**John Osborne**

**Biography**

John Osborne was born in London, England in 1929 to Thomas Osborne, an advertisement writer, and Nellie Beatrice, a working class barmaid. His father died in 1941. Osborne used the proceeds from a life insurance settlement to send himself to Belmont College, a private boarding school. Osborne was expelled after only a few years for attacking the headmaster. He received a certificate of completion for his upper school work, but never attended a college or university.

After returning home, Osborne worked several odd jobs before he found a niche in the theater. He began working with Anthony Creighton's provincial touring company where he was a stage hand, actor, and writer. Osborne co-wrote two plays -- The Devil Inside Him and Personal Enemy -- before writing and submitting Look Back in Anger for production.

The play, written in a short period of only a few weeks, was summarily rejected by the agents and production companies to whom Osborne first submitted the play. It was eventually picked up by George Devine for production with his failing Royal Court Theater. Both Osborne and the Royal Court Theater were struggling to survive financially and both saw the production of Look Back in Anger as a risk. After opening night, the play received mixed reviews. It did receive a handful of glowing reviews from several influential theater critics, however, and Osborne was soon pronounced to be one of the most promising young playwright's in British theater.

In the late 1950's, Osborne was approached by Lawrence Olivier, the famous actor, about writing and producing a play for him. Osborne wrote The Entertainer, a play that metaphorically explores the decline of the British empire through the lens of a failing music hall. Olivier played the lead role in the production and the play received critical acclaim. Osborne would continue to write for the stage through the 1960's. He produced a number of critical and commercially successful works including Luther, a play based on the life of Martin Luther. In 1963, Osborne won an Academy Award for his screen adaptation of Tom Jones.

Osborne continued to work in the artistic and entertainment worlds through the 1970's and 80's. He wrote plays, but also ventured into writing screenplays, television adaptations, and autobiography. Osborne made several appearances as an actor during this period. He starred in several popular Hollywood films including Get Carter and Flash Gordon. Later in life, he received numerous awards for his work including a Lifetime Achievement Award from the Writer's Guild in Britain. Osborne died at the age of 65 from complications related to diabetes.

**Look Back in Anger**

**Summary**

Look Back in Anger begins in the attic flat apartment of Jimmy Porter and Alison Porter. The setting is mid-1950's small town England. Jimmy and Alison share their apartment with Cliff Lewis, a young working class man who is best friends with Jimmy. Cliff and Jimmy both come from a working class background, though Jimmy has had more education than Cliff. They are in business together running a sweet-stall. Alison comes from a more prominent family and it is clear from the beginning that Jimmy resents this fact.

The first act opens on a Sunday in April. Jimmy and Cliff are reading the Sunday papers while Alison is ironing in a corner of the room. Jimmy is a hot tempered young man and he begins to try and provoke both Cliff and Alison. He is antagonistic towards Cliff's working class background and makes fun of him for his low intelligence. Cliff is good natured and takes the antagonism. Jimmy attempts to provoke his wife, Alison, by making fun of her family and her well-heeled life before she married him. Jimmy also seems to display a nostalgia for England's powerful past. He notes that the world has entered a "dreary" American age, a fact he begrudgingly accepts. Alison tires of Jimmy's rants and begs for peace. This makes Jimmy more fevered in his insults. Cliff attempts to keep peace between the two and this leads to a playful scuffle between the two. Their wrestling ends up running into Alison, causing her to fall down. Jimmy is sorry for the incident, but Alison makes him leave the room.

After Jimmy leaves, Alison confides to Cliff that she is pregnant with Jimmy's child, though she has not yet told Jimmy. Cliff advises her to tell him, but when Cliff goes out and Jimmy re-enters the room, the two instead fall into an intimate game. Jimmy impersonates a stuffed bear and Alison impersonates a toy squirrel. Cliff returns to tell Alison that her old friend, Helena Charles, has called her on the phone. Alison leaves to take the call and returns with the news that Helena is coming to stay for a visit. Jimmy does not like Helena and goes into a rage in which he wishes that Alison would suffer in order to know what it means to be a real person. He curses her and wishes that she could have a child only to watch it die.

Two weeks later, Helena has arrived and Alison discusses her relationship with Jimmy. She tells of how they met and how, in their younger days, they used to crash parties with their friend Hugh Tanner. Jimmy maintains an affection for Hugh's mother, though his relationship with Hugh was strained when Hugh left to travel the world and Jimmy stayed to be with Alison. Jimmy seems to regret that he could not leave, but he is also angry at Hugh for abandoning his mother. Helena inquires about Alison's affectionate relationship with Cliff and Alison tells her that they are strictly friends.

Cliff and Jimmy return to the flat and Helena tells them that she and Alison are leaving for church. Jimmy goes into an anti-religious rant and ends up insulting Alison's family once again. Helena becomes angry and Jimmy dares her to slap him on the face, warning her that he will slap her back. He tells her of how he watched his father die as a young man. His father had been injured fighting in the Spanish Civil War and had returned to England only to die shortly after. Alison and Helena begin to leave for church and Jimmy feels betrayed by his wife.

A phone call comes in for Jimmy and he leaves the room. Helena tells Alison that she has called Alison's father to come get her and take her away from this abusive home. Alison relents and says that she will go when her father picks her up the next day. When Jimmy returns, he tells Alison that Mrs. Tanner, Hugh's mother, has become sick and is going to die. Jimmy decides to visit her and he demands that Alison make a choice of whether to go with Helena or with him. Alison picks up her things and leaves for church and Jimmy collapses on the bed, heartbroken by his wife's decision.

The next evening Alison is packing and talking with her father, Colonel Redfern. The Colonel is a soft spoken man who realizes that he does not quite understand the love that exists between Jimmy and Alison. He admits that the actions of him and his wife are partly to blame for their split. The Colonel was an officer in the British military and served in India and he is nostalgic for his time there. He considers his service to be some of the best years of his life. Alison observes that her father is hurt because the present is not the past and that Jimmy is hurt because he feels the present is only the past. Alison begins to pack her toy squirrel, but then she decides not to do so.

Helena and Cliff soon enter the scene. Alison leaves a letter for Jimmy explaining why she has left and she gives it to Cliff. After Alison leaves, Cliff becomes angry and gives the letter to Helena, blaming her for the situation. Jimmy returns, bewildered that he was almost hit by Colonel Redfern's car and that Cliff pretended not to see him when he was walking by on the street. He reads Alison's letter and becomes very angry. Helena tells him that Alison is pregnant, but Jimmy tells her that he does not care. He insults Helena and she slaps him, then passionately kisses him.

Several months pass and the third act opens with Jimmy and Cliff once again reading the Sunday papers while Helena stands in the corner ironing. Jimmy and Cliff still engage in their angry banter and Helena's religious tendencies have taken the brunt of Jimmy's punishment. Jimmy and Cliff perform scenes from musicals and comedy shows but when Helena leaves, Cliff notes that things do not feel the same with her here. Cliff then tells Jimmy that he wants to move out of the apartment. Jimmy takes the news calmly and tells him that he has been a loyal friend and is worth more than any woman. When Helena returns, the three plan to go out. Alison suddenly enters.

Alison and Helena talk while Jimmy leaves the room. He begins to loudly play his trumpet. Alison has lost her baby and looks sick. Helena tells Alison that she should be angry with her for what she has done, but Alison is only grieved by the loss of her baby. Helena is driven to distraction by Jimmy's trumpet playing and demands that he come into the room. When he comes back in, he laments the fact that Alison has lost the baby but shrugs it off. Helena then tells Jimmy and Alison that her sense of morality -- right and wrong -- has not diminished and that she knows she must leave. Alison attempts to persuade her to stay, telling her that Jimmy will be alone if she leaves.

When Helena leaves, Jimmy attempts to once again become angry but Alison tells him that she has now gone through the emotional and physical suffering that he has always wanted her to feel. He realizes that she has suffered greatly, has become like him, and becomes softer and more tender towards her. The play ends with Jimmy and Alison embracing, once again playing their game of bear and squirrel.

**Characters**

**Jimmy Porter**

Jimmy Porter is the play's main character. He is the "Angry Young Man" who expresses his frustration for the lack of feelings in his placid domestic life. Jimmy can be understood as both a hero for his unfiltered expressions of emotion and frustration in a culture that propagated unemotional resignation. He can also be considered a villain for the ways in which his anger proves to be destructive to those in his life.

**Cliff Lewis**

Cliff is a friend to both Jimmy and Alison. Cliff lives with them in their attic apartment. He is a working class Welsh man and Jimmy makes sure to often point out that he is "common" and uneducated. Cliff believes this is the reason that Jimmy keeps him as a friend. He is quite fond of Alison and they have a strange physically affectionate relationship throughout the play.

