

2018–2019  
**LITERATURE**  
Resource Guide

# An Introduction to the Literature of the 1960s



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# Table of Contents

## SECTION I: CRITICAL READING . . . . . 4

### SECTION II: ROSENCRANTZ AND GUILDENSTERN ARE DEAD BY TOM STOPPARD. . . . . 10

Introduction . . . . . 10

Overview of Tom Stoppard’s Life and Work. . . . . 11

The Origin of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern in Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* . . . . . 13

Literary Forebears: Realism, Modernism, and Postmodernism. . . . . 15

    The Influence of Realism. . . . . 15

    The Influence of Modernism. . . . . 16

    The Influence of Postmodernism. . . . . 18

        John Barth and Jorge Luis Borges. . . . . 18

        Italo Calvino and other Influences on Postmodernist Literature. . . . . 19

        Postmodernism and Parody. . . . . 20

        Postmodernism and the Chaos of Life and Language . . . . . 20

        Postmodernism and “Play” . . . . . 21

        Meta-Theater . . . . . 21

Atmospheric Conditions in the 1960s . . . . . 22

    The Influence of Freudian Analysis and Existentialism . . . . . 22

    Stoppard and the “Theater of the Absurd” . . . . . 24

What’s *Godot* Got to Do with It? . . . . . 24

Stoppard and Pirandello . . . . . 27

Pirandello’s *Enrico IV* . . . . . 27

Pirandello’s *Six Characters in Search of an Author* . . . . . 27

Jean Rhys’s *Wide Sargasso Sea* . . . . . 28

Act One Reading Guide: In Place with No Visible Character. . . . . 29

    Act One: Short Summary . . . . . 29

    Act One: Detailed Review . . . . . 29

Act Two Reading Guide: Playing at Death . . . . . 34

    Act Two: Short Summary . . . . . 34

    Act Two: Detailed Review . . . . . 34

Act Three Reading Guide: “You Can’t Not-Be on a Boat” . . . . . 39

    Act Three: Short Summary . . . . . 39

    Act Three: Detailed Review . . . . . 39

*Rosencrantz Fifty Years Later* . . . . . 42

### SECTION III: SELECTED SHORTER WORKS OF LITERATURE. . . . . 44

Introduction . . . . . 44

Donald Barthelme’s “The Phantom of the Opera’s Friend” . . . . . 45

    Donald Barthelme: Life and Work . . . . . 45

SELECTED WORK: “THE PHANTOM OF THE OPERA’S FRIEND” BY DONALD BARTHELME . . . . . 46

    “The Phantom of the Opera’s Friend”: Analysis . . . . . 48



|  |    |  |            |
|--|----|--|------------|
| “Letter from a Birmingham Jail”: An Enduring Plea for Action against Injustice . . . . . | 50 | “A Hard Rain’s A’ Gonna Fall”: Analysis . . . . .                                    | 78         |
| Introduction . . . . .   | 50 | SELECTED WORK: “MASTERS OF WAR” BY BOB DYLAN . . . . .                               | 81         |
| The Life of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. . . . .   | 51 | “Masters of War”: Analysis . . . . .   | 82         |
| The Birmingham Campaign . . . . .  | 51 | SELECTED WORK: “THE LONESOME DEATH OF HATTIE CARROLL” BY BOB DYLAN . . . . .         | 83         |
| Context of the “Letter” . . . . .  | 53 | “The Lonesome Death of Hattie Carroll”: Analysis . . . . .                           | 84         |
| SELECTED WORK: “LETTER FROM A BIRMINGHAM JAIL” BY DR. MARTIN LUTHER KING JR. . . . .     | 54 | Joan Didion on Joan Baez: “Where the Kissing Never Stops” . . . . .                  | 86         |
| The “Letter”: Audience, <i>Ethos</i> , <i>Pathos</i> , and <i>Logos</i> . . . . .        | 62 | Introduction . . . . .   | 86         |
| Conclusion: <i>Kairos</i> and <i>Telos</i> . . . . .                                     | 65 | New Journalism . . . . .   | 86         |
| Toni Cade Bambara’s “The Lesson” . . . . .   | 65 | Joan Didion: Life and Work . . . . .   | 86         |
| Toni Cade Bambara: Life and Work . . . . .   | 65 | SELECTED WORK: “WHERE THE KISSING NEVER STOPS” BY JOAN DIDION . . . . .              | 87         |
| SELECTED WORK “THE LESSON” BY TONI CADE BAMBARA . . . . .                                | 66 | “Where the Kissing Never Stops”: Analysis . . . . .                                  | 93         |
| “The Lesson”: Analysis . . . . .   | 69 | Tim O’Brien: “Ambush” . . . . .  | 96         |
| Etheridge Knight: “The Idea of Ancestry” . . . . .                                       | 71 | Tim O’Brien: Life and Work . . . . .   | 96         |
| Etheridge Knight: Life and Work . . . . .  | 71 | SELECTED WORK: “AMBUSH” FROM <i>THE THINGS THEY CARRIED</i> BY TIM O’BRIEN . . . . . | 96         |
| SELECTED WORK: “THE IDEA OF ANCESTRY” BY ETHERIDGE KNIGHT . . . . .                      | 72 | Tim O’Brien’s <i>The Things They Carried</i> . . . . .                               | 97         |
| “The Idea of Ancestry”: Analysis . . . . .   | 73 | Tim O’Brien’s “Ambush”: Analysis . . . . .   | 98         |
| Three Early Songs of Bob Dylan . . . . .   | 75 | <b>NOTES . . . . .</b>   | <b>100</b> |
| Bob Dylan: Life and Work . . . . .   | 75 | <b>BIBLIOGRAPHY . . . . .</b>  | <b>103</b> |
| SELECTED WORK: “A HARD RAIN’S A-GONNA FALL” BY BOB DYLAN . . . . .                       | 77 |  |            |



# Section I

# Critical Reading

Critical reading is a familiar exercise to students, an exercise that many of them have been engaged in since the first grade. Critical reading forms a significant part of the PSAT, the SAT, the ACT, and both Advanced Placement Tests in English. It is the portion of any test for which students can do the least direct preparation, and it is also the portion that will reward students who have been lifelong readers. Unlike other parts of the United States Academic Decathlon® Test in Literature, where the questions will be based on specific works of literature that the students have been studying diligently, the critical reading passage in the test, as a previously unseen passage, will have an element of surprise. In fact, the test writers usually go out of their way to choose passages from works not previously encountered in high school so as to avoid making the critical reading items a mere test of recall. From one point of view, not having to rely on memory actually makes questions on critical reading easier than the other questions because the answer must always be somewhere in the passage, stated either directly or indirectly, and careful reading will deliver the answer.

Since students can feel much more confident with some background information and some knowledge of the types of questions likely to be asked, the first order of business is for the student to contextualize the passage by asking some key questions. Who wrote it? When was it written? In what social, historical, or literary environment was it written?

In each passage used on a test, the writer's name is provided, followed by the work from which the passage was excerpted or the date it was published or the dates of the author's life. If the author is well known to high school students (e.g., Charles Dickens, F. Scott Fitzgerald, John Fitzgerald Kennedy, Jane Austen), no dates will be provided, but the work or the occasion will be cited. For writers less familiar to high school students, dates will be provided. Using this information, students can begin to place the passage into context. As they start to read, students will want to focus on what they know about that writer, his or her typical style and concerns, or that time

period, its values and its limitations. A selection from Thomas Paine in the eighteenth century is written against a different background and has different concerns from a selection written by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. prior to the passage of the Civil Rights Act. Toni Morrison writes against a different background from that of Charles Dickens.

Passages are chosen from many different kinds of texts—fiction, biography, letters, speeches, essays, newspaper columns, and magazine articles—and may come from a diverse group of writers, varying in gender, race, location, and time period. A likely question is one that asks readers to speculate on what literary form the passage is excerpted from. The passage itself will offer plenty of clues as to its genre, and the name of the writer often offers clues as well. Excerpts from fiction contain the elements one might expect to find in fiction—descriptions of setting, character, or action. Letters have a sense of sharing thoughts with a particular person. Speeches have a wider audience and a keen awareness of that audience; speeches also have some particular rhetorical devices peculiar to the genre. Essays and magazine articles are usually focused on one topic of contemporary, local, or universal interest.

Other critical reading questions can be divided into two major types: reading for meaning and reading for analysis. The questions on reading for meaning are based solely on understanding *what* the passage is saying, and the questions on analysis are based on *how* the writer says what he or she says.

In reading for meaning, the most frequently asked question is one that inquires about the passage's main idea since distinguishing a main idea from a supporting idea is an important reading skill. A question on main ideas is sometimes disguised as a question asking for an appropriate title for the passage. Most students will not select as the main idea a choice that is neither directly stated nor indirectly implied in the passage, but harder questions will present choices that do appear in the passage but are not main ideas. Remember that an answer choice may be a true



statement but not the right answer to the question.

Closely related to a question on the main idea of a passage is a question about the writer's purpose. If the passage is fiction, the purpose, unless it is a digression—and even digressions are purposeful in the hands of good writers—will in some way serve the elements of fiction. The passage will develop a character, describe a setting, or advance the plot. If the passage is non-fiction, the writer's purpose might be purely to inform; it might be to persuade; it might be to entertain; or it might be any combination of all three of these. Students may also be questioned about the writer's audience. Is the passage intended for a specific group, or is it aimed at a larger audience?

The easy part of the Critical Reading section is that the answer to the question is always in the passage, and for most of the questions, students do not need to bring previous knowledge of the subject to the task. However, for some questions, students are expected to have some previous knowledge of the vocabulary, terms, allusions, and stylistic techniques usually acquired in an English class. Such knowledge could include, but is not limited to, knowing vocabulary, recognizing an allusion, and identifying literary and rhetorical devices.

In addition to recognizing the main idea of a passage, students will be required to demonstrate a more specific understanding. Questions measuring this might restate information from the passage and ask students to recognize the most exact restatement. For such questions, students will have to demonstrate their clear understanding of a specific passage or sentence. A deeper level of understanding may be examined by asking students to make inferences on the basis of the passage or to draw conclusions from evidence in the passage. In some cases, students may be asked to extend these conclusions by applying information in the passage to other situations not mentioned in the passage.

In reading for analysis, students are asked to recognize some aspects of the writer's craft. One of these aspects may be organization. How has the writer chosen to organize his or her material? Is it a chronological narrative? Does it describe a place using spatial organization? Is it an argument with points clearly organized in order of importance? Is it set up as a comparison and contrast? Does it offer an analogy or a series of examples? If there is more than one paragraph in the excerpt, what is the relationship between the paragraphs? What transition does the writer make from one paragraph to the next?

Other questions could be based on the writer's attitude

toward the subject, the appropriate tone he or she assumes, and the way language is used to achieve that tone. Of course, the tone will vary according to the passage. In informational nonfiction, the tone will be detached and matter-of-fact, except when the writer is particularly enthusiastic about the subject or has some other kind of emotional involvement such as anger, disappointment, sorrow, or nostalgia. He or she may even assume an ironic tone that takes the form of exaggerating or understating a situation or describing it as the opposite of what it is. With each of these methods of irony, two levels of meaning are present—what is said and what is implied. An ironic tone is usually used to criticize or to mock.

A writer of fiction uses tone differently, depending on what point of view he or she assumes. If the author chooses a first-person point of view and becomes one of the characters, he or she has to assume a persona and develop a character through that character's thoughts, actions, and speeches. This character is not necessarily sympathetic and is sometimes even a villain, as in some of the short stories of Edgar Allan Poe. Readers have to pick up this tone from the first few sentences. If the author is writing a third-person narrative, the tone will vary in accordance with how intrusive the narrator appears to be. Some narrators are almost invisible while others are more intrusive, pausing to editorialize, digress, or, in some cases, address the reader directly.

Language is the tool the author uses to reveal attitude and point of view. A discussion of language includes the writer's syntax and diction. Are the sentences long or short? Is the length varied—is there an occasional short sentence among longer ones? Does the writer use parallelism and balanced sentence structure? Are the sentences predominantly simple, complex, compound, or compound-complex? How does the writer use tense? Does he or she vary the mood of the verb from indicative to interrogative to imperative? Does the writer shift between active and passive voice? If so, why? How do these choices influence the tone?

Occasionally, a set of questions may include a grammar question. For example, an item might require students to identify what part of speech a particular word is being used as, what the antecedent of a pronoun is, or what a modifier modifies. Being able to answer demonstrates that the student understands the sentence structure and the writer's meaning in a difficult or sometimes purposefully ambiguous sentence.

With diction, or word choice, one must also consider whether the words are learned and ornate or simple and

*(continued on page 9)*



## SAMPLE PASSAGE TO PREPARE FOR CRITICAL READING

In order to prepare for the critical reading portion of the test, it may be helpful for students to take a look at a sample passage. Here is a passage used in an earlier test. The passage is an excerpt from Mary Shelley's 1831 Introduction to **Frankenstein**.

- "We will each write a ghost story," said Lord Byron, and his proposition was acceded to. There were four of us. The noble author began a tale, a fragment of which he printed at the end of his poem of Mazeppa. Shelley, more apt to embody ideas and sentiments in the radiance of brilliant imagery and in the music of the most melodious verse that adorns our*
- (5) *language than to invent the machinery of a story, commenced one founded on the experiences of his early life. Poor Polidori had some terrible idea about a skull-headed lady who was so punished for peeping through a key-hole—what to see I forget: something very shocking and wrong of course; but when she was reduced to a worse condition than the renowned Tom of Coventry<sup>1</sup>, he did not know what to do with her and*
- (10) *was obliged to dispatch her to the tomb of the Capulets, the only place for which she was fitted. The illustrious poets also, annoyed by the platitude of prose, speedily relinquished their uncongenial task.*
- I busied myself to think of a story—a story to rival those which had excited us to this task. One which would speak to the mysterious fears of our nature and awaken thrilling*
- (15) *horror—one to make the reader dread to look round, to curdle the blood, and quicken the beatings of the heart. If I did not accomplish these things, my ghost story would be unworthy of its name. I thought and pondered—vainly. I felt that blank incapability of invention which is the greatest misery of authorship, when dull Nothing replies to our anxious invocations. "Have you thought of a story?" I was asked each morning, and each*
- (20) *morning I was forced to reply with a mortifying negative.*

Mary Shelley

Introduction to **Frankenstein** (1831)

1. Tom of Coventry—Peeping Tom who was struck blind for looking as Lady Godiva passed by.

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**INSTRUCTIONS:** On your answer sheet, mark the lettered space (a, b, c, d, or e) corresponding to the answer that BEST completes or answers each of the following test items.

