Existentialism: Embracing the Unknown

Even the most ignorant shell of a human being can tell you that it was Shakespeare who penned the undying line, “To be or not to be.” Though this quote may echo throughout eternity, it is ultimately destined to remain an inferior, incomplete inquiry. While Hamlet muses idly whether or not he should go on living, his remarkably unremarkable school friends, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, must take this question one step further, and decide if they (and everyone else, along with them) are able “to be” in a meaningful fashion. Such questions form the philosophical school of Existentialism, which gently pulses beneath the surface in Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead. Throughout the play different characters toy with the notions of fate, the meaning of life, and deaths inevitable embrace. I would argue that, within the play, those who forever deliberate or give up hope in the absence of clear direction live anxiously at the mercy of the world, while those who embrace the unknown and take action are more powerful, peaceful, and purposeful.

Throughout the play, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern rarely know where they are, what they are doing, and what they are “supposed” to be doing. As two minor characters, plucked from their “home play,” where their original purpose lies, and thrust into a different production, it’s easy to understand why they have some trouble adopting their roles as protagonists. “Which way did we come in? I’ve lost my sense of direction,” Rosencrantz murmurs disappointedly on page 39. The two men repeatedly lose their geographic awareness throughout the play, a literal representation of the idea that their lives are devoid of any *obvious* direction. They’re never quite sure what to do with themselves. Existentialism suggests this idea, that “existence precedes essence,” which states that we must formulate our own purpose in order to escape an otherwise meaningless existence. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, however, are unable to do this. At one point the two beg The Player to provide them with orders; they “welcome the uncertainty of being left to other people’s [devices,]” after being left to their own for so long. However, he calmly replies that “Uncertainty is a normal state. You’re nobody special...Relax. Respond... You can’t go through life questioning your situation at every turn.” (p.66) These words wholly support the existential notion that it is normal to experience angst in the face of uncertainty, and that time spent questioning it is wasted. As Rosencrantz and Guildenstern fail come to terms with what is happening, and refrain from taking any action of their own, they continue to bend to the events that occur around them.

In stark contrast to how Rosencrantz and Guildenstern bumble through the play, both the Player and Hamlet embody the great value of and acceptance and decisiveness. Hamlet comes to the conclusion that he is part of some divine plan of revenge, after deliberating on what to do for some time, and finally sets forth a chain of events to avenge his father. His planning ahead and decisive approach allow him to manipulate events to his liking; he evades the questions that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern propose to him (“Twenty-seven questions he got out in ten minutes, and answered three!” p.57,) intercepts and swaps-out their letter, and makes his eventual escape from the boat and back to Denmark. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are unable to even approach Hamlet to try and sway him, realizing that, “When it comes to the point we succumb to their personality,” (p.75) referring to the seemingly overpowering effect that others have upon them. The Player, on the other hand, is quite at peace with how events play out around him. Stoppard has presented him as being self-aware of his place within a work of art; by giving the Player an almost omniscient perspective, Stoppard lends his voice great authority. Early on the Player states, “We have no control.” (p.25) He accepts things for the way that they are and embraces them, rather than try and figure out *what* exactly he should be doing. His claim that, “[Truth] is the currency of living. There may be nothing behind it, but it doesn’t make any difference so long as it is honoured.” (p.67) justifies his belief. The Player understands that nothing is certain and, and in lieu of this fact, the best thing to do is to simply go on living. This belief even gives him power over the fictional realm in which he resides, and allows him to help guide the confused young Rosencrantz and Guildenstern along their path to meaning. After carefully setting the stage, the Player transforms the open road into the castle of Elsinore, dropping Rosencrantz and Guildenstern exactly where they need to be. (p.37/38)

The very title of the play suggests that things look pretty grim for Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. Early on the Player informs them that, “Design [is] at work in all art...we aim for the point where everyone who is marked for death dies.” (p.79) This quote allows The Player to simultaneously foreshadow their deaths, allude to an existential dilemma, and advise the young men to eventually embrace death. The Player, while specifically referring to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, is making a statement about life and death in general. Existentialism is rooted in the inevitability of death, for it is this eventual event that the human being must somehow surpass via how he or she lives his or her life. Despite Guildenstern saying about Hamlet, “He is a man. He is mortal... Death comes to us all. He would have died, anyway, sooner or later,” (p.110) both he and Rosencrantz display great fear when they realize their own impending deaths. Though the Player casually reminds them that “most things end in death,” (p.123) the two deny this claim by reminding the Tragedians that, no matter how many times they act out death, it is not permanent. Guildenstern fearfully describes death as, “Not anything...the absence of presence... the endless time of never coming back.” (p.124) Though the two naturally fear this dark, abysmal end to the chaotic events that have surrounded them, their attitudes toward it change as it draws near. Rosencrantz accepts it in the end, saying, “I’ve had enough. To tell you the truth, I’m relieved,” while Guildenstern optimistically exits with the statement, “We’ll know better next time.” (p.126) The wise Player, who has accepted death for some time, is able to clearly see and welcome his own end, while Rosencrantz and Guildenstern fret and worry about theirs until the last possible moment.

The question of whether or not of fate and freedom can coexist is explored within Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead. The Player suggests that nobody decides their own fate, that “It is *written.*.. We follow directions. There is no choice involved.” (p.80) His full faith in his role as an actor allows him to continue living it exceptionally well, as he never questions the directions that he receives, be they from King Claudius or from Stoppard himself. At one point Rosencrantz imagines having to choose between being dead, and then shoved into a box, or being alive, and still being shoved into a box. He says, “Life in a box is better than no life at all...You’d have a chance at least.” (pg.71) This metaphor illustrates his belief in the intrinsic value of life, even if it entails existing on some predestined path. The concept of fate is revisited later in the book when sirs Rosencrantz and Guildenstern find themselves on a boat heading for England. “I’m very fond of boats myself. I like the way that they’re - contained. You don’t have to worry about which way to go, or whether to go at all,” Guildenstern says appreciatively. (pg.100) Though the two have journeyed thus far with little of their own input, they now find themselves comfortably making progress without *having* to make any decisions. Life and the boat share the method that Rosencrantz had mentioned earlier in the play: “There’s only one direction, and time is its only measure.” (p.72) The boat has become a sanctuary for these two lost souls, who are relieved to finally find themselves on their way to a tangible goal. Guildenstern qualifies this idea by saying, “We can do what we like and say what we like to whomever we like, without restriction.” to which Rosencrantz says, “Within limits, of course.” (p.116) These specific instances are the only times that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern transcend their typical silliness, and display a firm grasp and comfort with what is happening around them.  
 Though Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are initially quite troubled by the fact that they don’t know what they are doing, their comfort with acceptance grows as the play goes on. The Player and Hamlet calmly control the flow of the play, with Hamlet literally bringing Ros and Guil in and out of darkness with his lantern, and the Player using his abnormal power to bend the rules of reality (Such as when he whisks them magically to Elsinore, or fits an entire acting troupe within a single barrel.) While Rosencrantz and Guildenstern spend the entire play at the mercy of these seemingly greater men, they do eventually come to terms with their lack of control, which allows them to depart from the world gracefully. While they have finally learned the lesson that one must devise their own meaningful way “to be,” the two are ironically forced, “not to be,” in the end.  
  
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