**Alison Porter**

Alison Porter is Jimmy's wife. She comes from Britain's upper class, but married into Jimmy's working class lifestyle. The audience learns in the first act that she is pregnant with Jimmy's child. Jimmy's destructive anger causes her great strain and she eventually leaves him. Her child miscarries and she comes back to Jimmy to show him that she has undergone great suffering.

**Helena Charles**

Helena Charles is Alison's best friend. She lives with them in their apartment while visiting for work. Helena is from an upper class family. She is responsible for getting Alison to leave Jimmy. She and Jimmy then begin an affair. Her sense of morality leads her to leave. She can be considered the play's moral compass.

**Colonel Redfern**

Colonel Redfern is Alison's father. He represents Britain's great Edwardian past. He was a military leader in India for many years before returning with his family to England. He is critical of Jimmy and Alison's relationship, but accepts that he is to blame for many of their problems because of his meddling in their affairs.

**Themes**

**The Angry Young Man**

Osborne's play was the first to explore the theme of the "Angry Young Man." This term describes a generation of post-World War II artists and working class men who generally ascribed to leftist, sometimes anarchist, politics and social views. According to cultural critics, these young men were not a part of any organized movement but were, instead, individuals angry at a post-Victorian Britain that refused to acknowledge their social and class alienation.

Jimmy Porter is often considered to be literature's seminal example of the angry young man. Jimmy is angry at the social and political structures that he believes has kept him from achieving his dreams and aspirations. He directs this anger towards his friends and, most notably, his wife Alison.

**The Kitchen Sink Drama**

Kitchen Sink drama is a term used to denote plays that rely on realism to explore domestic social relations. Realism, in British theater, was first experimented with in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century by such playwrights as George Bernard Shaw. This genre attempted to capture the lives of the British upper class in a way that realistically reflected the ordinary drama of ruling class British society.

According to many critics, by the mid-twentieth century the genre of realism had become tired and unimaginative. Osborne's play returned imagination to the Realist genre by capturing the anger and immediacy of post-war youth culture and the alienation that resulted in the British working classes. Look Back in Anger was able to comment on a range of domestic social dilemmas in this time period. Most importantly, it was able to capture, through the character of Jimmy Porter, the anger of this generation that festered just below the surface of elite British culture.

**Loss of Childhood**

A theme that impacts the characters of Jimmy and Alison Porter is the idea of a lost childhood. Osborne uses specific examples -- the death of Jimmy's father when Jimmy was only ten, and how he was forced to watch the physical and mental demise of the man -- to demonstrate the way in which Jimmy is forced to deal with suffering from an early age. Alison's loss of childhood is best seen in the way that she was forced to grow up too fast by marrying Jimmy. Her youth is wasted in the anger and abuse that her husband levels upon her.

Osborne suggests that a generation of British youth has experienced this same loss of childhood innocence. Osborne uses the examples of World War, the development of the atomic bomb, and the decline of the British Empire to show how an entire culture has lost the innocence that other generations were able to maintain.

**Real Life**

In the play, Jimmy Porter is consumed with the desire to live a more real and full life. He compares this burning desire to the empty actions and attitudes of others. At first, he generalizes this emptiness by criticizing the lax writing and opinions of those in the newspapers. He then turns his angry gaze to those around him and close to him, Alison, Helena, and Cliff.

Osborne's argument in the play for a real life is one in which men are allowed to feel a full range of emotions. The most real of these emotions is anger and Jimmy believes that this anger is his way of truly living. This idea was unique in British theater during the play's original run. Osborne argued in essays and criticisms that, until his play, British theater had subsumed the emotions of characters rendering them less realistic. Jimmy's desire for a real life is an attempt to restore raw emotion to the theater.

**Sloth in British Culture**

Jimmy Porter compares his quest for a more vibrant and emotional life to the slothfulness of the world around him. It is important to note that Jimmy does not see the world around him as dead, but merely asleep in some fundamental way. This is a fine line that Osborne walks throughout the play. Jimmy never argues that there is a nihilism within British culture. Instead, he sees a kind of slothfulness of character. His anger is an attempt to awaken those around him from this cultural sleep.

This slothfulness of emotion is best seen in the relationship between Alison and Cliff. Alison describes her relationship with Cliff as "comfortable." They are physically and emotionally affectionate with each other, but neither seems to want to take their passion to another level of intimacy. In this way, their relationship is lazy. They cannot awaken enough passion to consummate their affair. Jimmy seems to subconsciously understand this, which is the reason he is not jealous of their affection towards one another.

**The Rise and Fall of the British Empire**

The character of Colonel Redfern, Alison's father, represents the decline of and nostalgia for the British Empire. The Colonel had been stationed for many years in India, a symbol of Britain's imperial reach into the world. The Edwardian age which corresponded to Britain's height of power, had been the happiest of his life. His nostalgia is representative of the denial that Osborne sees in the psyche of the British people. The world has moved on into an American age, he argues, and the people of the nation cannot understand why they are no longer the world's greatest power.

**Masculinity in Art**

Osborne has been accused by critics of misogynistic views in his plays. Many point to Look Back in Anger as the chief example. These critics accuse Osborne of glorifying young male anger and cruelty towards women and homosexuals. This is seen in the play in specific examples in which Jimmy Porter emotionally distresses Alison, his wife, and delivers a grisly monologue in which he wishes for Alison's mother's death.

Osborne, however, asserts that he is attempting to restore a vision of true masculinity into a twentieth century culture that he sees as becoming increasingly feminized. This feminization is seen in the way that British culture shows an "indifference to anything but immediate, personal suffering." This causes a deadness within which Jimmy's visceral anger and masculine emotion is a retaliation against.

**Quotes and Analysis**

*1."People like me don't get fat. I've tried to tell you before. We just burn everything up."*

*Look Back in Anger, 12.*

This quote, spoken by Jimmy, is a glimpse into his character and his anger. Though his quote, literally, is meant to convey the kind of physical energy that Jimmy has in his everyday life, on another level the quote is meant to suggest the kind of destruction that Jimmy brings to the lives of those around him. The word "burn" has a double meaning in this way; on the one hand it is meant to represent a burning of physical, bodily energy. On the other hand, it is meant to convey destruction -- how Jimmy's frenetic quest for real life destroys the lives of those to whom he is closest.

*2."If you could have a child, and it would die...if only I could watch you face that."*

*Look Back in Anger, 37.*

This quote, spoken by Jimmy, demonstrates his vicious anger towards Alison. The quote is an example of dramatic irony as well as foreshadowing. It foreshadows future events in the play in which Alison loses her pregnancy, Jimmy's child, to miscarriage. It is dramatic irony in that the audience already knows that Alison is pregnant when Jimmy speaks this line, but he does not realize this fact. Without the suffering of losing something close and important to her, Jimmy sees Alison as an incomplete or unborn person, incapable of true emotion and life.

*3."Oh heavens, how I long for a little ordinary human enthusiasm. Just enthusiasm -- that's all. I want to hear a warm, thrilling voice cry out Hallelujah!...Hallelujah! I'm alive!"*

*Look Back in Anger, 15.*

Jimmy is primarily concerned with a way to live a real, enthusiastic, and emotional life. The desire for emotion expresses itself in his anger towards his wife and their domestic existence. This quote is a reference to black gospel religion which Jimmy associates with things such as jazz music (Jimmy also plays the trumpet, a similar reference). This use of a religious phrase should be compared to Jimmy's antagonism towards traditional English Anglicanism, which Jimmy firmly rejects. It should also be noted that most of the play occurs on a Sunday, suggesting that in Jimmy's righteous anger is a modern attempt to find the kind of real life that traditional religion sought to convey for its believers.

*4."If you've no world of your own, it's rather pleasant to regret the passing of someone else's. I must be getting sentimental. But I must say it's pretty dreary living in the American Age -- unless you're an American of course."*

*Look Back in Anger, 17.*

Jimmy is a character that is not of his age. He derides his father-in-law for being an old "Edwardian." This Edwardian Age is a reference to the reign of King Edward VII in Great Britain, a brief period at the beginning of the 20th century where a fashionable British elite influenced the art and fashions of continental Europe. Jimmy, however, is also in many ways a sentimental Edwardian. He views himself as a descendant of this more fashionable age, stuck in a time in which the world around him does not understand his passions and motivations. In comparison, the American Age is "dreary," meaning that the fashion and culture of this previous age has been wiped away by the rise of America as a great world superpower.