**1. The author's purpose in this passage is to**

- a. analyze the creative process
- b. demonstrate her intellectual superiority
- c. name-drop her famous acquaintances
- d. denigrate the efforts of her companions
- e. narrate the origins of her novel

**2. According to the author, Shelley's talents were in**

- a. sentiment and invention
- b. diction and sound patterns
- c. thought and feeling
- d. brightness and ornamentation
- e. insight and analysis



**3. The author’s descriptions of Shelley’s talents might be considered all of the following EXCEPT**

- a. accurate
- b. prejudiced
- c. appreciative
- d. detached
- e. exaggerated

**4. The author’s attitude toward Polidori is**

- a. amused
- b. sincere
- c. derisive
- d. ironic
- e. matter-of-fact

**5. The author’s approach to the task differs from that of the others in that she begins by thinking of**

- a. her own early experiences
- b. poetic terms and expressions
- c. the desired effect on her readers
- d. outperforming her male companions
- e. praying for inspiration

**6. At the end of the excerpt the author feels**

- a. determined
- b. despondent
- c. confident
- d. relieved
- e. resigned

**7. “Noble” (line 2) can be BEST understood to mean**

- a. principled
- b. aristocratic
- c. audacious
- d. arrogant
- e. eminent

**8. All of the following constructions, likely to be questioned by a strict grammarian or a computer grammar check, are included in the passage EXCEPT**

- a. a shift in voice
- b. unconventional punctuation
- c. sentence fragments
- d. run-on sentences
- e. a sentence ending with a preposition

**9. In context “platitude” (line 11) can be BEST understood to mean**

- a. intellectual value
- b. philosophical aspect
- c. commonplace quality
- d. heightened emotion
- e. demanding point of view

**10. “The tomb of the Capulets” (line 10) is an allusion to**

- a. Shakespeare
- b. Edgar Allan Poe
- c. English history
- d. Greek mythology
- e. the legends of King Arthur

---

## ANSWERS AND EXPLANATIONS OF ANSWERS

1. **(e)** This type of question appears in most sets of critical reading questions. (a) might appear to be a possible answer, but the passage does not come across as very analytical, nor does it seem like a discussion of the creative process but rather is more a description of a game played by four writers to while away the time. (b) and (c) seem unlikely answers. Mary Shelley’s account here sounds as if she is conscious of **inferiority** in such illustrious company rather than **superiority**. She has no need to name-drop, as she married one of the illustrious poets and at that time was the guest of the other. She narrates the problems she had in coming up with a story, but since the passage tells us that she is the author of **Frankenstein**, we know that she did come up with a story. The answer is (e).
2. **(b)** This type of question asks readers to recognize a restatement of ideas found in the passage. The sentence under examination is found in lines 3–6, and students are asked to recognize that “diction and sound patterns” refers to “radiance of brilliant imagery” and “music of the most melodious verse.” (a) would not be possible because even his adoring wife finds him not inventive. “Thought and feeling,” (c), appear as “ideas and sentiments” (line 3), which according to the passage are merely the vehicles to exhibit Shelley’s talents.



Answer (d), incorporating “brightness,” might refer to “brilliant” in line 4, but “ornamentation” is too artificial a word for the author to use in reference to her talented husband. (e) is incorrect, as insight and analysis are not alluded to in the passage.

3. **(d)** This question is related to Question 2 in that it discusses Shelley’s talents and the author’s opinion of them. The writer is obviously not “detached” in her description of her very talented husband. She is obviously “prejudiced” and “appreciative.” She may even exaggerate, but history has shown her to be accurate in her opinion.
4. **(a)** This is another question about the writer’s attitude. Some of the adjectives can be immediately dismissed. She is not ironic—she means what she says. She is not an unkind writer, and she does not use a derisive tone. However, there is too much humor in her tone for it to be sincere or matter-of-fact. The correct answer is that she is amused.
5. **(c)** This question deals with the second paragraph and how the author set about writing a story. Choices (a), (b), (d), and (e) may seem appropriate beginnings for a writer, but they are not mentioned in the passage. What she does focus on is the desired effect on her readers, (c), as outlined in detail in lines 13–16.
6. **(b)** This question asks for an adjective to describe the author’s feeling at the end of the excerpt. The expressions “blank incapability” (line 17) and “mortifying negative” (line 20) suggest that “despondent” is the most appropriate answer.
7. **(b)** This question deals with vocabulary in context. The noble author is Lord Byron, a hereditary peer of the realm, and the word in this context of describing him means “aristocratic.” “Principled,” (a), and “eminent,” (e), are also possible synonyms for “noble” but not in this context. Byron in his private life was eminently unprincipled (nicknamed “the bad Lord Byron”) and lived overseas to avoid public enmity. (c) and (d) are not synonyms for “noble.”
8. **(d)** This is a type of question that appears occasionally in a set of questions on critical reading. Such questions require the student to examine the sentence structure of professional writers and to be aware that these writers sometimes take liberties in order to make a more effective statement.  

They know the rules, and, therefore, they may break them! An additional difficulty is that the question is framed as a negative, so students may find it a time-consuming question as they mentally check off which constructions Shelley does employ so that by a process of elimination they may arrive at which construction is not included. The first sentence contains both choices (a) and (e), a shift in voice and a sentence ending in a preposition. Neither of these constructions is a grammatical error, but computer programs point them out. The conventional advice is that both should be used sparingly, and they should be used when avoiding them becomes more cumbersome than using them. The sentence beginning in line 14 is a sentence fragment (c), but an effective one. Choice (b) corresponds to the sentence beginning in line 6 and finishing in line 11, which contains a colon, semicolon, and a dash (somewhat unconventional) without the author’s ever losing control. This sentence is not a run-on even though many students may think it is! The answer to the question then is (d).
9. **(c)** Here is another vocabulary in context question. Knowing the poets involved and their tastes, students will probably recognize that it is (c), the commonplace quality of prose, that turns the poets away and not one of the loftier explanations provided in the other distracters.
10. **(a)** The allusion to “the tomb of the Capulets” in line 10 is an example of a situation where a student is expected to have some outside knowledge, and this will be a very easy question for students. *Romeo and Juliet* is fair game for American high school students. Notice that the other allusion is footnoted, as this is a more obscure allusion for American high school students, although well known to every English schoolboy and schoolgirl.





colloquial. Does the writer use slang or jargon? Does he or she use sensual language? Does the writer use figurative language or classical allusions? Is the writer's meaning clearer because an abstract idea is associated with a concrete image? Does the reader have instant recognition of a universal symbol? If the writer does any of the above, what tone is achieved through the various possibilities of language? Is the writing formal or informal? Does the writer approve of or disapprove of or ridicule his or her subject? Does he or she use connotative rather than denotative words to convey these emotions? Do you recognize a pattern of images or words throughout the passage?

Some questions on vocabulary in context deal with a single word. The word is not usually an unfamiliar word, but it is often a word with multiple meanings, depending on the context or the date of the passage, as some words have altered in meaning over the years.

The set of ten questions on pages 6–7 is very typical—one on purpose, a couple on restatement of supporting ideas, some on tone and style, two on vocabulary in context, and one on an allusion. Students should learn how to use the process of elimination when the answer is not immediately obvious. The organization of the questions is also typical of the usual arrangement of Critical Reading questions. Questions on the content of the passage, the main idea, and supporting ideas generally appear first and are in the order they are found in the passage. They are followed by

questions applying to the whole passage, including general questions about the writer's tone and style. Students should be able to work their way through the passage, finding the answers as they go.

Additional questions on an autobiographical selection like this passage might ask what is revealed about the biographer herself or which statements in the passage associate the author with Romanticism.

Since passages for critical reading come in a wide variety of genres, students should keep in mind that other types of questions could be asked on other types of passages. For instance, passages from fiction can generate questions about point of view, about characters and how these characters are presented, or about setting, either outdoor or indoor, and the role it is likely to play in a novel or short story.

Speeches generate some different kinds of questions because of the oratorical devices a speaker might use—repetition, anaphora, or appeals to various emotions. Questions could be asked about the use of metaphors, the use of connotative words, and the use of patterns of words or images.

The suggestions made in this section of the resource guide should provide a useful background for critical reading. Questions are likely to follow similar patterns, and knowing what to expect boosts confidence when dealing with unfamiliar material.



## Section II

# Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead by Tom Stoppard

### INTRODUCTION

There is a scene that plays out in modern art museums on a regular basis, in which a well-intentioned art appreciator derides contemporary or modern art for its lack of obvious beauty, skill (“my five-year-old nephew could do better”), or even existence as “Art.” A more sophisticated viewer might acknowledge that there is more than surface to any one piece—there is also idea, and perhaps an intentional commentary on art history and tradition. An even more knowledgeable aficionado will know precisely the tradition and history that is contained in a piece and why the critique inherent in a nonfigurative work is important and “of its time.” Where one viewer sees a basic picture of a tomato soup can, another sees the mundane object of everyday use elevated by technique to a gallery-worthy subject, a commentary on modern design, the influence of advertisement, the fetishization of commodities, and the creation of the American culture around the mundane object. It sometimes requires a fair amount of background and contextual information to fully understand and appreciate the vision of the artist—and of course, understanding doesn’t mean you have to “like” it.

This is often the case in other artistic fields, including contemporary theater, especially when the play you’re reading or watching is an idea-fueled and audacious undertaking such as Tom Stoppard’s most well-known play *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* (hereafter usually shortened as *Rosencrantz*). This play may be pleasant enough and rather charming to read or to see with no previous knowledge to carry into the experience, but it is no doubt enhanced by knowing some background about both the theatrical commentary it makes and the history of ideas with which it deals. For our purposes, there is the added element of situating this play in the culture of the 1960s, in which it seems at first glance to sit uneasily. I hope that by using this rather comprehensive (but not exhaustive) resource guide, readers can better approach the play with all its nuances and sophistication

and gain a greater appreciation of its ambitious scope with each reconsideration of the world of Rosencrantz and gentle Guildenstern (or is it Guildenstern, and gentle Rosencrantz?).

One may say “Theater of the Sixties” without it meaning anything very definite since theater then, as now, is a varied genre, with many types of productions that appeal to many kinds of audiences. That the most popular film of the sixties was *The Sound of Music* might seem surprising since it was produced in a time of experimental, countercultural, and highly political productions. It should not be surprising, however. Such stalwarts as *Hello, Dolly!* and *How to Succeed in Business without Really Trying* performed well at box offices in New York. There were also breakouts from the counterculture, like *Hair* and *O, Calcutta*, which featured explicit sexual content performed by often nude actors. The Black Arts Movement in New York promoted drama written by black writers, who were often in revolt against mainstream society, resulting in plays like the Obie Award-winning *Dutchman*, by LeRoi Jones, and other works of “The Revolutionary Theater.” Other works with explicitly political undertones—or which featured humans in revolt—emerged. Many of these works were influenced by the “angry young men” movement in England that had been initiated by John Osborne’s play *Look Back in Anger*, published in 1956, which was a major influence on the young Tom Stoppard.

In the 1960s, avant-garde and experimental theater thrived, fueled by the emergence of the Theater of the Absurd in the 1950s. From a present-day perspective of some fifty years later, many of the more avant-garde offerings of the 1960s seem to originate in a loopy sense of theatrics inherited from new age psychology, psychedelic drug use, and a kind of street theater in which “everything goes.” It may seem that *Rosencrantz*, Tom Stoppard’s first major play, is not a perfect fit in this atmosphere. *Rosencrantz* is decidedly apolitical, and it uses as its foundation Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, the most celebrated and



canonical play there is. However, Stoppard's work was influenced by strains of performance theory and philosophy that helped define the revolution that took place in literature in the sixties. His play is both a culmination of historical and cultural forces and an original expression of such forces and movements. As we discuss the literary and artistic movement known as postmodernism, we shall see the myriad ways that *Rosencrantz* contributed to an important strand of thinking in its time.

## OVERVIEW OF TOM STOPPARD'S LIFE AND WORK

Tom Stoppard, who can now be called Sir Thomas Stoppard, was born Tomáš Straussler in the city of Zlín, Czechoslovakia, on July 3, 1937. His parents, both non-practicing, secular Jews, were in peril when Nazis came to control their region of Moravia. The forward-thinking head of the company Bata Shoes, where his father worked as a physician, had been working to reassign his Jewish employees. As a result, Eugen Straussler was reassigned with his family to Singapore on March 15, 1939—the same day the Germans invaded Czechoslovakia. In an unfortunate turn of fate for the Straussler family, Singapore also became a dangerous place when the Japanese began extensive bombing there in 1941. Tomáš and his mother and brother were relocated once more, this time to India, where his mother became manager of a Bata shoe store. Sadly, Eugen Straussler, her husband, died in a Japanese prisoner of war camp in Singapore.

