppard

Summary
In this play, Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* is told from the perspective of the obscure characters Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. The two characters discuss important issues on their mind as they are sitting around in the Danish castle trying to figure out why they are there. They know they were summoned there to help Hamlet earlier that morning, but don’t have a clue to what is wrong with him or how to help. They interact with characters from *Hamlet*; mostly with the players who come to perform the “mouse trap” play Hamlet sets up to catch the king. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are otherwise left alone in the castle, waiting for people to walk through and interact with them. Their time alone leads to different topics to be discussed and elaborated upon. Often times they play with words and become confused making for many comedic scenes, fun to read aloud and see the interaction.

Organizational Patterns
*Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* is a play written in three acts. Each act can be identified by their settings. Act one is set outside the castle walls, introducing the characters and their situations. Act two is set within the castle as Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are introduced to more characters and they engage in deeper philosophical conversations. Act three is set on a ship going to England.

Central Question
LIFE AND DEATH

What Constitutes A Life Worth Living?
Many times throughout the play, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern talk about life. They explain how they cannot and do not know how to act without another person telling them what to do or how to do it. Through most of the play, they sit around the castle waiting for other characters to arrive and give them instruction (like stage directions) instead of taking the initiative and acting for themselves. They depend solely on the words and actions of others to motivate them to act. The title of the play indicates that they “are dead” and they discuss what it is to be dead many times. What does this suggest? Does one have to act to be considered truly alive, or can he merely be acted upon? How does Rosencrantz
and Guildenstern’s inability to act ultimately affect their lives? Also, how is Rosencrantz and Guildenstern’s inability to act reflective of Hamlet’s inability to act in his own play?

Issues Related to the Study of Literature

THEME

Death – One of the major issues in this play can be pulled directly from the title: death. Throughout the play, Guildenstern argues, quite heatedly at times, what he believes death to be against what the players believe. Guildenstern believes death to be the absence of being and if one does not return, he is dead. The players, however, believe death to be something that can be acted out over and over again. Their arguments bring up the questions of what can be considered living or dying.

Identity Crisis/Confusion – Confusion of identity is seen as a common thread in the play and we see it most concretely through the trouble the characters have, even Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, in remembering who Rosencrantz is and who Guildenstern is. The King and Queen often address Rosencrantz as Guildenstern and vice versa. The two main characters, in turn, become confused and bow when addressed incorrectly and at times can’t remember their own names. They also have difficulty understanding their purpose in the castle and why they were called to help Hamlet. Not knowing who they are, they frequently ask each other as well as other characters what they are to do and how they are to know what to do if they are not being told.

SETTING

In *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, there are three main areas which the play takes place: outside the castle grounds in Denmark, inside the castle walls and on a ship set on a course for England. Set up and distinguished only by changes in the lighting and minimal props, the settings are not a main focus of the play. The scenes outside the castle are nondescript; only described as “a place without any visible character” (11). The change of setting from outdoor to indoor is indicated only by a slight lighting change. The last act is set on the boat to England which is indicated only by soft sea sounds. Since the play lacks description of these settings, students can draw on the prior knowledge they have from reading *Hamlet* to visualize what each looks like.

POINT OF VIEW, NARRATIVE VOICE

Since this is a play, there is no distinguished first or second person narrative; however, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, Culp, BYU, 2009
being the main focus of the play, are the characters most able to voice their inner thoughts. Both characters share insights about life and death and although at certain times one may seem more enlightened than the other, this light is traded off with differing topics of interest.

Guildenstern is often the one to bring up philosophical issues for discussion. He is constantly questioning life and death and becomes frustrated when Rosencrantz and other characters, mainly the players, fail to see things as he does. Rosencrantz comes off as the denser of the two, oblivious to the ominous questions Guildenstern often brings up but easily plays off of Guildenstern’s rants.

FOIL CHARACTERS

The contrasting characters of Guildenstern and the main Player are a good example of how using foil characters can be effective when wanting to emphasize certain characteristics. The Player highly contrasts Guildenstern’s character in his views of death as well as how one must live. The Player is an actor; he is constantly acting and constantly in character whereas Guildenstern only acts when told what to do by other people. These two characters have multiple discussions and arguments about their contrasting views of death which are very telling about their characters and can be used to study the different ways in which they contrast each other and bring out certain points of interest.

SYMBOLS

Symbols, their usage and their importance in literature are good areas to study and easy to do through the symbols used in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*. The many symbols in the play are interesting when taking a closer look at the topics that surround each one. The play begins with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern tossing a coin and calling “heads” in the air as the coin indefinitely continues to land on heads. This coin becomes a symbol for the question of fate and destiny which is occasionally brought up throughout the play. Another symbol used in the play is that of the barrels at the end of the play. Sitting in the center of the stage, the barrels are used in act three as vehicles for characters to climb in and out of. At the very end of the play Rosencrantz and Guildenstern climb into the barrels not to be seen again.

IMAGERY

Imagery is not rampant throughout this play, but there are a few passages which would be great to pull from the book and make individual studies of. One in particular is in the last pages of Act two (94) when Guildenstern is describing the term “autumnal”. It is also an interesting to look at which things are described in great detail and the implications, considering the minimal descriptions of the settings.