*5."It's what he would call a question of allegiances, and he expects you to be pretty literal about them. Not only about himself and all the things he believes in, his present and his future, but his past as well."*

*Look Back in Anger, 42.*

In this quote, Alison attempts to explain Jimmy's character and motivations to her friend Helena. Jimmy's allegiances are a result of his intense character and desire for raw emotion. Casual acquaintances will not do for him. Such relationships lack power and realness. Jimmy expects all of those he cares about to be committed to those things as well. Alison's break with Jimmy occurs when she goes to church with Helena, a rejection of Jimmy's secularism. He takes this action very personally as an affront to him.

*6."Jimmy went into battle with his axe swinging round his head -- frail, and so full of fire. I had never seen anything like it. The old story of the knight in shining armour (sic) -- except that his armour didn't really shine very much."*

*Look Back in Anger, 45*

This quote, spoken by Alison, is her attempt to explain to Helena why she fell so madly in love with Jimmy as a young girl. This quote allows Osborne to explore the idea of chivalry, an idea found in medieval English literature and a trait that has deep roots in English mythology. Osborne is questioning whether the idea of male chivalry can still exist in a feminized modern world. While Jimmy is compared to a knight, he is described as a poor knight with dull armor, and his modern chivalrous acts seems to do more harm than good.

*7."One day, when I'm not longer spending my days running a sweet-stall, I may write a book about us all. ...It'll be recollected in fire, and blood. My blood."*

*Look Back in Anger, 54.*

Jimmy expresses his anger through the use of language that could be almost considered biblical. Jimmy uses the word "blood" throughout the play to describe his relationships. "Blood" signifies sacrifice and violence. Jimmy feels as though he has sacrificed much of his life to a lifeless relationship with Alison. Thus, this quote illustrates the way in which Jimmy feels he has shed his blood for his dull domestic life. This quote also demonstrates the violence that Jimmy expresses to Alison. Though there is never any real physical violence in the play, the metaphorical use of the word "blood" demonstrates the deep psychological violence that both Allison and Jimmy perpetrate on each other.

*8."Why, why, why, why do we let these women bleed us to death?"*

*Look Back in Anger, 84.*

This is Jimmy's expression of his antagonism towards women. Jimmy uses imagery throughout the play to describe women in often mean-spirited and sometimes violent ways. Some critics of the play accuse Osborne of misogynistic language and. Osborne wrote later that much of the play was a reaction to what he saw as a feminized world in which personal suffering is glorified and the idea of male nobility is diminished. Again, the idea of blood is used here. Jimmy feels as though the idea of shedding blood for the love and attention of women has replaced the idea of shedding blood for a noble sacrifice.

*9."I suppose people of our generation aren't able to die for good causes any longer. We had all that done for us, in the thirties and the forties, when we were still kids. ...There aren't any good, brave causes left."*

*Look Back in Anger, 84.*

This quote demonstrates a central theme of the play: the way in which past and present are intertwined. Jimmy often sees himself as a product of Britain's great past, its empires and conquests. In this quote, Jimmy uses the specific example of the British defeat of the Nazi's in World War II as Britain's last great cause. In this past, he sees a noble and fulfilling state of being. The present, on the other hand, is an unfulfilling time in which the British age has been replaced by a "dreary" American age. Jimmy is, of course, idealizing the past, yet this nostalgia causes him to feel even more anger and dissatisfaction towards the present.

*10."There are cruel steel traps lying about everywhere, just waiting for rather mad, slightly satanic, and very timid little animals."*

*Look Back in Anger, 96.*

In this quote, one of the last lines of the play, Jimmy and Alison have reverted to their fantasy world of bears and squirrels. This is a fitting ending for the play since both Jimmy and Alison have come to a point in which they can no longer face the pain and intense emotion of real life. This is what JImmy calls the "pain of being alive." Escape, therefore, is the only option left for them. They retreat into a fantasy world. This world is the only stable option within which these characters can live. Through this idea, Osborne suggests that fiction is the only answer to the cruelties of real life.

**Essay Questions**

**1.What themes of the play are represented by Osborne’s meticulous description of the Porter’s attic apartment?**

Look Bak in Anger is considered to be a “Kitchen Sink drama.” This means that it is a play that delves into the deep meanings and psychology of ordinary British characters and their everyday working class lives. Osborne’s description of the Porter’s attic apartment is meant to express the theme of tranquil domesticity and working class life. In effect, Osborne is attempting to frame the Porter’s lives as simple and ordinary. This is contrasted, however, by JImmy’s deep anger. This theme in the play suggests that nothing is as ordinary as it might seem on the surface.

**2.What does Jimmy and Alison’s playful game of bear and squirrel represent?**

Alison describes their game of bear and squirrel as the only way the two have found to cope with the anger and viciousness that both direct towards each other. The closing lines of the play is the best representation of this: Alison has returned to show Jimmy that she has suffered greatly after losing their child to miscarriage. Both have now undergone intense suffering in their lives. They find that the real world is harsh and unforgiving and so they create a fantasy world to live in. This is also Osborne’s self-referential moment; the playwright engages in this same work of the creation of fantasy worlds. Theater, no matter how realistic, is also an escape from the real world.

**3.Why or why not is Helena Charles the moral compass of the play?**

Helena Charles is the play’s moral compass. Though her behavior might suggest otherwise, Helena’s strong sense of right and wrong allows her to make a final judgment in the play’s last act that her relationship with Jimmy is an illusion of love. Helena’s morality is contrasted with Jimmy’s moral subjectivity. Jimmy sees a moral bankruptcy in the modern world and is nostalgic for a time when previous generations were able to make firm judgments on the right and the wrong.

**4.Though Jimmy is antagonistic towards those that reminisce for England's past, he also has a strong sense of nostalgia for previous ages. Why do you think this is the case?**

In British history, the Edwardian Age is considered to be a high water mark for British culture in the twentieth century. Jimmy sees the Edwardian generation as the last generation that was able to determine and fight for worthy causes. Jimmy alludes to British colonial expansion and the bravery of British soldiers in two World Wars as examples of this. In comparison, Jimmy sees the modern world as a morally and socially bankrupt culture. British influence has waned and Britons no longer have a stake in world affairs or intellectual pursuits. Thus, he sees himself as a product of this earlier Edwardian Age. He feels trapped in the modern world.

**5.What imagery does Osborne use to explore the ideas of modern chivalry?**

Osborne uses imagery of knights, a medieval British institution of soldiers, to explore themes of modern chivalry. Alison describes Jimmy in chivalrous terms, but it is not an admiring view. The audience sees that Osborne takes a very pessimistic view of modern chivalrous action. Jimmy is described as a knight in tarnished armor who bluntly swings his weapons of hate and anger, destroying anything and anyone around him. Osborne attributes this loss of chivalry to a feminization of modern culture that steals the ideals of masculinity from the play’s male characters.

**6.Do you believe that Osborne is misogynistic in the play?**

Critics have been divided over whether Look Back in Anger is a misogynistic work of art. Those that believe that it is see Jimmy’s intense anger directed at both his wife and older women as being proof that Osborne blames the malaise of modern society on the growing place and influence of women in society. Jimmy’s extreme language, especially in his depictions of the ways in which he wishes Alison’s mother would die, seem to suggest that the play harbors and deep mistrust for women. It should be noted, however, that it is Helena that proves to be the most principled character in the play. This suggests that Osborne saw a complicated relationship between British society and women’s influence.

**7.What is the purpose of Cliff’s character in the play?**

Cliff represents two sides of the relationship between Jimmy and Alison. For Alison, Cliff provides the masculine affection and tenderness that Jimmy is incapable of providing for his wife. For Jimmy, Cliff provides masculine friendship and understanding, things that Jimmy cannot find in his relationship with his wife. Cliff’s absence at the play’s end, and Jimmy and Alison’s reversion into a fantasy world, suggest that Cliff was the character that connected Jimmy and Alison to the real world. Without him, these characters have no choice but to escape the hardships and loneliness of real life and descend into a fantasy world.

**8.Why does Jimmy see suffering as a crucial event for living a “real” life?**

Throughout the play, Jimmy is chiefly concerned with living a full and real life. This is a life of emotion and experience. He feels as though he is being kept from living such a life because of his domestic ties to Alison. He believes that she has not been born into the real world because she has not undergone the intense suffering that he has. Therefore, in Jimmy’s estimation, she cannot feel real emotion. Jimmy’s suffering first occurred when he witnessed the death of his father. Alison is born into Jimmy’s world of emotion and suffering after her miscarriage of their child. In a larger sense, Alison represents the feminine domestic life of working class England. Osborne sees this part of society as lacking in energy and emotion.

**9.Discuss Osborne’s view of religion in the play?**

In the play, Jimmy sees organized traditional Anglican religion as the antithesis of everything he believes in. The modern world, he believes, is a world of moral subjectivity. The church offers a worldview in which there is clear right and wrong, salvation and damnation, and this is a world that Jimmy simply believes no longer exists. Jimmy’s relationship to religion is more complicated, however, because he does allude to African American evangelical religion as an example of pure emotion. It is probable that Jimmy does not value the morality or spirituality of African American religion as much as he values the way in which such religious expression gives voice to real and true emotion.