In India, young Tomáš went to a boarding school run by American Methodists and grew comfortable with the English language. Tomáš's mother, Martha, met and married a British major there named Kenneth Stoppard, who in February 1946 moved the family to England. When he adopted the two brothers, he also gave them his name, which is how Tomáš Straussler became Tom Stoppard. This is also, according to Stoppard biographer Paul Delaney, how Tom Stoppard found his true home. In "Exit Tomáš Straussler, enter Sir Tom Stoppard," Delaney quotes Stoppard as saying: "As soon as we all landed up in England, I knew I had found a home . . . I embraced the language and the landscape."<sup>1</sup>

Stoppard was bored with and uninterested in intellectual life as well as literary works. He left school at the age of seventeen, having completed testing for the O-levels in Greek and Latin, which is roughly equivalent to a high school degree in the United States. His first job was as a



*Playwright Tom Stoppard, photographed in 1967.*

journalist, working for the *Western Daily Press* in Bristol, England, where the rest of his family lived. As a young man his ideas about journalism included a romantic fantasy of the adventurous life of the wartime journalist, as he admitted in an interview with *New York* magazine in 1977: "I wanted to be a great journalist. My first ambition was to be lying on the floor of an African airport while machine-gun bullets zoomed over my typewriter."<sup>2</sup>

Stoppard's journalistic fantasies did not come to fruition as fate took him in a different direction. Stoppard was assigned some tasks as a second-string theater critic, and so he would frequently see productions at the Bristol Old Vic Theatre. In 1948, Stoppard was on hand to see the young Peter O'Toole as Hamlet at the Old Vic. The production had a tremendous effect on Stoppard, whose interest in theatre in general and Shakespeare in particular





Façade of the Bristol Old Vic Theatre. Stoppard saw plays at the Old Vic while working as a theater critic, and the 1948 production of *Hamlet* he saw there had a tremendous effect on him.

was greatly increased.

It was a heady time to have taken an interest in the theater in London, a hub of international theater activity. Plays that would later be categorized as belonging to the Theater of the Absurd, like Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, which opened in 1955, were being performed and talked about. The Marxist Bertolt Brecht was creating works of what he called The Epic Theater with the Berliner Ensemble, which had a lengthy visit to London. And the movement of "angry young men" was initiated by the 1956 debut of John Osborne's play *Look Back in Anger*.

In 1960, Stoppard was struck with an urgent desire to begin his career as a writer, and so he quit his job at the newspaper. He completed his first play, *A Walk on the Water*, which was eventually produced for television. Perhaps of greater significance to Stoppard's career, this work brought him to the attention of the agent Kenneth Ewing, who became Stoppard's long-term agent. Stoppard eked out a meager living at this time, reviewing theater for a London magazine called *Scene* and writing unproduced scripts for television plays and one-act plays for BBC Radio.

Ewing, Stoppard's agent, was the catalyst for the work that would catapult Stoppard to fame. In 1963, after seeing a production of *Hamlet*, it was Ewing who mused that there might be potential in a play about Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, speculating that the king they travel to see in England might well be another Shakespearean character, King Lear. In 1964 Stoppard received a Ford Foundation grant to live in Berlin and continue to write, and he produced the forerunner to his most famous play, a one-act treatment written in verse called *Rosencrantz and*

*Guildenstern Meet King Lear*. In this play, the Player and Hamlet exchange identities on the ship bound for England, which is captured by pirates. The Player then returns to Denmark to fulfill Hamlet's role for the rest of the play.<sup>3</sup> This work offers a preview of Stoppard's concern with identity as performative and unstable.

Stoppard reworked his play about the two minor characters in *Hamlet*, and in 1966, after having had it rejected by the Royal Shakespeare Company and the Royal Court Theatre, he sent it to the Oxford Playhouse. In turn, they offered it to university undergraduates looking for something to perform at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe, which they did, to decidedly mixed reviews. However, a reviewer from *The Observer*, Ronald Bryden, wrote that the play was an "erudite comedy, punning, far-fetched, leaping from depth to dizziness...the most brilliant debut" in some time. This review came to the attention of the influential theater critic Kenneth Tynan, who was then the literary manager for the National Theatre in London. Tynan offered to produce the play at the National Theatre. Receiving rave reviews in London in April of 1967, and then as the first National Theatre production to be transferred to New York, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* paved the way for Stoppard to become one of the most illustrious of modern playwrights.

Beginning in 1964, with the play *Walk on the Water*, Stoppard has an imposing bibliography, with short and long plays, translations of other playwrights like Anton Chekhov and Luigi Pirandello, radio plays, TV plays, screenplays for major films, and one novel. To say that he is prolific would be an understatement. Besides *Rosencrantz*, there are three works that critics regard as his "major" work, each of which defies being contained in a brief abstract. *Jumpers* is a kind of unrestrained murder mystery in which some of the murders are the result of academic, philosophical papers admitting to the existence of a divine being. The title is taken from an acrobatic troupe of radically liberal university dons. *Travesties* imagines, or partly reimagines, a meeting in the neutral Swiss city of Zurich of three wildly disparate thinkers—the Modernist James Joyce, the Dadaist Tristan Tzara, and the Communist leader Vladimir Lenin. As with *Rosencrantz*, stage drama is at the core of this play, which revolves around a production of Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest* that was in fact produced by Joyce in Zurich in 1918. *Arcadia*, regarded by many as Stoppard's mature masterpiece, shifts between 1809—with the life of a precocious young girl genius who predicts many of the twentieth century's most astonishing mathematical discoveries—and the present (at the time of the first performance, 1993), where a pair of





Tom Stoppard, photographed c. 1980.

scholars lives in the same house as the young genius and inadvertently discover elements of the past. For the purpose of a keener understanding of *Rosencrantz*, the primary links between these plays is a constant attention to identity and performance, a concern with philosophical discourse that often touches on identity and humankind's place in the world, a manic and antic imagination, and, especially in *Travesties*, the meta-theatrical.

Lovers of film may be surprised at the number of films in which Stoppard has had a hand. Of the forty-six titles for which he receives credit as a writer, among the most notable are: *Brazil*, which he co-wrote with Terry Gilliam, of Monty Python fame; *Empire of the Sun*, a film directed by Steven Spielberg; *The Russia House*, an adaptation of a John Le Carré novel, starring Sean Connery; *Shakespeare in Love*, co-written with Marc Norman; an *Anna Karenina* adaptation in which Keira Knightley plays the title role; and the recent adaptation of a novel by Deborah Moggach, *Tulip Fever*. As writer and director, Stoppard had a major role in bringing his own play *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* to film in 1990.

## THE ORIGIN OF ROSENCRANTZ AND GUILDENSTERN IN SHAKESPEARE'S HAMLET

To truly “get” the device with which Stoppard so adroitly plays, one should begin with a working understanding of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, the play in which Rosencrantz and Guildenstern first appear. The primary action of *Hamlet* concerns Hamlet, a Danish prince who is charged by the ghost of his own father with getting revenge on the dead

King Hamlet's brother Claudius, who has not only murdered him, but has also taken both his crown and his wife. Hamlet, reluctant to act on the word of a ghost, even that of his own father, engages in near-endless ratiocination, which is a deferral of action, until he is in complete certainty about the truth of his father's fate. Part of Hamlet's technique is to feign madness so that he might catch other characters unprepared.

Hamlet also decides to stage a play in which the suspected crime of his uncle is revealed onstage. Hamlet intends to “catch the conscience of the King” by observing Claudius' reaction to the performance. In the end, Claudius attempts to poison Hamlet, but his ploy is turned back on him, as Claudius' queen, Gertrude, unwittingly drinks the poison herself. Hamlet is then struck by the poisoned tip of the sword of his friend Laertes, who has been lied to about Hamlet's true self. Laertes is poisoned, too, with the same blade, which Hamlet then uses against the King, finally fulfilling his father's wishes. Many tragedies end with a substantial pile of corpses on the stage and with a righteous ruler on the throne. In this case, a noble Norwegian, Fortinbras, ascends to the Danish throne.

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are not central players in *Hamlet*. Old school-friends of Hamlet, they are summoned by King Claudius and Queen Gertrude early in the play. They are asked to use their closeness to the Prince to learn why Hamlet has been behaving strangely. The new King Claudius is also interested in finding out what Hamlet knows about Claudius' role in King Hamlet's death, although Rosencrantz and Guildenstern know nothing of the regicide. The appearances of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern in *Hamlet* are brief, and their off-stage deaths precede the climax of the play where several central characters are killed onstage.

Tom Stoppard's play *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* relocates Rosencrantz and Guildenstern from the periphery of the original *Hamlet* to center stage in its re-vision. Since much of what concerns Stoppard is the role of theater and performance in human life, the Player—the head of the theater troupe that appears in *Hamlet* to perform an adulterated version of *The Murder of Gonzago*—has a major voice in *Rosencrantz*.

With the spotlight on them, Stoppard endows his title characters with more distinct personalities than they have in *Hamlet*. These personalities are fleshed out whenever they are alone together onstage or with the Player. Their personalities, taken together, might be called inquisitive as well as clueless, plaintive in their yearning for significance, and observant. Guil (the shortened form of Guildenstern in the written text) is somewhat more deeply immersed in





Author Tom Stoppard, photographed in c. 1990.

conventional philosophical speculation, seeking answers to questions like, “Why are we here?” Ros (Rosencrantz), on the other hand, seems to react without reflection and is more scattered. He often forgets even the train of thought that has brought the conversation he is having to its present point. At times, they seem quite distinct from each other, and at other times they are an indistinguishable couple, a point that the play uses for a great deal of fun.

In *Hamlet*, in Act 2, scene 2, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are summoned by King Claudius and Hamlet’s mother, Queen Gertrude. They are welcomed as childhood companions and age-mates who may have the ability to “gather/ So much as from occasion you may glean,/ Whether aught to us unknown afflicts him thus,/ That, open’d, lies within our remedy.”<sup>4</sup> Even though the Queen insists that “two men there is not living/ To whom [Hamlet] more adheres,” when it is refigured in Stoppard’s play, the close relationship to Hamlet does not seem so apparent to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. This is one way in which Stoppard, while basing his play on *Hamlet*, complicates and comments on his source material.

In an opening tableau in Stoppard’s *Rosencrantz*, Ros and Guil speculate on their reality, which is one in which a coin flip can come up heads over ninety times in a row. The Player and his troupe are then introduced, allowing speculation on the real versus the performed. The play takes a turn when the “reality” of *Hamlet*, and

the characters from that play, are introduced. A lighting change introduces the entrance of Hamlet’s would-be love interest, Ophelia. A lengthy set of stage directions describes a kind of “dumbshow” in which the two characters, acting unhinged and highly emotional, interact with one another before running offstage in opposite directions. Witnessing this, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern hasten to escape the confines of the stage, but Guil’s “Come on!” is followed immediately by the entrance of Gertrude and Claudius. The pair are trapped in the action and in Shakespeare’s script.

To say they are “trapped in the action” is no exaggeration, for what follows for two and a half pages (in Stoppard) is a nearly verbatim rendition of what happens in Shakespeare. The only difference is Stoppard’s additional stage directions. In the following passage, all the stage directions (in italics) are from Stoppard, while the spoken part exists as it is in Shakespeare:

Claudius: Welcome, dear Rosencrantz . . . (he raises a hand at Guil while Ros bows—Guil bows late and hurriedly) . . . and Guildenstern.

*He raises a hand at Ros while Guil bows to him—Ros is still straightening up from his previous bow and halfway up he bows down again. With his head down, he twists to look at Guil, who is on the way up.*<sup>5</sup>

It is a sight gag, a bit of physical comedy that is no doubt good for a laugh in performance. But there is more to it than mere slapstick. Paired together inexorably in *Hamlet*, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are indistinguishable for the reader. The King and Queen fail to tell them apart. It is part of the crisis for the pair, as later in Stoppard’s play and as central characters, the two of them can hardly maintain their separate identities. Later, in order not to reproduce this confusion, the Queen is given directions by Stoppard that allow her a general address that brooks no confusion. She addresses them by saying, “Good (fractional suspense) gentlemen,” and “they both bow.”<sup>6</sup>

As Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* takes over the action in Stoppard’s *Rosencrantz*, the language changes to Shakespearean prosody, and the title characters’ speech takes on a formality it had not had previously. The sudden, radical change in tone and diction bewilders the reader, and it soon becomes apparent that it is equally bewildering for the two speakers, who have become something like puppets or ventriloquist’s dummies in the service of the written text.

It is when the players from *Hamlet* exeunt (i.e., leave the



stage), leaving Ros and Guil alone on the stage, that the identity thrust on them by the play becomes overwhelming. "I want to go home,"<sup>7</sup> cries Ros, while Guil simply admonishes "Don't let them confuse you." Left now to their own devices as far as articulating ideas is concerned, figures of speech come out of their mouths impossibly jumbled and fractured. "I'm out of my step here,"<sup>8</sup> proclaims Ros, meaning, "out of my depth here," as Guil tries to assure his partner that they will soon be "high and dry," but mangles it saying, "high—dry and home," "hie you home," "dry you high," and "home and dry," before he comes to the desired "high and dry."

Immediately after this, Guil asks Ros, "Has it ever happened to you that all of a sudden and for no reason at all you haven't the faintest idea of how to spell the word—'wife'—or 'house'—because when you write it down you just can't remember ever having seen those letters in that order before . . . ?"<sup>9</sup> This could be taken as a commentary on one of several things: the centrality of language in ordering one's existence; the alienation of the common person from exalted language (of, say, Shakespeare); or the alienated state of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern on the stage, where they are without such common accoutrements as "wife" and "house." In any case, it shows that Guil and Ros are not secure—not "high and dry," as it were, but quite "at sea" or "out of their depth" in their condition.