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CHARACTER SKETCH

The characterizations of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are very unique. Their unique characterization presents a good opportunity for students to learn how to create a character sketch to show their ability to understand each of the characters.

Affective Issues Related to the Work

One major issue students will be able to relate to within this play is how one lives life. Looking at Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, it is easy to see that they do not feel the need to act for themselves. Students can look at the characters’ opinions on life and ask themselves, how do I want to live? Although some students may connect with the feeling of not wanting to act, most will recognize the innate human desire to do and create.

Along with the idea of action in life, students will be able to connect with the struggle that sometimes accompanies finding the motivation or courage to act. A main theme in this play as well as in Hamlet is the inability to act.

Death is another issue that will be brought up that students can relate to. Death is a part of life that everyone must face in their lives, and as high school students, they may have experienced enough life that they have already been faced with death. Students may have their own personal experiences with death and their own views. Differing views of death are presented in this play by various characters and the students can decide which character they agree with, if they agree with a character at all. Death can be a sensitive topic to approach, but when discussed with sensitivity and respect, it can be very affective.

Vocabulary Issues

Throughout the play, students may approach words which they do not understand. When Guildenstern begins speaking philosophically, he tends to use words which students may need the aid of a dictionary to understand. Students can keep a list of words they come across that they don’t know creating their own vocabulary list. Students may also practice using context clues to figure out meaning to these words on their list before going to a dictionary.

The topic of “code shifting” can also be approached in relation to vocabulary. Looking at how Rosencrantz and Guildenstern talk to differing characters, a shifting in their language can be seen. When talking to each other,
Rosencrantz and Guildenstern have short, choppy sentences with long pauses and they are often interrupting each other; however, when speaking to the king and queen their language shifts. It is audibly as well as visibly noticeable when reading the text because their speech changes from being written in streaming prose to iambic pentameter. This makes for good discussions because everyone code shifts, even if they are unaware of it. Discuss code shifting and ask the students how they may speak differently to their best friends than they would to their parents. Even sending text messages or emails can be seen as forms of code shifting.

**Background Knowledge**

Since *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* is written based off of the play *Hamlet*, students will need to know and have read this play as well. Shakespeare’s play is still being acted out around the two main characters; however, the reader only sees the parts of the play Rosencrantz and Guildenstern see. In discussing the issues embedded in this play, it is also important for students to understand the issues presented in *Hamlet* since they correspond with each other.

**Implications for Students of Diversity**

This play does not address matters of diversity in any explicit ways. However, there are matters of social class that can be addressed. The most noticeable difference in class is between the players and the people of the court. These differences can be discussed and can lead to discussions about class differences still seen today in the United States.

Some students in the classroom may come from different backgrounds that address the matters of death differently. Incorporate those cultural differences into discussions when the situation allows and be sensitive to the differing views.

**Gender Issues**

Gender issues are not as prominent in this play as they are in *Hamlet* which has a lot more focus on Ophelia. Ophelia, however, does show up in this play in the scene where Hamlet accosts her and tells her to get to a nunnery. After the scene is presented, Claudius comments on Hamlet’s love for Ophelia and Rosencrantz mentions briefly how it did not look like love to him. Through this scene, it is interesting to note the difference in seeing *Hamlet* from the perspective of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. Seeing how Hamlet treats Ophelia in this new light can spark a discussion about love and relationships and how boys and girls should treat each other in relationships.
Research Issues/Project Ideas

MAKING CONNECTIONS

Themes From Hamlet – It is interesting to see how many themes from Hamlet are carried over to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead. Students can explore an issue in Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead and relate it back to Hamlet, finding passages that are similar and connecting them. This can be done in a simple project to create connections like a poster or PowerPoint or in a formal written paper. Students can either find multiple themes and find a connection for each or choose one specific theme and delve deeper into it, finding multiple connections between the two texts.

CREATIVE PROJECTS

Interviews – Many different views of life and death are given in this play and lend for a lot of discussion in class about the students’ differing views. The students can participate in a fun creative project to interview others; their peers, parents, friends or family and find out other points of view. Have the students write up specific questions that relate to the text and address the issues addressed by Rosencrantz and Guildenstern.

Acting – Students can choose their favorite scene from the play with a group and be prepared to perform it in front of the class. Along with the performance, students can write up a short paper explaining why they chose the specific scene, what meaning they derive from the scene and the difference they notice between reading and actually being a part of the text.

Becoming A Playwright – In the play, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern have many quick-witted conversations with each other about different topics on their minds. Students can think of their own topic or issue to discuss and create a dialogue between them and a partner, taking into account differing points of view or personality traits. Students may then act it out in front of the class with a partner.

Enrichment Resources

Film – There is a film adaptation of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead which was written and directed by Tom Stoppard, and is a good resource if students are interested in seeing some of the dialogue or actions played out on screen.
Pop Culture – Recently a film was released called *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Undead* about a man who is recruited to put on a production of this play. The plot also includes vampires and a quest for the holy grail, making it quite the hodgepodge of a film. It is not a film I would suggest to students to watch as it has sexual content, but it would be interesting to discuss how this play has made it into pop culture and why.

Other Plays – *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* has also been compared to Samuel Beckett’s play *Waiting for Godot*. For further readings or projects, students could look at this play and the similarities they can draw from it to *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*. 