**10.As Alison prepares to leave, she tells her father that, “You’re hurt because everything is changed. Jimmy is hurt because everything is the same. And neither of you can face it.” What does Alison mean by this?**

One of the play’s over-arching themes is the relationship between the past and the present. It can be said that Alison’s father, Colonel Redfern, and Jimmy represent two sides of the same coin. Both are nostalgic for a past that no longer exists and that was probably not as idealistic as either understands it to be. Jimmy sees the Colonel’s generation as both the last great generation of noble characters, but also as a failure because they did not pass on a vibrant culture full of life and meaning. The Colonel is hurt because Jimmy’s generation seems to lack objectivity and morality of a his age. In both cases, the past and present weave a complicated web of nostalgia, memory, and meaning.

**Study Guide**

Look Back in Anger is considered one of the most important plays in the modern British theater. It was the first well-known example of "Kitchen Sink drama," a style of theater that explored the emotion and drama beneath the surface of ordinary domestic life. Jimmy Porter, the play's main character, became the model for the "Angry Young Man," a nickname given to an entire generation of artists and working class young men in post-World War II British society.

Osborne wrote the play in only a few weeks in May of 1955. The play was first rejected by many of the agents and theater companies that Osborne approached about producing it. George Divine, the creative producer for the struggling Royal Court Theater, decided to gamble on the play and staged its first production. The play opened on May 8, 1956. It received mixed reviews from English theater critics, yet it won a rave review from the Times. This established the play's notoriety and helped it eventually build an audience.

The two iconic motifs of the play are the aforementioned concepts of the Angry Young Man and the Kitchen Sink drama. The Angry Young Man motif came to be associated with a group of young writers and artists -- John Osborne and Kingsley Amis being foremost amongst them -- that the cultural public believed to personify an anger, boredom, and frustration with British cultural life that many working class families felt during this time.

The idea of the Kitchen Sink drama was also a revelation for British theater. The stylings of most British theater before Look Back in Anger favored Victorian dramas and comedies or stagings of classical plays. In a general sense, the Victorian plays dealt mostly with polite themes from the late 19th and early 20th century upper ruling class. In contrast, Osborne's play depicted the raw emotions and living conditions of the working class. This style of theater was given the name "Kitchen Sink" because of its focus on the interior domestic and emotional lives of ordinary people. In the case of Look Back in Anger, the kitchen is literally a part of the set.

The cultural backdrop to the play is the rise and fall of the British empire. The beginning of the twentieth century saw the peak of power and influence of British colonialism. By the 1950's, two World Wars, which devastated the British economy, and the rise of the United States as the new world military and political power meant that the British empire had entered a steep decline. Jimmy Porter is representative of an entire culture that remained nostalgic for this past glory. He idealizes the worthy causes of the past even while he mocks those who cannot understand why the times have changed as much as they have.

Look Back in Anger is a play that appeared in a time of crucial transition from Britain's Victorian past into the modern twentieth century. Jimmy's rage and anger is his expression of pent-up emotion and his need for life in a world that has become listless and uninteresting. That anger became a symbol of the rebellion against the political and social malaise of British culture. His anger is destructive to those around him and the psychological violence of the play received a great deal of criticism. Critics today agree, however, that the play is central to an understanding of British life in the twentieth century and, thus, a crucial piece of literature in the British canon.

**Tom Stoppard**

**Biography**

**Early life and career**

The second son of a doctor for the Bata shoe manufacturing company, Thomas Straussler (Stoppard) was born on July 3, 1937, in Zlin, Czechoslovakia. The family fell victim to the Nazi racial laws, a wide-ranging set of laws enforced by Germany's radical Nazi Army that were aimed at severely restricting the freedoms of Jews and other minorities. Since there was "Jewish blood" in the family, his father was transferred to Singapore in 1939, taking the family with him. When the Japanese invaded that city in 1942, Thomas's mother fled with her children to India. Dr. Straussler stayed behind and was later killed.

Thomas attended an American boarding school in Darjeeling, India. In 1946 his mother married Kenneth Stoppard, a British army major, and both of her sons took his name. The Stoppards moved to Bristol, England, where Thomas's stepfather worked in the machine tool industry. Thomas continued his education at a preparatory school in Yorkshire, England.

At age seventeen Thomas felt that he had had enough schooling. He became first a reporter and then a critic for the Western Daily Press of Bristol, England, from 1954 to 1958. He left the Press and worked as a reporter for the Evening World, also in Bristol, from 1958 to 1960. Stoppard then worked as a freelance reporter from 1960 to 1963. During these years he experimented with writing short stories and short plays. In 1962 he moved to London, England, in order to be closer to the center of the publishing and theatrical worlds in the United Kingdom.

**The playwright**

Stoppard's first radio plays for the British Broadcasting Company (BBC), The Dissolution of Dominic Boot and M Is for Moon Among Other Things, aired in 1964. Two more, Albert's Bridge and If You're Glad I'll Be Frank, followed in 1965. His first television play, A Separate Peace, appeared the next year, as did his only novel, Lord Malquist and Mr. Moon, and the stage play that established his reputation

The year 1968 saw another television play, Neutral Ground, and two short works for the theater, Enter a Free Man and The Real Inspector Hound. In 1970 Stoppard returned to the BBC with the two radio plays, Artist Descending a Staircase and Where Are They Now. He also authored the television plays The Engagement and Experiment in Television as well as the stage work After Magritte. It was about this time that Stoppard became acquainted with Ed Berman from New York City's Off-Off-Broadway. Berman was attempting to establish an alternative theater in London. For him Stoppard composed Dogg's Our Pet, which was produced in 1971 at the Almost Free Theater.

In 1972 Stoppard had presented Jumpers, which begins with circus acts and evolves into religious and moral philosophy (the study of knowledge). Although critics reacted warmly to the play, Jumpers did not enjoy the same praise that had greeted Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. Theater critic Stanley Kauffmann labeled it "fake, structurally and thematically," while another critic, John Simon, wrote that "there is even something arrogant about trying to convert the history of Western culture into a series of blackout sketches, which is very nearly what Jumpers is up to."

Two years later Stoppard produced his third major work, Travesties. It is based on the coincidence that Russian exile politician Vladimir Lenin (1870–1924), Irish novelist James Joyce (1882–1941), and the father of the French Dadaist movement in literature and art, Tristan Tzara (1896–1963), were all in Zurich, Switzerland, at times during World War I (1914–18; when German-led forces pushed for European domination). It is assumed that they never met in reality, but their interaction in Stoppard's play asks the question of what defines art. The author's conclusion seems to be that its sole function is to make the meaninglessness (complete emptiness) of life more bearable.

**Later works**

In 1977 Stoppard offered Every Good Boy Deserves Favour, a remarkable achievement performed for the first time at the Royal Festival Hall by the Royal Shakespeare Company and the one hundred-piece London Symphony Orchestra, conducted by Andre Previn (1929–). Brought to the United States, it was presented at the Metropolitan Opera House in New York City with an eighty-one-piece orchestra.

Stoppard summed up his life's work as an attempt to "make serious points by flinging a custard pie around the stage for a couple of hours." Some of his serious points must have been heard in 1999, when he shared the Academy Award for Best Original Screenplay with Marc Norman for their work on the movie Shakespeare in Love. The movie also won the award for Best Picture of the year.

**Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead**

**Summary**

Act I opens with Rosencrantz (Ros) flipping a coin that has landed heads up over ninety times in a row. Ros and Guildenstern (Guil) are betting on the flip of the coin. Ros feels slightly guilty for taking so much money from his friend, but is not as tuned into the oddness of what is occurring. Guil is trying to understand why mathematical laws of probability seem to have failed, and attempts to get Ros to be as bothered by their situation as he is. While they talk, Guil and then Ros remember that a messenger awoke them that morning and that they are supposed to be on some sort of important official business.

A troupe of actors arrives led by a character called "the Player." The Player offers to perform any sort of tragedy for Ros and Guil for a fee. He shows off the range of his fellow players (actors), but when he offers to perform the Rape of the Sabine Women, Guil is taken aback and slaps him. Guil accuses the Player of being a pornographer.

Guil challenges the Player to a coin tossing game, and, predictably, the Player loses. He then bets the Player that the year of his birth doubled is an even number. The Player again takes the bet before realizing that any number doubled is an even number. They continue to bicker until the Player walks off, and the scene is interrupted by a scene from Hamlet.