As Ros and Guil try to get a grasp of their present predicament, they are unable to summon up memories of childhood, youth, love, or sports owing to their existence merely as stage characters. Instead, their earliest memory comes from that very morning when, "A man standing in his saddle in the half-lit, half-alive dawn banged on the shutters and called out two names." This is the emissary of King Claudius, summoning Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to do his bidding. For them, there is only one certainty: "we came."<sup>10</sup>

Throughout the play, lengthy quotations from Shakespeare serve to indicate the scripted nature of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's actions. They also serve to draw parallels between Shakespeare's commentary on theater and that of the leader of the Tragedians, who appears as the Player. In *Hamlet*, Act 2, scene 2, there is a lengthy interaction between Hamlet and Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, from lines 217 to 529. Much occurs during this time, including a total domination of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern by Hamlet in his display of "madness." During this display, Hamlet discovers that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are in the service of Claudius, and Hamlet has a discourse on theater with Polonius (one of Claudius's lords and the father



Actors Daniel Radcliffe (left) and Joshua McGuire (right) portray Rosencrantz and Guildenstern in a 2017 production of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*.

of Ophelia) and the Players. The audience almost forgets that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are even on the stage.

In other sections of *Rosencrantz*, there is a somewhat altered account of the play commissioned by Hamlet, "The Murder of Gonzago," and a stylized performance of the shipboard letter switch that seals the fate of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. What is particularly significant to the modern viewer/reader of *Rosencrantz* is the fact that the two main characters always seem a bit out of it, trying desperately to understand the context into which they have been thrown, and how they might escape the trap of being always already scripted—and thus fated to a certain destiny—and how they might choose to live otherwise.

## LITERARY FOREBEARS: REALISM, MODERNISM, AND POSTMODERNISM

### THE INFLUENCE OF REALISM

How do Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, the slightly questionable—in some views, slightly menacing—pair who do the bidding of King Claudius in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, go from being decidedly minor characters in Shakespeare to center stage in the 1960s play by Stoppard? On the one hand, we might want to thank the rise of Realism, which allows for narrative attention to be lavished on outwardly modest people, such as Gustave Flaubert's Félicité in "A Simple Heart," or Leo Tolstoy's Ivan Ilyich (who, like Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, also has his death foretold in the title *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*). These are characters born into the middle class or to the peasantry, rather than to nobility. Perhaps a more direct precursor to Rosencrantz





Russian writer Fyodor Dostoevsky, c. 1863. The narrator of Dostoevsky's novella *Notes from Underground* is a precursor to Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern*.

and Guildenstern is the narrator of Fyodor Dostoevsky's novella *Notes from Underground*, who torturously justifies his existence and his behavior. The great works of Realism allow for common people to become central protagonists of great works. As the twentieth century proceeds, these common heroes develop into antiheroes, like Yossarian from Joseph Heller's *Catch-22*, who has little of nobility or ability about him.

## THE INFLUENCE OF MODERNISM

The influence of modernism is also notable, as can be seen with characters such as Kafka's Gregor Samsa (from *The Metamorphosis*), whose interior monologue tries to reaffirm his place in his own bourgeoisie family, but who, like Dostoevsky's underground man, is irreconcilably alienated from his social world.

The work of T. S. Eliot, a foundational Modernist poet, also presages the central role of a Rosencrantz or a Guildenstern. The very young T. S. Eliot created a middle-

aged protagonist in "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," a speaker who has "seen the moment of [his] greatness flicker"<sup>11</sup> and comes to grips with the fact that his youthful ambitions will never be realized. Toward the end of this poem, the narrative voice of Prufrock seems to presage the focus on Hamlet's side-men, as he realizes:

*No! I am not Prince Hamlet, nor was meant to be;  
Am an attendant lord, one that will do  
To swell a progress, start a scene or two,  
Advise the prince; no doubt, an easy tool,  
Deferential, glad to be of use,  
Politically, cautious, and meticulous;  
Full of high sentence, but a bit obtuse;  
At times, indeed, almost ridiculous—  
Almost, at times, the Fool.<sup>12</sup>*

It is easy to miss the irony that even Hamlet's character is one who hardly seizes the day; his procrastination toward avenging his father's death is hardly a model of decisive, heroic action. Nevertheless, Hamlet is "named," and as the title character of what is arguably Shakespeare's most important play, has achieved a kind of dramatic and literary greatness. The main point, for Prufrock, and for modern man in the grip of the modern condition, is that he lacks heroic status. He is "attendant," "an easy tool." These descriptions apply quite aptly to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. The comparison of the minor figures with Hamlet is Eliot's narrator's way of putting himself in the proverbial backseat. He hears the mermaids singing, but realizes, "I do not think that they will sing to me." Prufrock once had ambitions to "Have squeezed the universe into a ball, / To roll it toward some overwhelming question," but now has the suspicion that "I have seen the moment of my greatness flicker."<sup>13</sup>

Tracing Eliot's "attendant lord" from Shakespeare's minor characters to Stoppard's central protagonists can be aided by an understanding of some of the principles of modernism as a literary era. Of course, most of what is called a literary era is established in retrospect, and there is a fluidity between writers who might be characterized as Realist and modernist or modernist and postmodern. Nevertheless, it is useful to note the dissatisfactions with one mode of literary art as it is succeeded by another.

A mistrust of appearances, or surfaces provides a relevant critique of Realism. For instance, it is said that the Realist desires to hold a mirror up to nature and reflect it as it is. The modernist, however, is dissatisfied with this picture of the world, and especially of the human, because it leaves





out so much of what lies beneath the surface. The Father of Psychoanalysis, Sigmund Freud, is profoundly influential in this vision, as he mapped out an inner world of human beings that includes the subconscious and the unconscious and the psychic structures of the id, ego, and superego. The superego influences identity, as it acts as a kind of internal judge of one's actions and enforces civilizing qualities that repress humans' baser instincts. Modernist literature reflects the heavy influence of the linguistic attributes of Freudian thinking, with elements such as dreams, jokes, and slips of the tongue expressing very real but inaccessible forces working in a character's inner world.

The modernist writer challenges narrative traditions; rather than use a sequential flow to tell a story, modernists may instead break up the chronology within a text. Narrators may change in mid-page or mid-poem in a modernist text. Modernist literature often uses devices such as stream-of-consciousness in narration, the use of fragments, and the experience of epiphany—the sudden realization of a profound revelation that usually comes from common experiences. The following quote by the renowned modernist writer Virginia Woolf offers one way to understand the modernist rejection of literature that adheres to a chronological sequencing of events and to an identifiable narrative origin:

*Life is not a series of gig lamps symmetrically arranged; but a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end. Is it not the task of the novelist to convey this varying, this unknown and uncircumscribed spirit, whatever aberration or complexity it may display, with as little mixture of the alien and external as possible?*<sup>4</sup>

The rich notion that experience—especially inner experience—is not symmetrically arranged but diffuse in both space and in time creates possibilities for writers to explore interior consciousness in a manner that at times has some kinship with the artistic period of Impressionism. Edges are not sharply defined, and there is a flow from one description to another that creates the mental image. Revelation comes not in a chronological progression, but in pieces, as Eliot expresses near the end of his great poem, "The Waste Land," when the poem's speaker claims, "these fragments I have shored against my ruins"—as if the ruined civilization of the twentieth century might find salvation in the collection of fragments available in the mind of the artist.

The ambition of modernism comes in part from another



*British writer T. S. Eliot, photographed in 1934. The narrative voice of Eliot's *Prufrock* seems to presage the focus on Hamlet's side-men, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern.*

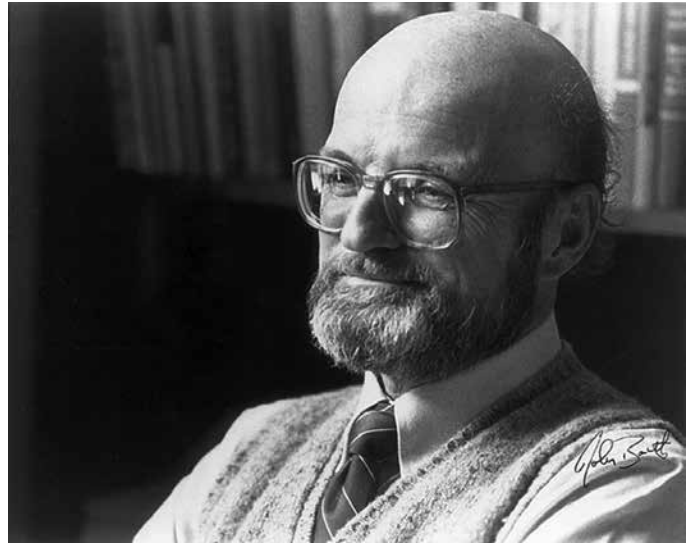
influential thinker, the nineteenth-century philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche. Nietzsche's overarching complaint was of the inherent meekness of humanity in the current state of Christianity. His well-known antidote to this was for humans to seize the will to power and realize the creation of the self as the *übermensch* or superman. This superman responds to a crisis in civilization—where humans are led by religion to an unproductive and complacent attitude and a retreat to the values of the herd—by striving to create and define new values for humanity. In modernist terms, the artist is seen as the creative force, and the task is one in which the world, or the representation of the world, shapes a new and vital reality for the reader, viewer, or audience.

Some modernist art is descriptive of what the civilized world lacks in its vital performance of life. Some modernist art attempts to be proscriptive of how a new kind of understanding can lead to new ways of being in the world that create meaning for human existence. The ambition of the modernist artist is seen in a passage from James Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, when the protagonist, the arrogant scholar Stephen Dedalus, is ready to leave his home of Dublin and the comforts of Catholicism with the loftiest of ambitions. "Welcome, O life!" he writes in his





British modernist writer Virginia Woolf, photographed in 1902. Woolf’s writing reflected her view that experience—especially inner experience—is not symmetrically or sequentially arranged.



American writer John Barth, whose essay “The Literature of Exhaustion” and his own response to this essay “The Literature of Replenishment” are together often considered a manifesto of postmodernism.

bourgeois, capitalist status quo. Surrealism was an artistic movement that sought to express the conditions of dream and the unconscious in concrete images.

### THE INFLUENCE OF POSTMODERNISM

In texts that are designated “postmodern,” artists and writers respond to many of the concerns modernist writers were responding to, such as the lack of an overarching foundation for instilling meaning in life. Postmodernists also used some of the same techniques as modernists; for example, postmodernists use fragments assembled in a visual or verbal “collage.” A primary difference between modernists and postmodernists is that postmodernists distrust established systems for creating meaning—postmodern irreverence toward “high art” is one of its defining characteristics. For postmodernists, language and words are no longer seen as stable repositories of meaning, as the linguistic science of semiotics, structuralism, and post-structuralism came to challenge claims that language has an essential relationship to reality. Efforts to communicate are plagued by distortions that are brought on by the proliferation of meanings that any sign, symbol, word, or message carries with it. Postmodern artists embraced this idea, making art in the form of playful suggestions of possible meanings. These suggestions themselves might be temporary, disposable, or lacking in solidity.

### John Barth and Jorge Luis Borges

Two foundational texts that try to reimage literature

journal; “I go to encounter for the millionth time the reality of experience and to forge in the smithy of my soul the uncreated conscience of my race.”<sup>15</sup> What follows further embeds his ambitions in a secular rather than sacred origin, as he addresses his own earthly father, whom he equates to Daedalus in Greek Mythology. Daedalus was a famous craftsman, an accomplice in the slaying of the Minotaur, and the father of Icarus, who famously flew too close to the sun on wings designed by his father and plummeted to death when the wax holding the wings together melted from the heat of the sun. When Joyce closes his novel with Stephen’s invocation, “Old father, old artificer, stand me now and ever in good stead,” the “artificer” points to the creative capacity of his namesake inventor from Greek Mythology.

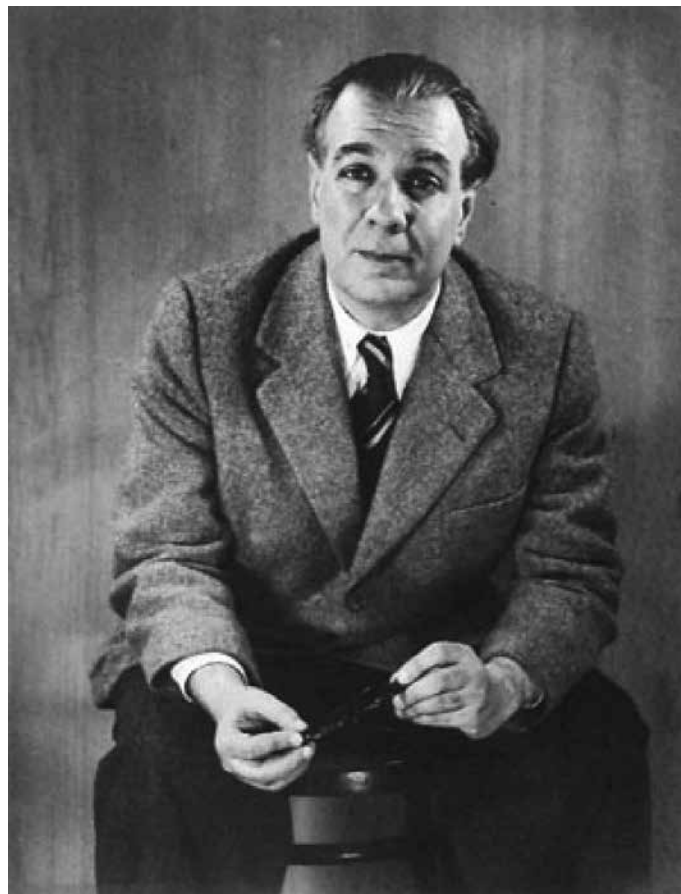
These qualities in modernism represent some of the major forces and movements in the era. In addition to the influence of modernism, other artistic movements of note include Dadaism and Surrealism. Dadaism was an artistic movement that emphasized the illogical and used nonsensical and chance artistic creations to challenge the



beyond Realism are John Barth's essay "The Literature of Exhaustion" and his own response to this essay, "The Literature of Replenishment," published in *Atlantic Magazine* in 1967 and 1980, respectively. Together they are often considered to be a kind of manifesto of postmodernism. Barth's primary critique is that writers continue to write as if innovations such as those found in the work of Franz Kafka have not occurred, and that writers are not concerned with going beyond Kafka, or even beyond Leo Tolstoy, who represents the quintessence of Realism. After deriding easy experimentalism, (conceptual art done with up-to-date ideas but no virtuosity), Barth celebrates one writer whom he believes has both imagination and virtuosity—the Argentinian short story writer Jorge Luis Borges. One particular example Barth cites, which resonates with Stoppard, is Borges' play on *The Thousand and One Nights*. Barth explains that Scheherazade, the narrator of *The Thousand and One Nights*, appealed to Borges because "[w]hen the characters in a work of fiction become readers or authors of the fiction they're in, we're reminded of the fictitious aspect of our own existence, one of Borges's main themes, as it was of Shakespeare, Calderón, Unamuno and other folks."<sup>16</sup> This should remind us of Stoppard's characters Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, who appear to be conscious that their origin is somehow fictitious, but whose desperation to trace that origin seems quite relevant to that of the everyman—relevant to the age-old human questions of "Why are we here?" and "What is the purpose of life?"

Barth goes on to discuss Borges' interest in Scheherazade's dilemma, which was that it was necessary for Scheherazade to continue telling stories in order to preserve herself from execution.<sup>17</sup> This is the origin of *The Thousand and One Nights' regresus in infinitum*, the endless circularity of Scheherazade's storytelling. The Latin term literally means "going back endlessly"—a proposition requires a proof, which proof requires another proof, and so on, endlessly. Again, this brings to mind some conversations in which Rosencrantz and Guildenstern try to establish something definitively—though it might be said that their reasoning often seems circular, like a [Möbius strip](#), rather than infinite. Incidentally, in a series of Barth's short works called *Lost in the Funhouse* (1968), the author includes a cutout page that allows readers to assemble their own physical Möbius strip, "a surface with one continuous side formed by joining the ends of a rectangular strip after twisting one end through 180 degrees."<sup>18</sup>

As we try to situate postmodern concerns and postmodern writing in the 1960s, it may seem odd to cite an essay



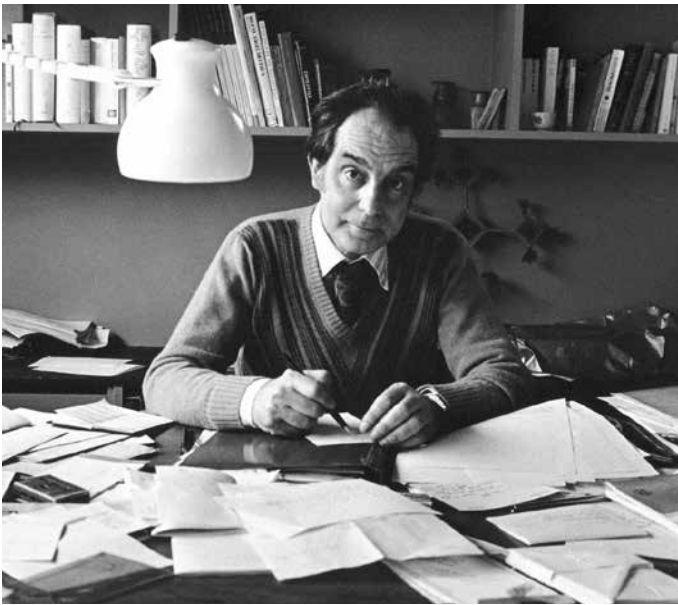
Argentinian short story writer Jorge Luis Borges, 1951. *The circularity of Scheherazade's storytelling in Borges' One Thousand and One Nights has echoes in some of the dialogue between Stoppard's Rosencrantz and Guildenstern.*

that makes the Argentinian writer Borges exemplary of the innovations looked for in a new literature. Borges was born in 1899, was publishing poetry as early as 1923, and the kind of work for which he was most celebrated was published in 1943 in a collection called *El Jardín de Senderos que de Bifurcan* (*The Garden of Forking Paths*). In an international and parochially English language perspective, however, Borges' work is very much a part of literature in the sixties since the most influential translations of Borges, in collections titled *Ficciones* (*Fictions*) and *Labyrinths*, first appeared in 1962.

### *Italo Calvino and other Influences on Postmodernist Literature*

Another international giant of the kinds of texts we now celebrate as "postmodern" is Italo Calvino, an Italian writer whose play on science, *Cosmicomics*, first appeared in





*The Italian writer Italo Calvino was a renowned author of the kinds of texts that are now celebrated as "postmodern."*

English in 1968. Though writers such as Samuel Beckett (1906–89) and Luigi Pirandello (1867–1936) preceded the era of postmodernism, they were nevertheless writers whose concerns have relevance to postmodernism. Writers who were reading the works of Beckett, Pirandello, and others who focused on similar concerns sprung up in the sixties, including the American writers John Barth, Donald Barthelme, Thomas Pynchon, and Kurt Vonnegut as well as the playwright Adrienne Kennedy and many others.

### *Postmodernism and Parody*

Postmodernism is often linked with parody, as postmodern writers often take an old form and ironically reproduce it in order to look at the form from another angle. The aforementioned John Barth, for instance, takes the (also aforementioned) text of *The Thousand and One Nights* and gives it an irreverent slant by presenting the story from the point of view of Scheherazade's sister, Dunyazad, who in the myth hides beneath the storyteller's bed during the entirety of the *Nights*. Barth's "The Dunyazadiad," a novella within his book *Chimera*, is rambunctious and irreverent. It demonstrates how a writer can play with a legend, myth, or fable that exists in cultural history and at the same time use that myth to deal with the social and political realities of his or her own day.

Here again, we can locate Stoppard's text, which in some ways pays homage to *Hamlet* and in other ways offers a parodic rendition of Shakespeare's masterpiece. The most

successful parodic moments are those in which Rosencrantz and Guildenstern seamlessly slip into the language that Shakespeare wrote for them and just as seamlessly fall back into the rather straightforward twentieth-century language that is given to them by Stoppard.

### *Postmodernism and the Chaos of Life and Language*

The rather chaotic and uncontrolled way in which the plot of Stoppard's *Rosencrantz* shifts back and forth, from the existential crisis of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, to the smarmy showmanship of the Player, into the plot of *Hamlet*, and back to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's [Laurel and Hardy](#) routine, is quintessentially postmodern. This underpinning philosophy is shown when Ros claims to have a preference for "a good story, with a beginning, middle and end," and Guil replies, "I'd prefer art to mirror life, if it's all the same to you."<sup>19</sup> The inference here is that life itself is chaotic, messy, disorganized, and slippery. Postmodernists consider language itself to be promiscuous and disorderly, rather than composed, formal, or precise. A rather reverent approach to language persists in modernism, which sought to reveal something divine in humankind's creative capacity. Postmodernism replaces this with a kind of irreverent pastiche of different modulations in language. Coherent and linear narratives (Ros' preference) appear infrequently, replaced by a nearly incoherent world of shady, untrustworthy narrators and stories told by tricksters, criminals, fools, and madmen.



*The ruins of Hiroshima after the detonation of an atomic bomb in August 1945. In the aftermath of the Second World War, writers and humanity at large had to reckon with a world that had witnessed mass destruction.*



The modernist takes the creation of the work of art, and the world into which it is inserted, as serious business. Modernism was at heart a human response to the loss of the centrality of god and of nation. Modernism was a response to a world in which the mechanization and urbanization of civilization through industrialization transformed the human relationship to nature. Modernist writers were writing and living in a post-World War world. It was a world in which industrialization had allowed for the wholesale killing of other human beings as occurred in the shelling and gas attacks in World War I. While a great deal of modernist writing and art contains humor, the movement is largely considered to be a serious response to a serious human crisis.

This human crisis was no less serious in the heyday of postmodernism. In the aftermath of the Second World War, writers and humanity at large had to reckon with a world that witnessed concentration camps in which humans were murdered on a mass scale as well as the detonation of two atomic bombs, in Hiroshima and Nagasaki. For many, these realities underscored the notion that humans lived in a world in which they could not rely on traditional ways of creating meaning. For postmodernists, the serious striving toward a central foundation is a fool's errand.

### *Postmodernism and "Play"*

Postmodernists turned, in large part, toward a less serious approach than the modernists. Some theorists have indicated "play" to be a serious function of the postmodern text. An example of such "play" is the use of a word or words in a context that undermines the word's authority—making a word mean something other than what it is generally taken to mean. Play can also involve playing with a concept—twisting it into different shapes in order to examine the way the concept works from various angles. Play in a postmodern text can simply involve making a game out of recognizable human situations.

*Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* begins with a kind of game—the flipping of coins. It is a game that soon becomes portentous of a sub-natural, unnatural, or supernatural force at work in the lives of the characters. The end of this first game—the discovery of a coin with tails facing up under the foot of the tragedian—is a preface to the first appearance of King Claudius and Queen Gertrude, who determine the "rules" that govern the lives of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. Several games of "questions" are played, which constitute a kind of toying with the rhetorical or linguistic. These games are intended

to lead to an end result but proceed in a circular pattern. The Player and the tragedians make a game out of death and dying. Similarly, Hamlet's use of scripted drama, in both Shakespeare and Stoppard, is a game that is meant to expose the king by revealing his true sentiments about the death of King Hamlet. In the end, it is while "play" acting that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern discover that Hamlet has "played a trick" on them by changing the message to be delivered to the English king.

### *Meta-Theater*

In a condition called meta-theater, a postmodern play is always conscious of itself as a play. While meta-theater did not originate in the 1960s, it can be argued that there was a more widespread and self-conscious use of this technique in that decade. Stoppard's *Rosencrantz*, a play in which the protagonists are two "characters" born from a piece of theater, is inherently meta-theatrical and becomes more so with the back and forth of action from *Hamlet* in sequence with scenes original to *Rosencrantz*.

One device of meta-theater is the conscious "breaking of the fourth wall." In theater, the phrase "the fourth wall" refers to the imaginary divide that exists between the actors on stage and the audience. The fourth wall can be broken if a playwright's characters on stage become conscious that they are being watched by an audience, and the characters on stage might even address asides or direct commentary to the audience. Recall, for instance, the moment in *Rosencrantz* when Ros decides to yell "Fire" to demonstrate "the misuse of free speech."<sup>20</sup> Ros looks out on the audience "with contempt," as the stage directions dictate, and judges them for not having reacted to his alarm. He then concludes that the members of the audience "should burn to death in their shoes."<sup>21</sup> This not only breaks the fourth wall, but it also turns the tables in the matter of appraisal, and in this case, it is the character who judges the action from the audience rather than the other way around.

Another notable moment of the fourth wall coming down occurs in the third act, when Hamlet, after a hopeful interchange in which Ros and Guil assert their freedom, comes to the footlights and regards the audience and then clears his throat and spits on them. Following this brazen and primitive display, it is Ros who makes the absurd commentary that, "A compulsion towards philosophical introspection is [Hamlet's] chief characteristic."<sup>22</sup>

Stoppard is drawing on *Hamlet*, a kind of sacred text in literature, while deploying sometimes parodic elements and elements of play, if not near-incoherence and confusion,



to interrogate some very modern themes in a classical, Elizabethan setting. Stoppard's work addresses serious issues concerning relevance, the part that the individual plays in the life of the world, and the inevitability of one's destiny; but yet, no serious resolution of these issues is being offered.

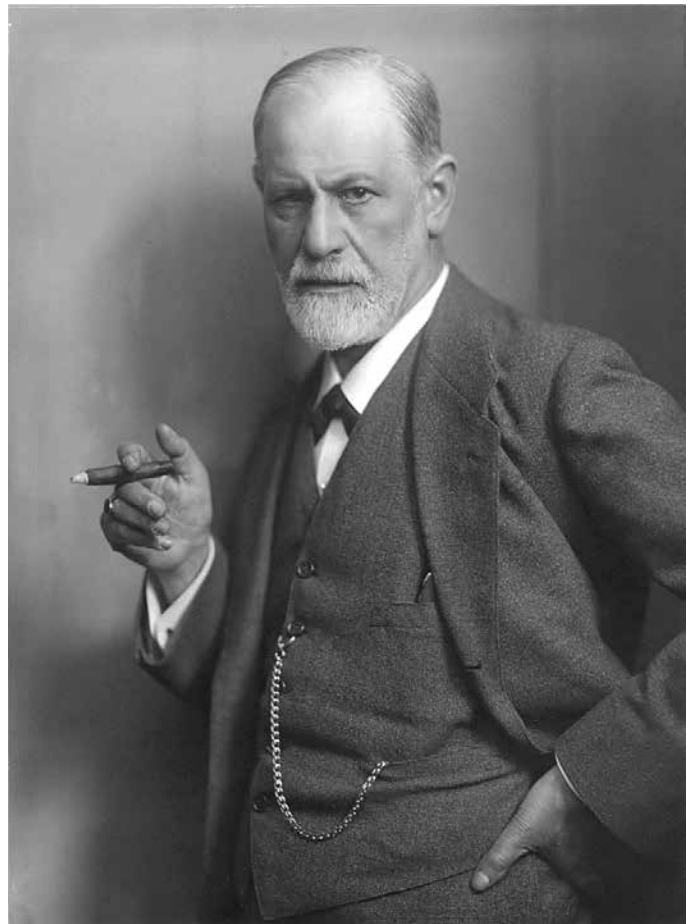
For readers and audiences who know what Stoppard is up to with all this, it can be a great deal of fun. In all these ways, *Rosencrantz* fits the accepted definition of the postmodern text. In producing it, Stoppard was greatly influenced by his times, his theatrical predecessors (namely, the Irish writer Samuel Beckett and the Italian writer Luigi Pirandello), and the philosophical questions that arose with existentialism.