King Claudius (Hamlet's uncle and new stepfather) and Queen Gertrude (Hamlet's mother) ask Ros and Guil to find Hamlet, cheer him up, and figure out what is troubling him. After they leave, Ros and Guil feel directionless and wish to be at home. They play a word game called "questions" and banter back and forth.

When they see Hamlet walk across the stage with a book, they decide to role-play: Guil as Hamlet and Ros as himself. Ros questions Guil/Hamlet, and they determine that his trouble is related to the fact that his father died, and his uncle (Claudius) quickly married Hamlet's mother (Gertrude), making him king. They are interrupted by Hamlet, who greets his friends warmly. The act ends with the three of them walking off the stage, arm-in-arm.

Act II opens with the continuation of the conversation from Act I. Hamlet tells his friends that he is not completely crazy, but afterward Ros and Guil think that they've failed to figure out what is wrong with Hamlet. Hamlet hangs around and asks the Player to put on a play called The Murder of Gonzago, with a special added part that Hamlet will write.

The Player, Ros, and Guil start chatting. When Guil keeps trying to clarify what is going on, the Player tells him that he can't constantly be questioning his situation â€“ that sometimes he just as he to relax and act naturally (a.k.a. chill out). The Player proceeds to tell Ros and Guil about how Hamlet wants the actors to put on a play about a king and queen. Fortunately, the play Hamlet desires hits on all the actors' strengths (blood, love, and rhetoric).

Since the Player has brought Hamlet up, Ros and Guil begin to discuss what is going on with Hamlet. They think that Hamlet is still sane, and the Player tells them that Claudius thinks Hamlet is in love with Ophelia. The Player and Guil move to a discussion of death.

Then Claudius and Gertrude pass through the play. Claudius mentions that he has set up a situation where Hamlet will run into Ophelia (his love interest, sort of) and it will seem like an accident.

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern watch the dress rehearsal of the tragedians' (the actors) play. It depicts events that have or will soon come to pass. First, the original King is poisoned by his brother, and the brother then marries the widowed Queen and usurps the throne. (This sounds a lot like what happened with Claudius and Gertrude).

Hamlet and Ophelia pass through the rehearsal. Ophelia is crying, and Hamlet is acting hysterical. He suggests that either the King or Queen will die. After Hamlet leaves, Claudius enters and tells Ophelia that Hamlet is sane and that he does not love her. He decides to send Hamlet to England.

The dress rehearsal resumes with the uncle and the widowed Queen entangled in a love affair. Ros is upset by the sordidness of the scene, and argues that this is not what people want to see. The Player asks him what he would prefer, and Ros says that he wants a simple story with a beginning, middle, and end. The Player then asks Guil what he expects out of a play, and Guil says that he would prefer art to reflect life.

In the dress rehearsal, the Prince confronts the Queen, and then stabs his uncle's aide. The play then depicts the Prince's banishment to England, accompanied by his two friends (the actors that play the roles corresponding to Ros and Guil in real life). Though the two friends die in this play, Ros and Guil fail to recognize themselves or their fate. The Player and Guil argue about whether or not actors can portray death.

Night passes. When the sun rises, Ros and Guil are lying on their backs in the same positions as the actors who had played them in the tragedians' rehearsal. The events predicted in the rehearsal begin to occur. Hamlet stabs Polonius (King Claudius's aide). Claudius asks Ros and Guil to bring Polonius's body to a chapel, and to bring Hamlet to him. They see Hamlet dragging Polonius's body, but fail to react. It is determined that Ros and Guil will take Hamlet to England, and Hamlet willingly submits. The act ends with Ros thinking that anything could happen.

Act III opens with Ros and Guil in darkness. They are on a boat at sea, sailing to England. They worry about whether or not they are alive, where they are, and what they are doing. They bicker about what they will do when they get to England, and act out a scenario where they meet the King of England. At the end of the scenario, they open the letter they have been given to find that it commands Hamlet's death. They rationalize not doing anything (a.k.a. allowing Hamlet's death), and decide that they are wrapped up in matters beyond their control.

When Ros and Guil sleep, Hamlet edits the letter so that it commands their deaths and not his own. The next morning, Ros and Guil find the tragedians hiding in some barrels on the ship. Claudius did not like their play, and they had to flee. Pirates attack the boat, and everyone hides in barrels. The stage goes dark and the barrel in which Hamlet is hiding disappears.

Ros and Guil again lament their condition. This time Guil is more worried than Ros. They again play out what will happen when they meet the King of England, but when they reopen the letter they've been entrusted with, they find that it condemns them, and not Hamlet, to death. The Player rallies the tragedians, who encircle Ros and Guil.

Guil derides the tragedians' acted deaths, which he claims are nothing like real death, which is the ultimate negative. Guil is ambiguous, but what he means is that death is something that is absolutely impossible to think about or conceive of: it is nothingness. If life is positive, then death is the ultimate negative.

Guil pulls a dagger from the Player's belt and stabs him. The Player appears to die while Guil and Ros watch. Yet a moment later, the tragedians applaud, and the Player rises again to reveal that Guil stabbed him with a trick dagger. The tragedians act out all sorts of deaths, and then the stage goes dark, leaving only Ros and Guil.

Ros wants some justification for their being condemned to death, but then he gives up and says that he is relieved. He disappears. Guil recalls the messenger that woke them, and wonders if there was a way out of their situation that they had overlooked. He disappears with the lines, "Well, we'll know better next time. Now you see me, now you.

The lights go up on the closing scene of Hamlet with dead bodies strewn everywhere. An ambassador from England announces that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are dead. Horatio, a friend of Hamlet and a character in Shakespeare's Hamlet, delivers a speech asking for all of the bodies to be put high on a stage, and claims that he can truly relate the events that took place and led to all of these deaths. Yet as Horatio is speaking, the music starts and the stage is enveloped in darkness before he finishes.

Wearing Elizabethan costumes on a blank stage, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are tossing coins, all of which land 'heads.' Rosencrantz is unperturbed by the improbable odds but Guildenstern grows disturbed, demanding Rosencrantz think through potential meanings of the unlikely situation. They realize they can't remember a past before tossing coins and have only vague recollection of being called by royal summons. The Tragedians march onstage lead by the Player, who sees Rosencrantz and Guildenstern as a potential audience and tries to entice them into buying a performance with the chance to sodomize the lowliest tragedian, Alfred. Guildenstern is appalled but the Player maintains that people only go to the theater for crude entertainment full of "blood, love, and rhetoric" (and mostly blood). The Player accepts and loses two futile bets to Guildenstern and agrees to pay with a play. Rosencrantz extracts a coin from under the Player's foot, sees it fell on tails, and, suddenly, the lighting shifts the scene to Elsinore Castle.

A disheveled Hamlet and Ophelia run on stage for a brief, mute appearance. Then Claudius and Gertrude enter, welcoming Rosencrantz and Guildenstern and explaining they've been sent for to uncover the cause of Hamlet's recent transformation. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern agree to do so, then, alone on stage, lament the absurd incomprehensibility of their situation. Perplexed by what action to take, they stay passive. The sight of Hamlet prompts them to practice acting in character, but they muddle their names. Just as Guildenstern decides they're "marked," Hamlet walks on taunting Polonius. When Hamlet notices Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, he greets them warmly but can't tell them apart. The lights black out and rise on Act Two, where Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are still talking with Hamlet, who explains he's only mad when the wind blows north. Alone, Guildenstern tries to be optimistic but Rosencrantz insists they made no headway with Hamlet, who made them "look ridiculous." They try to figure out which direction's south and wonder if anyone will enter. Guildenstern alludes to an "order" of which they are a part.

Hamlet enters with the Tragedians, who he's booked to play the next night, then exits. The Player is cold towards Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, who left midway through the Tragedians' performance, humiliating them beyond measure. An actor's whole existence, the Player explains, depends on being watched. Guildenstern asks desperately for acting advice to help his and Rosencrantz' efforts with Hamlet. "Act natural," the Player says, and tells them there's no truth, only assumptions. He exits. Hamlet, Claudius, Gertrude, and Ophelia enter briefly and Rosencrantz and Guildenstern assure Gertrude they're making progress with Hamlet.

The Tragedians return to rehearse their play, whose plot turns out to be Hamlet's, including Rosencrantz's and Guildenstern's deaths played by actors wearing Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's clothes. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are uncomprehending. Entrances by Ophelia, Hamlet, Claudius, and Polonius interrupt the Tragedians' play. The Player calls the play "a slaughterhouse," bringing out the actors' "best." Guildenstern criticizes spectacular stage deaths, insisting death is simply "a man failing to reappear." The lights blackout. The sun rises on Rosencrantz and Guildenstern alone.

Claudius enters briefly and tells Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to find Hamlet and Polonius' corpse (Hamlet murdered him) but the two procrastinate and, when a scornful Hamlet enters, are unable to make him obey them. Alone, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern despair. Hamlet eventually returns and promises to go with them to England.

Act Three opens on Rosencrantz, Guildenstern, and Hamlet on the boat to England. While preparing their speech to the King of England, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern read the letter Claudius gave them and realize it orders Hamlet's death. They're at first horrified and wonder if they should intervene, but eventually rationalize passivity and feel better. While they sleep, Hamlet steals, reads, and replaces the letter with another.

The Tragedians' appear on the ship as stowaways, pirates attack, and Hamlet goes missing, distressing Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. Reviewing their plan, they now discover that the letter orders their own execution. They're indignant, then despairing. Infuriated by the Player's calm claims to understand death, Guildenstern stabs him and the Player falls and dies. But the dagger turns out to be fake and the Player stands up, alive and smug, having convinced Guildenstern with the very sort of acted death Guildenstern claims isn't convincing. The Player and Tragedians' gleefully act out various deaths. Lights fade on them. Alone, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's exasperation at death gives way to resolved acceptance. Rosencrantz disappears, then Guildenstern does.

Lights rise on the corpse-strewn end of Hamlet. An ambassador reports that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are dead and the lights fade out as Horatio promises to tell the tragedy's story.

**Themes**

**Death**

The odds of the coin toss that opens Act One – an 100-long streak of "heads" – at first seem impossible, the sure sign of a make-believe world. Yet, as the play goes on, it becomes clear that there's nothing really odd about those odds: they represent the probability of human life. Death wins every time. "Life is a gamble, at terrible odds" the Player explains, "—if it was a bet you wouldn't take it." The odds of the coin toss that opens Act One – an 100-long streak of "heads" – at first seem impossible, the sure sign of a make-believe world. Yet, as the play goes on, it becomes clear that there's nothing really odd about those odds: they represent the probability of human life. Death wins every time. "Life is a gamble, at terrible odds" the Player explains, "—if it was a bet you wouldn't take it." Above all, this is a play about death. Most obviously, the title – Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead - states the death of its protagonists. But the protagonists' deaths are a foregone conclusion even apart from the title, which is in fact a line from Hamlet. As characters drawn from another play, the details of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's deaths are already scripted by Shakespeare's play before Stoppard's play even begins. Everyone in the audience knows exactly how Rosencrantz and Guildenstern will die from the first moment of Stoppard's play. By building his play around these characters, Stoppard is thus able to exaggerate the fatedness and inevitability of death.

Yet while death is a sure thing, the play casts it in a fresh, unsettling light. Death itself may be a given, but the human acceptance of death is no given, and the characters struggle against death even in the face of its 100% probability. As inevitable as it is, it seems impossible to accept death. In fact, it seems impossible even to describe it properly. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern argue with the Player and Tragedians about what 'real' death looks like. "What do you know about death?" Guildenstern demands of the Player and, when the Player replies that dying is "what the actors do best," Guildenstern insists death can't be acted because "[t]he fact of it is nothing to do with seeing it happen-it's not gasps and blood and falling about." Indeed, the Player recounts that the time he arranged for one of his actors to actually be hung on stage, the audience booed it as a subpar performance.

Impossible to recognize, death thus remains elusive even as the play never stops dreading its inevitability. All the deaths on stage, after all, are staged, be they performances of plays-within-the-play (such as those that occur during the Tragedians' play and the fatal stabbing enacted by the Player) or supposedly 'real' action (such as Polonius' corpse, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's deaths at play's end, or the corpse-strewn final stage). The play's running meta-theatrical commentary (comments about plays made within a play) keeps the audience hyper-aware of this fact. Guildenstern's frequent critiques of staged deaths makes even the gracefully subtle portrayal of his and Rosencrantz' deaths at play's end – a gore-free, sudden disappearance – seem unsatisfying, questionable, eerily incomplete.

Indeed, Stoppard seems committed to producing this sense of incompleteness that, while it fails to deliver a complete understanding of death, completely captures the human understanding of death - which is, of course, quite incomplete. The play portrays awareness of death as the ever-present yet ever-unknown constant in life. "There must have been…a moment in childhood when it first occurred to you that you don't go on for ever," Rosencrantz reflects, "And yet I can't remember it. It never occurred to me at all." He concludes that he can't remember the moment of realization because no one moment exists. Instead, one is "born with an intuition of mortality. Before we know the words for it, before we know that there are words," we know there is death.

**Individual Identity**

Since death is inevitable, the play goes on to ask, what does one make of a single human life? What is individual identity? Though most of the characters in the play are characters appropriated from Hamlet (whose characters were in turn based on other literary historical characters), Hamlet's main characters (Hamlet, Claudius, Horatio, and Ophelia) are here greatly diluted and constantly fade in and out of sight,

Since death is inevitable, the play goes on to ask, what does one make of a single human life? What is individual identity? Though most of the characters in the play are characters appropriated from Hamlet (whose characters were in turn based on other literary historical characters), Hamlet's main characters (Hamlet, Claudius, Horatio, and Ophelia) are here greatly diluted and constantly fade in and out of sight, seeming more like representations of ghosts than like representations of people. In turn, two of Hamlet's most minor characters – Rosencrantz and Guildenstern – are Stoppard's play's protagonists and speak the vast majority of its lines. The play also foregrounds another minor character by giving Alfred, the lowliest member of the Tragedians, more attention than any of the troupe's other actors. In choosing to highlight his play's characters this way, Stoppard foregrounds powerlessness and lowliness, further emphasizing the helplessness of the individual human life against the prevailing force of death.

Yet beyond choosing to feature powerless individuals and washing out powerful ones, Stoppard's play also questions the specific identities of his characters and suggests that not only is the human self lowly and powerless, but it may not even be a "self." Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's identities prove extremely porous. They are constantly losing track of themselves and mix up their own names, even their own body parts, as Rosencrantz thinks Guildenstern's leg is his in the dark at the beginning of Act Three. When facing exact depictions of themselves in the Tragedians' play, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are intrigued but unable to recognize them. "Well, if it isn't--! No, wait a minute, don't tell me….I never forget a face…not that I know yours, that is," Rosencrantz tells the character representing him, then loses his grip of the situation and mistakes the character for himself by implying that the character has almost recognized Rosencrantz whereas it's in fact Rosencrantz who has almost recognized the character: "For a moment I thought—no, I don't know you, do I? Yes, I'm afraid you're quite wrong. You must have mistaken me for someone else," Rosencrantz says.

Other characters struggle, too, to recognize individual identity and Claudius and Hamlet confuse Rosencrantz and Guildenstern while Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's conversation with the Player confuses Hamlet's, Claudius', and Polonius' relationships to Ophelia. Stoppard himself once described his play's protagonists as "two halves of the same personality." By presenting characters that seem to flicker back and forth between identities, Stoppard questions the notion of identity at large. If every human individual is condemned to die, what distinguishes one from another?

**Free Will**

As the play questions the reality of individual identity, it likewise questions free will. What is it? What is choice? What is action or progress? Can one trust all the trappings and signs of existence if one knows that they'll soon be extinguished? As the play proceeds, individual decisions and actions seem more and more inconsequential, nearly equivalent to apathy and passivity. Hamlet is, famously, a play whose crisis swirls within the vortex of Hamlet's As the play questions the reality of individual identity, it likewise questions free will. What is it? What is choice? What is action or progress? Can one trust all the trappings and signs of existence if one knows that they'll soon be extinguished? As the play proceeds, individual decisions and actions seem more and more inconsequential, nearly equivalent to apathy and passivity. Hamlet is, famously, a play whose crisis swirls within the vortex of Hamlet's passivity. Yet this play reveals that Hamlet's passivity is in fact everyone's. Every individual might as well be motionless, might as well fail to act, since his or her every effort is overridden by a more powerful motion: the trajectory of life towards death. Guildenstern describes this trajectory in terms of being on a boat: "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…"

Indeed, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern bustle about on stage but ultimately effect nothing, their attempts at action all thwarted by the plot structure of the original Hamlet, whose inexorable progression is analogous to the inexorable motion of life towards death. (Indeed, the exchange of the letter ordering Hamlet's death for the letter ordering Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's is in fact a plot twist in the original Hamlet.) Rosencrantz and Guildenstern try futilely to intercept Hamlet on stage and end up going along with anything the prince and/or Claudius proposes. As in Hamlet, they agree to reason with Hamlet, sail to England, are executed, etc. Even that seemingly spontaneous pirate attack is just playing out a reference already written into Hamlet.