## ATMOSPHERIC CONDITIONS IN THE 1960s

Before addressing major influences, such as Pirandello and Beckett, on Stoppard as a playwright, we should circle back to the mid-sixties and examine some influences on the times in which Stoppard emerged. It can be tempting to see the sixties as emerging from the womb fully grown, born from the Birmingham, Alabama campaign in which Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. participated, or the assassination of John F. Kennedy in 1963, or the Acid Tests run in California by Ken Kesey and the Merry Pranksters, or the protests against the war in Vietnam. One has to recognize, however, that each new epoch arises from the foundation laid by the previous one. In the vision of the sixties rehearsed above, the fifties are a kind of wasteland, populated by suburban men in flannel suits heading to Madison Avenue complacent with a status quo that finds two cars in every garage. It can be easy to forget that many timelines of the Civil Rights Movement begin in 1954 with *Brown vs. the Board of Education* or in 1955 with the lunch counter sit-in at Reed's Drug Store in Baltimore, Maryland. Most of the vital works of the writers of the Beat generation—precursors to bohemian, hippie San Francisco—were composed and published in the forties and fifties.

## THE INFLUENCE OF FREUDIAN ANALYSIS AND EXISTENTIALISM

Two major strains of thought—both of which are central in Stoppard—were highly influential for artists and popular culture alike in the sixties. One was Freudian analysis, in which patients are asked to speak without reflection in the presence of a psychoanalyst, hoping to expose to analysis elements of their subconscious, such as motives for conscious behaviors. The evolution that took place from the theories of Freud to the practice of analysis had its peak



*Photographic portrait of Sigmund Freud, 1921, by Max Halberstadt. Freud's influence on Stoppard's *Rosencrantz* is apparent in the way characters are revealed by their linguistic slips, jokes, riddles, and non sequiturs.*

in cosmopolitan centers in the 1960s. Freud's influence on *Rosencrantz* is apparent in the way characters are revealed by their linguistic slips, jokes, riddles, and non sequiturs.

*Rosencrantz* also draws on the philosophy of existentialism, which had some currency in bohemian cultures and the art world of the sixties, though much of its theoretical foundation was published long before then. The long history of existential philosophy extends back into the nineteenth century, to the Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard, and was substantially developed in the early twentieth century. Many of Jean-Paul Sartre's works had emerged by the thirties and forties, including his existential play *No Exit* (1944) and his long treatise on existentialism *Being and Nothingness* (1943). It was in the postwar era, though, that existentialism garnered a great deal of attention and popularity with the general public, outside of strictly intellectual and philosophical circles. The public friendship and the disputes between Jean-Paul Sartre,





*Existentialist philosophers and writers Simone de Beauvoir and Jean-Paul Sartre.*

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Simone de Beauvoir, and Albert Camus in France were reported in the popular press, making unlikely celebrities of these intellectuals.

The central premise of existentialism lies in an insistence that no system of thought or belief can legitimately serve as the defining purpose of human existence. In the eighteenth century, the notion that king and country could be the pillars of one's reason to live was called into question by successful revolutions against monarchies in England and France. The French Revolution, in particular, put individuals at the center of their own existences. Nationalism persisted, but the fact that nations could fall, maps could change, and systems of governance could be transformed shifted the foundations of contemporary thought.

The unquestioned acceptance of God as supreme was also challenged in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries by advances in science. Darwin's theory of evolution posited that the human race was part of a grand biological and cosmic system, which further challenged organized religion. Later, in the twentieth century, some of the same historical forces and events that produced the movements of modernism and postmodernism diminished trust in humanity's moral and ethical goodness. Stripped of the absolute centrality of nation, the unquestioned authority of the church, and the "truth" of moral systems, philosophy turned to humanity itself to find meaning. A basic formulation in existential thought is that the human being has no essential value. If life is to have any meaning, one must create that meaning for oneself.

The "oneself" or the "I" is important in this formulation. Following the kind of critique Friedrich Nietzsche makes against "the herd" and in favor of the *Übermensch* (Superman), most existentialist thought holds individuals



*Existentialist philosopher and writer Albert Camus. There are parallels between Rosencrantz and Guildenstern and Camus' Sisyphus, who is in the absurd situation of endlessly repeating the same task.*

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responsible for their own actions and for their own authenticity in a social world in which so much behavior is prescribed. According to existentialist thinking, to live is to choose to act in such a way that one is individual and authentic. This is defined by Sartre and by Albert Camus as "being-for-others"—that is, acting in an authentic way that best assures the greater common good. Camus agrees that the universe is indifferent to the fate and actions of an individual human and that the relationship between the two—humanity and the universe—is marked by its absurdity. However, he says simply that one must act as if it were not so. One way of doing this is to embrace what Camus called "engagement"—a willful self-definition that allows one to act in the best interest of others in the world, particularly in the interest of those who are materially and politically disadvantaged.

The above is a simplified rendition of existential thought, but one that does the necessary work of differentiating between existentialism and [nihilism](#). Existentialism is not an empty or bankrupt philosophy, which is what it is sometimes misunderstood to be. While it does start with



a seemingly despairing notion that the universe is, at its heart, meaningless, it gives the individual human subject agency to act in a way that gives meaning to his or her own existence, even if this meaning is a willed illusion.

To be sure, if one transports these positive elements of action and *engagement* to *Rosencrantz*, one finds the title characters little able to act in an authentic way that might be considered to be “being-in-itself” or “being-for-others.” True, the characters are on a quest for some notion of the meaning of their existence, and they do not seem to have such standard recourses as religion or nation to which to turn. Lacking the capacity to act (barring Ros’s act of stabbing the Player, albeit with an inconsequential weapon), one finds *Rosencrantz* and *Guildenstern* in the situation of Camus’ *Sisyphus*, always rolling their boulder toward an end that resolves nothing. Camus reimagined the plight of the ancient mythical figure of *Sisyphus* and reconfigured his struggle in modern terms. *Sisyphus* was an inventor who was punished by Zeus for an excess of cleverness and deceit, among other crimes, and so was sentenced to his eternal task of pushing a boulder up a mountain, only to have it roll down, necessitating a renewal of the task. While in Camus’s version the mythic hero transforms his seemingly meaningless (absurd) task by willing himself to put his entire being into it, *Rosencrantz* and *Guildenstern* face an absurd situation with no apparent way of positively addressing it. Thus, there is an absurdity that is undeniable in *Stoppard* with no recourse to *engagement*.

## STOPPARD AND THE “THEATER OF THE ABSURD”

*Stoppard*’s work is, appropriately, in the tradition of a kind of theater that came to be known as the “Theater of the Absurd.” It is a theatrical world in which the laws of physics, the constancy of identity, the meaning of words, and the predictability of human response are suspended. We might say it is a world unlike the one in which we live, but one that is recognizable nonetheless.

Since we have established a basic notion of the existential, it may be useful to suggest the ways that the Theater of the Absurd is distinct from the philosophical system of existentialism. In *Tom Stoppard and the Theater of the Absurd*, Victor L. Cahn describes the protagonists of Sartre’s and Camus’s fiction and theater as “tragic-heroic” as they battle against the prevailing meaninglessness of existence. The protagonists in works by absurdist playwrights like Eugene Ionesco, Harold Pinter, Jean Genet, and Samuel Beckett, on the other hand, are “comic-pathetic”—they are helpless and impotent victims of the circumstances of their

meaninglessness.<sup>23</sup> In his seminal work on the Theater of the Absurd, Martin Esslin declares that, “The Theater of the Absurd has renounced arguing about the absurdity of the human condition; it merely presents it in being—that is, in terms of concrete stage images.”<sup>24</sup>

## WHAT’S GODOT GOT TO DO WITH IT?

*Stoppard*’s *Rosencrantz* is often compared to Samuel Beckett’s play *Waiting for Godot*. Both plays are set in a world without established order or fulfilling relationships. The relationships that do exist seem to sustain themselves because they are inevitable and because both participants in them are deeply afraid of being left alone. In fact, *Stoppard*’s *Rosencrantz* is said to have been influenced as much by Samuel Beckett as by William Shakespeare. Anyone who has carefully read Beckett plays like *Endgame* and *Waiting for Godot* can immediately perceive the echo of Beckett in the work of *Stoppard*, the younger playwright—two characters, trapped in a seemingly endless, empty wasteland of life, desperately and often impotently seeking some semblance of an answer to profound and essential questions.

*Waiting for Godot*, Beckett’s most famous play, had an inarguably profound impact on the theater of the sixties. Composed in the late 1950s, with its first performance in 1953 and its first English language performance in 1955, it was voted “the most significant English Language play of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century” in a poll conducted by the British National Theatre. While its origin precedes the sixties, many of the most influential performances of the play occurred in the sixties, as theater at that time was under the sway of the same revolutionary spirit as music and politics.

In the sixties, Beckett, whose novels and plays had always stretched the bounds of convention, was producing work that was more and more nontraditional—sparse, minimalist, and unconcerned with entertainment or pleasure. His philosophical language was replaced with a much more vernacular language of the people, while his settings became increasingly abstract. As Ryan Diller writes in an article on Beckett’s theater in the sixties, “Rather than focusing on the abstract absurdities of reality in concrete locations, he exposed the concrete futilities of life in abstract settings.”<sup>25</sup>

After the first performance of *Waiting for Godot* in New York, theater theorist June Schlueter maintained that conventional playwrights were compelled to give way to





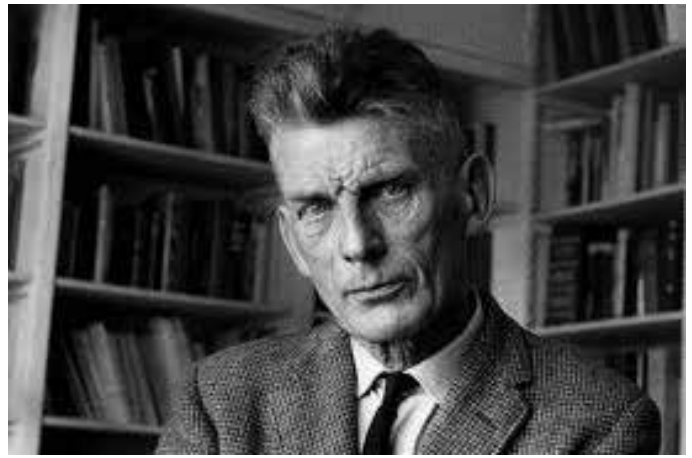
a new generation, “a generation that felt obliged to chisel away at the solidified boundaries of the realistic form that had so long defined their art.”<sup>26</sup> Schlueter cites a list of American playwrights who followed Beckett into abstract and nonrepresentational realms, from Edward Albee to Sam Shepard, from Ntozake Shange to LeRoi Jones.

The influence of Beckett and other writers characterized as part of the “Theater of the Absurd” is evident not only in the texts of such playwrights, but also in the manner of theatrical presentation. Theater in the sixties was characterized by “ambiguity, discontinuity, heterodoxy, pluralism, randomness, revolt, perversion,” elements that are identified by theorist Ihab Hassan as central to postmodernism (and most of which we can identify as central to *Rosencrantz*). Groups that “brought vitality to theater not through innovation in text but through performance,” like the Living Theater, Bread and Puppet Theater, The Open Theater, and productions helmed by directors like Peter Brook and Jerzy Grotowski, created theater to conceptually challenge the way an audience interacts with what occurs onstage.

In a kind of career retrospective of Stoppard by William Demastre, Demastre defines the era of the sixties in which Stoppard emerges as divided between the socially committed realists and the anti-realism of absurd theater initiated by Beckett and *Waiting for Godot*. His assessment that, “British theater basically split into two camps, one presenting a politically-active, left-leaning vision that change can occur by utilizing devices of logic and reason, the other believing that logic and reason had exhausted themselves and had in fact generated cataclysmic outcomes (i.e., two world wars) necessitating re-assessments of logic and reason themselves” puts Stoppard squarely into the absurdist camp.<sup>27</sup>

The way that Ros and Guil are portrayed in *Rosencrantz* shows Stoppard to be in the *Waiting for Godot* camp. In *Rosencrantz*, as in *Godot*, there are two figures, isolated by themselves on a mostly barren stage. Each pair of men answers to the shortened form of their names (Didi and Gogo for Vladimir and Estragon / Ros and Guil for Rosencrantz and Guildenstern). In both *Godot* and *Rosencrantz*, the pairs of characters have vaudeville or slapstick elements in common with such pairs as the slapstick duo Laurel and Hardy, whose film career began in the silent era and continued until the late 1950s, and the popular comedy team of Abbot and Costello, who starred in nearly forty films from 1940 to 1959.

While these comedic pairings are defined by the



Irish author Samuel Beckett, whose play *Waiting for Godot* is often cited as having as much influence on Stoppard’s *Rosencrantz as Shakespeare did*.

dimwittedness of one of their halves, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern’s thought processes are anything but dumb. Both Beckett’s Didi and Gogo in *Waiting for Godot* and Stoppard’s Ros and Guil are acutely aware of the potential meaninglessness of life as they know it. Both pairs have moments of intellectual questing for things that ultimately elude them. Within the pairs, there is one that is more intellectual than the other (Didi and Guil), and one who is more centered in the body (Gogo and Ros). Both pairs end up playing games and exchange non sequiturs with one another. In the end, the commonalities fall away somewhat, as Rosencrantz and Guildenstern find the destiny that has been written for them, and Vladimir and Estragon seem to drift into another cycle of repeating the same day they have just gone through, the same waiting for a Godot who remains elusive and distant.