Yet while human will may be powerless against mortality, it can still act meaningfully within the realm of interpersonal relationship and human emotion. Helpless as they are, humans can still choose to be kind to others and to honor friendship and, in so doing, instill their lives with some meaning. Thus, Guildenstern's tenderness towards Alfred and his comforting of Rosencrantz stand out as affecting moments of warmth within the play. Conversely, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's passivity after discovering Hamlet's death-sentence stands out as one of the play's most horrifying instances. Though any action may have been futile, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's choice to not even try to act to save him bespeaks a level of disregard for human life on par with death's itself.

**The Absurdity of the World**

As a play investigating the central, unknowable mysteries of existence – death and mortal beings' capacity for free will – Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead charts the human struggle to make sense of a universe characterized by utter randomness, harshness towards human life (the universe itself could be seen as the dramatic "bloodbath" described by the Player), and complete apathy towards the human condition. All human meaning is undermined by the meaninglessness of the environment. As a play investigating the central, unknowable mysteries of existence – death and mortal beings' capacity for free will – Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead charts the human struggle to make sense of a universe characterized by utter randomness, harshness towards human life (the universe itself could be seen as the dramatic "bloodbath" described by the Player), and complete apathy towards the human condition. All human meaning is undermined by the meaninglessness of the environment humans are forced to inhabit. The effort to make meaning thus grows increasingly absurd.

The play's use of language reflects the absurdity of human attempts to make meaning, incorporating wordplay and pushing the bounds of sense to demonstrate how difficult it is to convey significance. Dialogue in the play frequently replicates the coin toss revelation: what at first seems absurd is actually reality, what seems false is revealed to be true. It's the play's mode of presentation that startles the audience into a seemingly new perspective: the already known is seen anew, and seems unrecognizable. As Guildenstern says: "All your life you live so close to truth, it becomes a permanent blur in the corner of your eye, and when something nudges it into outline it is like being ambushed by a grotesque."

Thus, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern frequently misspeak or jumble common idiom, but, listened to carefully, these "mistakes" describe the situation more accurately than the "right" phrasing might. "[O]ver my head body!" Rosencrantz shouts in exasperation, "I tell you it's all stopping to a death, it's boding to a depth, stepping to a head, it's all heading to a dead stop." Though they may first seem like mistakes, his phrasings point out truths: 'head body' describes the living thinking being he is better than the conventional ("correct") expression 'dead body' would; his mis-phrasings of the expression 'coming to a head' end up illuminating the play's actual trajectory towards death. Later, Rosencrantz' description of sunset as "The sun's going down. Or the earth's coming up" rings similarly true.

Furthermore, the play's many instances of mishearing and misunderstanding start to accrue their own sense of accuracy: death, as Rosencrantz and Guildenstern repeatedly remind the audience, is the unknown, is beyond the grasp of human perception. When Rosencrantz tries to rationalize death by comparing it to a boat, Guildenstern responds, "No, no, no…Death is…not. Death isn't... Death is the ultimate negative. Not-being. You can't not-be on a boat." By riddling the play with moments of lost meaning, the play's script creates a linguistic experience – 'not-understanding' – akin to the unimaginable not-being of death that renders life in the world so absurd.

**The Theater**

As a play written within the structure of another play (Shakespeare's Hamlet), Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead offers a complex meditation on the nature of the theater and the relationship between drama and lived human life. The play articulates a wide range of views on the theater, from a harsh critique of theater's artifice and inability to represent death (articulated by Guildenstern) to an unreflective willingness to embrace dramatic entertainment as diversion from life.

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Apart from using characters to articulate perspectives on the nature of drama, the play's very structure explores theater's possibilities and potential similarities to human life. Stoppard's play takes two characters from Hamlet, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, who, in Hamlet, have a fairly limited role, and turns those characters into this play's protagonists Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. In so doing, Stoppard seems to offer a kind of inside-out view of the original play, where the stars have become mere supporting characters and the supporting characters have become stars. Still, though freed from their original bit parts and launched into the spotlight, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern all along remain trapped by their old roles as Hamlets original plot structure proves inescapable, its inexorability becoming a metaphor for the inevitable progression of life towards death. Stoppard thereby uses the dramatic form itself to comment on the shape of human existence.

In addition to illuminating the structural similarity of a play to human life, Stoppard uses frequent repetition, allusion, and metatheatrical observations to create a sense of claustrophobia in the play akin to the human feeling of being trapped inside mortality. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern seem locked into repeating numerous small actions –playing with coins, playing at questions, trying and failing to remember the past – and are, of course, also locked into repeating the larger action of their already scripted roles from Hamlet. Hamlet itself contains a play within a play (in the middle of Hamlet, Prince Hamlet hires actors to perform a play that he hopes will expose Claudius' guilt). That play-within-a-play is contained in this play too: Stoppard's Hamlet hires the Player and Tragedians to perform it, creating a play-within-a-play-within-a-play. Amidst everything else, Stoppard also scatters metacommentary throughout his script so that a disappointed Rosencrantz is crushed not only by his own disappointment but by the knowledge that it's deflating the dramatic scene: "Now we've lost the tension," he says.

**Language and Communication**

In Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead, the two title characters often play with words. They pun off of each other's words without much intention of moving their dialogue toward a set purpose. Instead, they are simply goofing around, like two kids throwing a ball back and forth. At the same time, however, the consistently poor communication in the play seems to hint at a broader breakdown in understanding between the characters that may help send the play into its tragic spiral. Language is sometimes seen as an empowering way of writing one's own fate, but for Ros and Guil it often seems like an impotent tool, best suited for idle speculation.

**Isolation**

In Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead, main characters Ros and Guil, when left alone in the play, often suffer from feelings of isolation. In the opening and closing scenes of the play, it is just Ros and Guil alone on stage. One wonders if it is the degree to which these two are isolated that has led to their constant idleness and passivity, or if things worked the other way around. From the very start of the play, however, it does seem as if Ros and Guil are marked, as if they are moving toward their deaths, simply passing through the action of the play. The sense of isolation reaches its highest pitch, perhaps, when it is just the two of them in the dark on the boat in the last act. It is, in a sense, a premonition of death, or a fear of what death might be: bodiless nothingness, with only the mind working.

**Manipulation**

People use each other quite a bit in Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead, and part of the reason the main characters, Ros and Guil, are never in control of their situation is because they seem naively incapable of using the people around them. Manipulation, in many ways, is compared the act of directing a play – it's the ability to control the course of events. A play is explored as something that manipulates the audience: something that attempts to affect the way that they think and feel

**Fear**

In the opening of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead, there is a long string of coin flips that come up heads, which frightens Guil, one of the main characters. He later attempts to reason through how the laws of probability could seemingly be suspended, and at one point concludes, "The scientific approach to the examination of phenomena is a defence against the pure emotion of fear" (1.73). What Guil means is that we fear the unknown (such as death). Science, by trying to make things comprehensible, attempts to reduce this fear. By coming to know things about our world and the laws by which it works, we try to feel more at home in it, more like we have a handle on what is happening. The alternative – recognizing just how little we know about the world around us – causes fear.

**Foolishness and Folly**

In many ways, in Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead it is the title characters' fault that they die. They are easily, and, at times, willingly manipulated. Not to mention, Ros and Guil spend a good portion of the play messing around – swapping names, misunderstanding each other, playing at games of their own devising. Their foolishness is, in part, a source of comedy, but it also seems a natural way to stay entertained when one has as little to do.

**Passivity**

Ros and Guil may be at the center of the action in Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead, but they certainly don't drive it. It can be seen most clearly in Act II how they are just left to sit around and wait unless someone else crosses the stage or tells them what to do. Another main character, the Player, seems to suggest that they should be more active and that Guil shouldn't waste so much time questioning things, but Guil is less concerned with action than with freedom of action. Yet, in the end, the fact that Ros and Guil betray their friend Hamlet makes their passivity morally significant; their failure to act may play a role in their own fates.

**Versions of Reality**

In Shakespeare's Hamlet, the play-within-a-play is packed within a clear context and is used by Hamlet to send a message to Claudius. For us as the audience of Stoppard's play, however, the distinctions between a play and reality get totally jumbled. First, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern is nothing but a play on the stage. Secondly, it is a play that interacts with the action of an earlier play, Shakespeare's Hamlet. Third, it is unclear to what extent the Player and his Tragedians are driving the action of the play and to what extent the "real" characters are in control of what is happening. The difference between drama and reality is called into question, most explicitly in the arguments between Guil and the Player.

**Mortality**

So, you probably noticed that the word "dead" in the title Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead, and that there is a lot of discussion of death in the play. Stoppard's play is intensely aware of the fact that we will all, one day, die. It is also aware of the fact that death simply cannot be captured in art. The main character, Guil, sees death as the negative, as a blind spot in the mind – something that humans are incapable of thinking about. As a result, he sees acted out deaths in plays as pretense – claiming to put something on stage that one cannot. In contrast, Guil's rival, the Player, thinks that no one can tell the difference between an acted death and a real one, and he thus decides to give his audiences the sort of entertainment they want – death, and lots of it.

**Characters**

**Rosencrantz**

A schoolmate of Hamlet's whom Claudius hires with Guildenstern to spy on the Prince and convey him to execution in England, Rosencrantz is a minor character in Hamlet whom Stoppard expands into a leading one. A schoolmate of Hamlet's whom Claudius hires with Guildenstern to spy on the Prince and convey him to execution in England, Rosencrantz is a minor character in Hamlet whom Stoppard expands into a lead. Stoppard describes Rosencrantz as someone who, when winning a coin toss ninety times in a row, will feel slightly sheepish at winning so many coins off his friend but will remain otherwise unperturbed by the situation. Often fearful and foolish and deeply forgetful (Rosencrantz frequently forgets even his own name), Rosencrantz is the self-described supporting half of the Rosencrantz and Guildenstern pair. With Guildenstern, Rosencrantz' struggles against passivity, hopelessness, and the inescapable structure of Hamlet's plot constitute a play-long meditation on death that ends in the foregone conclusion of his own passing a few moments before Guildenstern's.

**Guildenstern**

Like Rosencrantz, Guildenstern is a minor character in Hamlet expanded by Stoppard into a protagonist. Stoppard describes Guildenstern as someone who, when losing a coin toss ninety times in a row, will be more Like Rosencrantz, Guildenstern is a minor character in Hamlet expanded by Stoppard into a protagonist. Stoppard describes Guildenstern as someone who, when losing a coin toss ninety times in a row, will be more concerned about the implications of the situation than by the lost change. The self-described 'dominant personality' of the Rosencrantz and Guildenstern pair, Guildenstern, like Rosencrantz, is often fearful and foolish but he can also be bullying, easily angered, and bossy, and possesses a firmer grasp on reality and a stronger memory than Rosencrantz. With Rosencrantz, Guildenstern's struggles against passivity, hopelessness, and the inescapable structure of Hamlet's plot constitute a play-long meditation on death that ends in the foregone conclusion of his own passing.

**The Player**

Jaded, domineering, loud-mouthed and long-winded, the Player is the leader of the Tragedians and frequently expounds on the view that humanity's only real understanding of death is as a melodramatic death on stage. Jaded, domineering, loud-mouthed and long-winded, the Player is the leader of the Tragedians and frequently expounds on the view that humanity's only real understanding of death is as a melodramatic death on stage. Though Rosencrantz and especially Guildenstern resist his cynical perspectives, the Player and his troupe reappear again and again to undermine all traces of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's idealism and encourage their darkest views on the essential meaninglessness of human life.

**The Tragedians**

Garish, bawdy, and boisterous, the Tragedians make up the ragged and increasingly impoverished dramatic troupe led by the Player. Their theatrical specialties are "blood, love, and rhetoric," but especially "blood" . Garish, bawdy, and boisterous, the Tragedians make up the ragged and increasingly impoverished dramatic troupe led by the Player. Their theatrical specialties are "blood, love, and rhetoric," but especially "blood" – dying, the Player explains to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, is the Tragedians' greatest talent and thus the thing they best depict on stage. The sound of the Tragedians' instruments makes a musical refrain throughout the play that repeatedly haunts Rosencrantz and Guildenstern.

**Hamlet**

The famously passive protagonist of Shakespeare's play, Hamlet is the Prince of Denmark, son to Gertrude, and nephew to Claudius who goes half-mad after his father dies and his mother marries Claudius. The famously passive protagonist of Shakespeare's play, Hamlet is the Prince of Denmark, son to Gertrude, and nephew to Claudius who goes half-mad after his father dies and his mother marries Claudius. Fearful of Hamlet's menacing mad speeches, Claudius sends Hamlet to be killed in England in the care of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. En route, Hamlet stealthily reads and rewrites Claudius' order, resulting in Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's execution. As in Shakespeare's play, Stoppard's Hamlet eludes Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's every attempt to gather information on him and tricks them into being executed. Yet in Stoppard's play, Hamlet is a secondary character with a fragmented presence as he wanders on and offstage. Still, though rarely onstage, Hamlet frequently features in Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's dialogue as the two remain haunted and worried about their relationship to Hamlet throughout the play.

**Claudius**

Hamlet's uncle and nemesis in Shakespeare's play who secretly murdered his own brother (Hamlet's father) and slimily marries his brother's widow Gertrude to assume Denmark's throne. Hamlet's uncle and nemesis in Shakespeare's play who secretly murdered his own brother (Hamlet's father) and slimily marries his brother's widow Gertrude to assume Denmark's throne. Claudius hires Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to spy on the troublingly deranged Hamlet and to carry out his plot to have Hamlet executed in England. In Stoppard's play, Claudius is an intermittent but sinister and domineering figure whose orders Rosencrantz and Guildenstern accept without knowing how to fulfill them.

**Alfred**

The lowliest member of the Tragedians who is perennially forced into playing female roles, Alfred is a miserable and unwilling actor who is frequently bullied by the Player and offered up as a prostitute for any paying audience member interested in cruder entertainments.

**Ophelia**

Polonius' daughter and Hamlet's love interest, Ophelia is a main character in Shakespeare's play whose frustration with Hamlet's madness and cruelty eventually drives her truly insane and leads her to commit suicide. In Stoppard's play, Ophelia barely speaks and appears on stage only to weep and suffer Hamlet's chasing.

**Gertrude**

Queen of Denmark, Gertrude is Hamlet's mother and Claudius' new wife. Worried about her son's growing bitterness and madness, Gertrude implores Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to do their best to glean the cause of Hamlet's changed character and, in Stoppard's play, appears only intermittently onstage.

**Polonius**

The famously long-winded and foolish if well-meaning father to Ophelia, Polonius is accidentally murdered by Hamlet. Stoppard's play offers only a few glimpses of Polonius, first as a babbling buffoon, then as a corpse dragged along by Hamlet.

**Horatio**

Hamlet's best friend and a major character in Hamlet, Horatio only makes one appearance on Stoppard's stage. At the end of the play, he holds Hamlet's corpse and speaks the lines that he speaks at the conclusion of Shakespeare's play, promising to tell the story of Hamlet's tragedy.

**A Guard**

A guard who briefly escorts Hamlet in Act Two.

**A Soldier**

A soldier who updates Hamlet on the approach of Fortinbras' troops in Act Two.

**Fortinbras**

The Prince of Norway, Fortinbras appears only at the end of Stoppard's (and Shakespeare's) play, surveying the array of corpses on stage.

**The Two Ambassadors**

The two ambassadors appear only at the end of Stoppard's (and Shakespeare's) play, delivering the message from England that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern have been executed.

**Laertes**

Polonius' son and Ophelia's brother, Laertes is slain by Hamlet in a duel in Shakespeare's play. In Stoppard's play, Laertes appears only as a corpse on stage at the end.

**Symbols**

**The Coin**

First featured in the uncanny coin toss between Rosencrantz and Guildenstern at play's start, coins appear throughout the play and symbolize the forces of mortality that control human life and render human free will meaningless. First featured in the uncanny coin toss between Rosencrantz and Guildenstern at play's start, coins appear throughout the play and symbolize the forces of mortality that control human life and render human free will meaningless. While a tossed coin should, according to the law of probability, have a 50-50 chance of falling 'heads' or 'tails,' the coins in this play fall almost exclusively on 'heads,' signaling that probability's law is suspended. Such suspension may seem at first to be the stuff of make-believe, but the play quickly reveals that there is nothing fantastical about such odds: they are in fact the odds of human will against death. Death always prevails, no matter how badly humans try to fight it or struggle to stay alive. Throughout the play, coins feature in various games (be it the coin toss of play's start, Guildenstern's coin toss with the Player, or Rosencrantz' coin tricks) that replace a 50-50 law of probability with an 100% likelihood, thereby symbolically gesturing towards death's utter inevitability.

**The Boat**

The boat symbolizes the trajectory of human life and the fundamentally limited and futile nature of human action. As a boat's passengers are able to move at will within the contained space of the vessel. The boat symbolizes the trajectory of human life and the fundamentally limited and futile nature of human action. As a boat's passengers are able to move at will within the contained space of the vessel but are ultimately swept up in the greater movement of the boat's motion, so too are a human individual's actions and developments dwarfed by the unstoppable progress of his life towards death. Though Act Three's setting on a boat is in line with Shakespeare's original play, the set also resonates with symbolic significance as Rosencrantz and Guildenstern hurdle helplessly towards their own deaths. As Guildenstern reflects, describing his and Rosencrantz' situation on board, "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…"