What seems to be an eternity of time stretches out in front of the pairs, in which they discover ways to pass the time—banter that is performed often at cross purposes, games, jokes, and inquiries of each other about what to do next. The lack of specific goals or direction makes the monotony of living a deadly thing for each pair, and the playwright in each case presents it at such length that the audience is bound to share the desperate feeling of boredom. There is a line in Beckett’s play *Endgame* in which a character, Hamm, says, “I dream of the life to come,” whereupon his other, Clov, sighs, “Mine was always that.” At the heart of things, the desire to discover life with a purpose and direction, and perhaps a goal, is the quest for all the characters mentioned here.

Despite the similarities between *Waiting for Godot* and





Actors Patrick Stewart (left) and Ian McKellen (right) perform as the characters Vladimir and Estragon in Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*.

*Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, one has to concede that there are great differences in the respective predicaments of Didi and Gogo and Ros and Guil. The former pair are vagabonds or tramps, disconnected from society and stranded in some version of a wasteland, whose only flora is a leafless (until the second act) tree. The latter are a pair of well-dressed gentlemen with hats, cloaks, sticks, and other accessories, like leather bags. Their world, though, also seems barren, at least until it is populated with characters from Shakespeare.

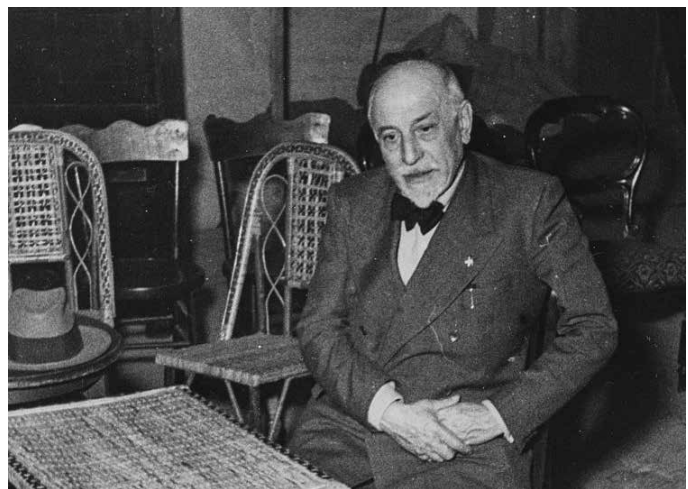
The title of Beckett's play underscores a central distinction between the two sets. While there is no consensus on who Godot is, he might be seen as a kind of hope—for substance, significance, meaning, or purpose. Although Beckett has famously said of Godot, "If I meant God I would have called him God," the traits embodied in Godot are some traits that many people find in their personal God. In any case, if Godot exists, he does not seem to exist for Didi and Gogo, despite their dedication to awaiting his arrival. Still, the hope of his arrival is enough to prevent them from moving on, from leaving the space where they are, the space of waiting.

In the beginning of *Rosencrantz*, Ros and Guil seem much like Didi and Gogo in the beginning of *Godot* because Ros and Guil are also waiting—waiting to "go on" as characters in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. Their existence is absurd, for they lack a pre-history, and they do not have enough knowledge about themselves and who they are to know why they have been summoned by the messenger, or what they are supposed to do with reference to Hamlet. Even when they do admit to a friendship with Hamlet, it is only because they have been told by others (the king and queen) that they are special friends, not because of any

cherished memory that they have of Hamlet. They are as Shakespeare has invented them, "enough to swell a scene or two," in T. S. Eliot's words. They are perhaps less "glad to be of use" than Eliot might claim, but they are nevertheless put to use.

Unlike Beckett's characters, Ros and Guil discover their purpose, or at least their fate by the end of Stoppard's play. It is contained in the line from Shakespeare that forms the title of Stoppard's play, and their death is inevitable, irrevocable, fated, and written. To say "death" in this context is a complex thing; Ros and Guil are characters, after all, and the frequent discussions of "staged" deaths versus "real" deaths in the play—as well as Guil's softening of what death might mean (philosophically) when they imagine their complicity in the death of Hamlet—makes the characters' trepidation in the face of death seem as absurd as anything else. In both Shakespeare and Stoppard, the deaths of Ros and Guil occur offstage—an example of *sparagmos*, a term from Greek theater that refers to violence which occurs offstage.

Most critical readings of *Rosencrantz* against *Godot* that are negative assert that Stoppard merely imitates the master, creating a secondhand, second-rate pair of characters in a similar plight to Beckett's characters. More positive critics do not deny the similarities, but also insist on the primary differences between the two texts. Stoppard chooses a path of drama that will probe the complex uncertainties and abnormalities of human experience, using a vision of unnatural phenomena to preside over the lives of his characters. What cannot be disputed is that Stoppard is indeed indebted to Beckett and part of a wave of innovators who emerged in and from the sixties.



The Italian playwright Luigi Pirandello was an early pioneer of what is now referred to as "metafiction."



## STOPPARD AND PIRANDELLO

One of the earliest pioneers of what we now call [metafiction](#) was Luigi Pirandello, an Italian playwright. Winner of the Nobel Prize for literature in 1934, Pirandello wrote seventeen major dramatic works, fourteen novels, a collection of short stories, and seven volumes of poetry. He continues to be most well-known (at least outside of Italy) for his plays, and his most well-known play is *Six Characters in Search of an Author*, followed by *Henry IV* (*Enrico IV*), a play that Tom Stoppard “adapted” for the stage in 2004.

### PIRANDELLO’S ENRICO IV

A brief synopsis of *Enrico IV* (Pirandello’s untranslated title) gives us insight into Pirandello’s interest in performance and life. In this play, an Italian aristocrat is celebrating carnival in the costume of the English King Henry IV. He falls off his horse and is injured, and when he comes to consciousness, he believes that he is Henry IV. His family and friends—some fearing for his health and some seeing a means of profit—nurture this belief. They go so far as to redecorate his Italian villa in a style that would be familiar to the fourteenth-century king, and they play-act roles that would have suited Henry’s court. This goes on for some twenty years—a real home, set as a stage, with real people playing roles to fit this theater.

A twist that the audience discovers is that Henry’s madness lasted only a year or two; for the last decade and more, he has been fully aware that he is not truly Henry IV, but he has nevertheless preferred to live in the simulated world that has been set up for him instead of the early twentieth century. On the day in which Pirandello’s play is set, the family and friends discover this deception and react angrily against the Italian aristocrat, who returns their anger, killing one of his friends. Then, he resumes his life as an Italian aristocrat.

We’ll note just a couple correspondences in *Hamlet* and *Rosencrantz*. In *Hamlet*, Hamlet spends much of the time of the play feigning his own madness and going to great lengths to keep this disguise, even when it results directly in the death of Polonius, with whom Hamlet has no quarrel, and indirectly in the death of Ophelia, to whom Hamlet, under different circumstances, might have been wed. In Stoppard, the only way that Ros and Guil are able to imagine events beyond their control is to play-act the roles of others. They take on Hamlet’s persona in the rehearsal of their interrogation and later act as the king of England (Henry IV? King Lear?) in order to imagine what it might be



Writer Luigi Pirandello at work.

like to arrive in England with a letter. In all these examples, there is an intricate weave of theater and life.

In an essay on modern drama, the scholar Richard Gilman voices the kind of questions that motivate both Pirandello and Stoppard:

*What is the relationship between the uses of the verb “act” to denote the straightforward movements within the order of nature and sham movements, pretenses, within the order of artifice? Finally, what are the relationships between reality and truth, human characters and the characters of a fiction, imagination and actuality?<sup>28</sup>*

### PIRANDELLO’S SIX CHARACTERS IN SEARCH OF AN AUTHOR

Questions about how real a performance might be and how much reality is in the life of a character also arise in Pirandello’s *Six Characters in Search of an Author*. In this radically meta-theatrical play, a group of actors is rehearsing a play by none other than Pirandello. As they complain about how awful, abstract, and unplayable the piece is, a strange family arrives on the scene: Father, Mother, Daughter, Stepson, boy, and girl. They are made to look distinct from the actors on the set through makeup, monochromatic clothing, and even masks. The Father, as spokesman, explains that the group had been created as characters in a novel, but the work was abandoned by its author, and he beseeches the theater director to allow them to perform their drama. The Director, citing the professionalism of his troupe against the characters’ inexperience in theater, tries to dismiss them, but gradually he becomes more and more intrigued.

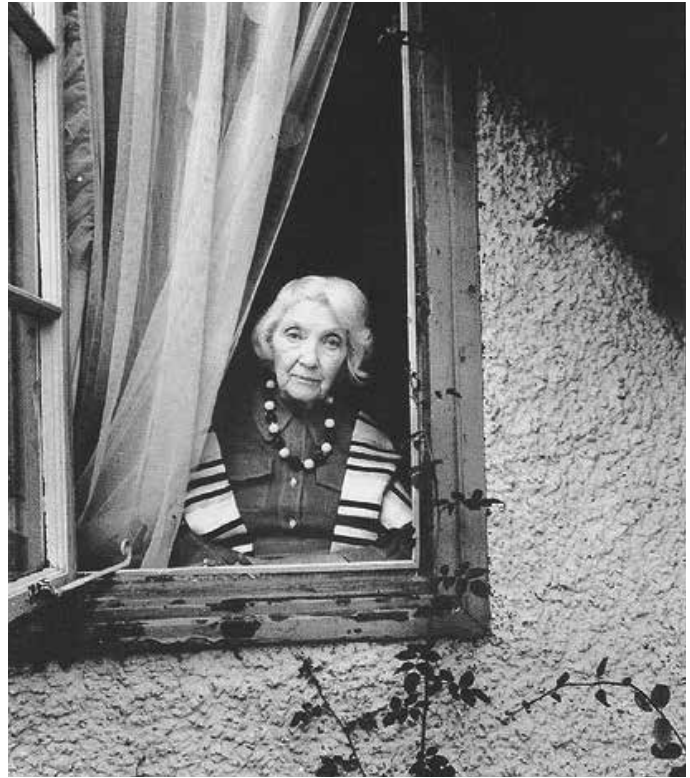
Their story is a kind of classic melodrama, with a broken



family, the mother creating a new family, and the father visiting his young daughter at her school, courting her with gifts. The father leaves town, the mother's new husband dies, and the mother is reduced to do sewing for a woman who runs a brothel in the back of a dress shop. The daughter is soon forced into work for the brothel owner. The father, returning from a long period away, visits the brothel as a customer. In the story that the characters are obsessed with performing, Pirandello has constructed a version of the standard plot of this "well-made play," deliberately heightening the melodramatic excess.

Pirandello's main concern is the relationships between artifice and truth, performance and reality. Who is more real—the character who is written, fixed forever in an inevitable fate, or the actor who in a transitory way embodies this character's fate? In one of the Father's more impassioned arguments to the Director, the Father echoes what Rosencrantz and Guildenstern might have said, at least in their roles as created by Shakespeare. The actors, who leave the theater and go out into the world, have a flexible reality. This contrasts with the reality of the characters; the Father says, "Ours doesn't change, it can't change, it can never be different, never, because it is already determined, like this, forever, that's what's so terrible! We are an eternal reality."<sup>29</sup> This unchanging reality is something that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern come to know through the Player and the march of events until the terrible, scripted destiny of their deaths finally hits home. The deaths that do ensue in Pirandello's *Six Characters*—of the young girl at the hands of the young boy (who has inexplicably produced a gun) and the young boy in a fountain—cause shock and horror in the actors, now bystanders, who debate among themselves whether what happened was real or some kind of trick.

Like the six characters in Pirandello, Stoppard's Rosencrantz and Guildenstern have been created by an author and set in motion. What is unusual about their predicament is that they have been created in such a skeletal manner that little is known, even by the characters themselves, of who they are, where they have come from, and what they are intended to do. They take on faith the material that other more substantial characters give to them about who they are and their "direction." As Pirandello's characters are desperate to be "played"—to be realized as the beings created by their first author—Stoppard's characters are desperate to have some control of how they are to perform, to act differently than they have been scripted to act, and to find a different fate than that which has been scripted for them. In both cases, the terrible immutability of their fate is



The writer Jean Rhys's 1966 novel *Wide Sargasso Sea* re-envisioned a minor character from a previous work of literature.

one of the powerful forces of their respective drama.

## JEAN RHY'S WIDE SARGASSO SEA

Tom Stoppard was by no means the first writer to take a work of literature as the point of departure for another literary work—even Shakespeare's *Hamlet* has an antecedent in Thomas Kydd's *The Spanish Tragedy*. What does seem different and unique to Stoppard is the way that Stoppard expands on two of Shakespeare's minor characters while otherwise being faithful to the text from which they emerge. To clearly see the difference, let's compare Rosencrantz to another sixties text, Jean Rhys's novel *Wide Sargasso Sea*. *Wide Sargasso Sea* is a novel that re-envisioned a character from literature and was published in 1966, the same year as the initial performance of Stoppard's play.

Like Stoppard's Rosencrantz, Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* takes a minor character from an established work of literature—in this case, Bertha Mason, Rochester's first wife in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*—and expands on her life in



the development of the text. *Wide Sargasso Sea* centers on the life of Antoinette Cosway, who lives on the Caribbean Island of Dominica. At the end of the novel, Cosway becomes the first wife of Edward Rochester, the primary male character in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, and she is given the name of Bertha Mason. Rhys's characterization of Antoinette can be interpreted as a reaction to the fact that Bertha Mason can be seen as simply a plot device in Brontë's novel, a kind of racial "other" who is almost seen as having no right to a full personal history.

Addressing this, Rhys gives Antoinette a family life, a status where she exists in a kind of middle ground between colonial conqueror and subject. She has a deep connection with the natural world of her tropical environment and with the mysterious (particularly to European minds) spiritual life present in the voodoo practices of some of the island's inhabitants. Taken in marriage by Rochester, whose motivation is chiefly financial, Antoinette becomes his property. Her desires and past identity are effaced. Transplanted from her known world to the sterile and barren England where Rochester lives, she eventually becomes the minor figure in *Jane Eyre* who has come to be known as "the madwoman in the attic" on Rochester's estate. The contemporary reader of *Wide Sargasso Sea* grows sympathetic to the plight of Antoinette as the victim of laws that are imposed through colonial rule and patriarchy.

If Rosencrantz and Guildenstern had been subjected to a similar treatment, they would have been given a complex backstory. What were their relationships to Hamlet in the school in which they are said to have been close companions to Hamlet? Are they embroiled in their own family dramas, with perfidious uncles and faithless mothers? Do they have Ophelias of their own? Do they have opinions and likes and dislikes, or feelings about Hamlet that don't appear in Shakespeare (or Stoppard)?

While both Stoppard and Rhys focus on minor characters from prior works, Stoppard's treatment of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern differs notably from Rhys's handling of Antoinette. Stoppard does not invent a life for Rosencrantz and Guildenstern before they appear in *Hamlet* and does not present a dramatization of what two courtiers of that age might do when they are not summoned to court. Rather, their roles as minor characters are given scrutiny. They are rendered as central figures in *Rosencrantz*, but Stoppard never lets us forget that they are secondary, that their creator, William Shakespeare, denied them multidimensionality. They are born into a world in which the events are the domain of others, and existence carries with it no substance except

what was written for them. While it may seem strange that characters so bereft of personal history have extended conversations with the Player that are not in the text of *Hamlet*, it is less surprising if one considers the subject matter of the conversations—the nature of reality and performance as it relates to the dramatic stage.

## ACT ONE READING GUIDE: IN PLACE WITH NO VISIBLE CHARACTER

### ACT ONE: SHORT SUMMARY

In Act One of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, our heroes, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, flip a coin to heads so many times in a row that it scares them. They do not know how they came to be where they are, as they can only remember back to a certain summons to the court. A troupe of traveling dramatists arrive on the scene, and their manager, the Player, tries to lure Rosencrantz and Guildenstern into paying for a "performance." The Tragedians leave, and a scene from *Hamlet* commences in which Rosencrantz and Guildenstern alter their speech patterns and are enlisted to help the king discover what Hamlet is up to. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are bewildered at this turn of events. They play a game of "questions" to practice their entrapment of Hamlet though there is not much hope that they will be effective. Hamlet arrives again and greets his old friends, and the curtain falls on Act One.

### ACT ONE: DETAILED REVIEW

The audience of *Rosencrantz* first meets Rosencrantz and Guildenstern as they are engaged in a game of coin flipping. This is a seemingly tedious form of entertainment, good only to pass some time. Even the remarkable aspect of this particular game—that the coin comes up heads with each flip—does little to relieve the tedium. It may be that the playwright, or the director of the play, desires to reproduce this feeling of boredom in the play's audience members.

The reactions of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are what give them specificity and distinguish them from one another, and their reactions also indicate their perceptions of their world. Guild, as he is named in the text, is full of speculation about the phenomenon of the coin repeatedly landing on heads, and he makes two observations. First, he says, "A weaker man might be moved to examine his faith."<sup>30</sup> The reader may be inclined to view this "faith" as faith in the divine. However, he continues, "if in nothing else at least in





The audience of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern* first meets Rosencrantz and Guildenstern as they are engaged in a game of coin flipping.

the laws of probability.” Thus, the reader soon sees that Guil is more concerned with science than with theology. He goes on to examine laws of probability, saying that this law “is something to do with the proposition that if six monkeys (he has surprised himself) . . . if six monkeys were . . .”<sup>31</sup> Here the reader is expected to remember the popular “infinite monkey theorem” that posits that if a monkey were sitting at a typewriter for an infinite period of time, he would eventually type the works of William Shakespeare. The reader might “get” this joke about Shakespeare and his genius, and maybe the inevitability of *Hamlet*, but Guil goes in a different direction with the monkeys, using them theoretically as coins to be flipped and to come up heads or tails.

While Guil is afflicted with a portentous foreboding about the unlikely outcome that heads has come up over a hundred times in a row, Ros is matter-of-fact, noting merely that it must be a new record. When Guil asks him if it makes him fearful, Ros admits that he is afraid—“I’m afraid it isn’t your day”<sup>32</sup>—to Guil, who loses a coin with every heads-up toss. Led to further attempts at logical explanation, Guil posits such things as, “I am the essence of a man spinning double-headed coins, and betting against himself in private atonement for an unremembered past.”<sup>33</sup> His philosophical inquiries go beyond the comprehension of Ros, who continues to flip the coin and placidly accept the unlikely series of heads.

Perhaps cued by the “unremembered past” comment, Guil is inspired to examine, and have Ros examine, their memory of the past. It is the first time the “messenger” is mentioned in the text. The messenger appears to be the first thing they remember, which makes sense, in an absurd way, if the characters were created only to perform limited service in a

play by Shakespeare.

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern have an exchange that is reminiscent of the directionless exchanges between Beckett’s own pair, Didi and Gogo, until Ros asks, “What do you want to do?” and Guil responds, “I have no desires. None.”<sup>34</sup> This might be experienced by a theater audience as a kind of throwaway line. In print, though, the reader can see this as rather monumental. Guil insists that he is a being with no desires. It is yet another signal that Ros and Guil are not humans but rather characters, whose uses, lives, and experiences are strictly limited.

Guil uses the moment to think more deeply about the unlikely of the by-now ninety-six consecutive coin tosses that have come up heads. He concludes that they are now in a world ruled by “un-, or sub-, or supernatural forces.”<sup>35</sup> He posits a transition to this kind of world by speculating that he and Ros had a long history of spinning coins, during which tails occurred as often as did heads. It seems a spurious and indistinct memory: “we have been spinning coins together since I don’t know when.”<sup>36</sup> But the upshot is that Guil concludes that it was the aforementioned summons from the messenger that changed everything and began the process of the series of “heads.”

The quality of communication between the pair is shown by the response of Ros to the impassioned speech of Guil. Ros’ response is a kind of non sequitur, as he notes, “Another curious scientific phenomenon is the fact that the fingernails grow after death, as does the beard.”<sup>37</sup> The sudden turn of logic here understandably confuses Guil, and what follows is a kind of ridiculous Abbot and Costello “[Who’s on First](#)” routine.

Still, as apparently frivolous as the play has been so far, one feels that there is more at work in Stoppard beneath the surface dialogue. At the end of his speculations on nail and beard growth, Ros observes, “I never, to the best of my knowledge, cut my toenails. They ought to be curled under my feet by now, but it doesn’t happen.”<sup>38</sup> What seems to be at work here is the un- or sub- or supernatural suspension of the real that may in fact be true for a stage character—for whom it might also be impossible to remember shaving, buying new shoes, or going to the bathroom, since these things don’t happen on the stage.

The audience is reminded once again of the pair’s first memory, the summons by the messenger. Ros, in fact, adds some dramatic flair to the memory, adding a sense of urgency and a caution that speed is essential so that they not be too late. When Guil asks Ros what they might





David Haig portrays the Player in a 2017 production of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*. In addition to *Ros and Guil*, the Player is the most significant character in Stoppard's work.

Photograph Tristram Kenton for the Observer.

be late for, Ros responds that he doesn't know, since they have not yet arrived. We remember that in *Hamlet* the two old friends of the hero have been summoned to Court in Elsinore to feel out Hamlet and discover if his madman act has to do with a desire for revenge. Much later in the first act of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* the same memory is summoned, but this time with a kind of literary embellishment. By this time, the characters are fully embroiled in the events of *Hamlet* and are mightily confused about why and about what they are doing there. Trying to establish certainty, Guil returns to this origin:

*A man standing in his saddle in the half-lit half alive dawn banged on the shutters and called two names. He was just a hat and a cloak levitating in the grey plume of his own breath, but when he called we came. That much is certain—we came.*<sup>39</sup>

The reiteration, embellishment, and stylization of this, their first memory, becomes for Ros and Guil a kind of solid ground to cling to when they are drowning in the

inconsequential nature of their existence. Wondering at their lack of direction, the pair meander through their dialogue until Ros believes that he hears music. After Guil produces a lengthy hypothetical story about an illusory unicorn, who turns out to be a horse with an arrow in his head, the tragedians appear. At just the time when the title characters are at an impasse in their attempts to discover their purpose, this traveling troupe appears and allows the play to feature a lengthy dissertation about theatrical reality.

In addition to Ros and Guil, the most significant character in Stoppard's work is the Player. The Player is the manager or producer of the troupe, and he is the driving force in their continued survival as working actors (and perhaps also a reason they are doing so poorly at it). Some readers will see the Player as a mouthpiece for Shakespeare, who is frequently meta-theatrical within his plays. Some will see him as a representation of Stoppard in his cynical and critical view of conventional theater. More commonly, he is taken to represent some of the sentiments of the Father in Pirandello's *Six Characters*, or the Producer in the same





David Haig as the Player with the Tragedians in a 2017 production of *Rosencrantz*.

play. Most likely the Player is an amalgamation of these roles; he is a character and a “type” used by Stoppard in his comedy of ideas to transmit some notions about drama, theater, representation, tragedy, and reality. The Player does exist in *Hamlet*, of course, as the director of the traveling actors who conspires with Hamlet to produce *The Mousetrap* to “catch the conscience of the king.”

The overall impression one gets from the Player is that of a rather smarmy and opportunistic showman, perhaps even a con artist. At the same time—and this is the joke, in *Rosencrantz*—he is the consummate tragedian, with a fully developed theoretical position on the life (if you could call it that) of the actor. He sees Ros and Guil first and foremost as potential paying customers. During the Player’s first encounter with Ros and Guil, he spends most of his time trying to find out exactly what appeals to them in order to make them part with some of their money.

The introduction the Player gives of his troupe is revealing and extends some concerns already introduced in the situation of Ros and Guil. About the Tragedians, the Player says, “we grow rusty and you catch us at the very point of decadence.”<sup>40</sup> The audience, of course, is struck with the two senses of the word “decadence.” The art in which they are trained may be subject to decay from misuse. Applied to human behavior, the term denotes hedonism, self-indulgence, and sexual promiscuity. Following this admission, the Player connects to Ros and Guil’s own difficulties with memory when he says, “by this time tomorrow we might have forgotten everything we ever knew.”<sup>41</sup> The statement mirrors Ros and Guil’s own lack of memory (aside from their memory of the messenger). The reader will also notice that Rosencrantz’s introductions

begin a repeated series in which the distinct identity of the title pair are confused—Ros even introduces himself as Guildenstern.

In his effort to induce Ros and Guil to part with some money, the Player appeals to their baser instincts, detailing the kinds of plays his troupe can perform that involve sexual misadventures (“we can do you rapiers or rape or both, by all means, faithless wives and ravished virgins—*flagrante delicto* at a price, but that comes under realism for which there are special terms”<sup>42</sup>). It appears that through these kinds of appeals, Stoppard is commenting on the debased reputation of the theater at the time of Shakespeare. He may even be cunningly commenting on the frequently ribald content of Shakespeare’s plays. In several of his suggestions, the Player seems to offer the youthful actor Alfred to Ros and Guil as a potential sexual partner. This is a reminder to the contemporary audience that theater in Shakespeare’s own time forbade women to be actors (a woman who would act as someone else in public was equated to a prostitute). At the suggestion that the pair use Alfred for their pleasure, Ros and Guil’s reaction is to be more and more demonstrably offended, showing that although they are characters in an absurd world, the pair are nevertheless imbued with a sense of propriety.

As the Player goes so far as to prompt Alfred to “get your skirt on,” Guil responds by striking him in the face, and then laments:

(shaking with rage and fright): *It could have been—it didn’t have to be obscene. . . . It could have been—a bird out of season, dropping bright feathered on my shoulder. . . . It could have been a tongueless dwarf standing by the road to point the way. . . . I was prepared. But it’s this, is it? No enigma, no dignity, nothing classical, portentous, only this—a comic pornographer and a rabble of prostitutes.*<sup>43</sup>

While it is easy to sympathize with Guil’s complaint, it takes a bit more speculation to understand the alternatives that he proposes. It may be the mystical content of the “bright-feathered” bird that he desires. And, perhaps the appeal of the dwarf is both the unlikelihood of the encounter as well as the wordless mime of direction provided by this imaginary interloper. It may be simply that Guil attempts to summon the unexpected and unlikely in order to shake up predictability a bit.

Most of the exchange between the Player and the protagonists seems like banter, like something out of a





vaudeville skit. Review, for instance, the back and forth between Guil and the Player on the topics of chance and fate, followed by Guil's offer to use his influence (which the Player assumes is at the Tavern, rather than at the Court).

Is it for continuity, or to test fate, that Guil proposes some gambling, centered around a new round of coin spinning? As before, heads keeps coming up until Guil proposes a new kind of wager, one where there is no chance of losing. He bets whether his birth year, doubled, is an even number. It is a more certain outcome than even the coin coming up heads, but the Player takes the bet and loses. The Player then confesses he has no money and again offers Alfred to them as a form of compensation. Guil asks that they instead perform a play. When there is uncertainty as to what Guil means, he mentions Greek drama. The Player replies that his troupe is "more of the blood, love and rhetoric school,"<sup>44</sup> saying that they are able to do plays with any combination of any two of those elements, as long as one is blood—"blood is compulsory."

As the performance commences, Guil asks the Player when he is going to change into his costume and how he is going to come onto the stage. The Player responds that he is always in costume and always on stage. Here Stoppard employs a meta-theatrical commentary that affirms the "all the world's a stage" premise and also has echoes of Pirandello's *Six Characters*, where the family led by The Father are characters staging their drama.

The departure of the Tragedians is a little confusing, as it seems to be the beginning of a performance, but it corresponds to the entrance of the "real" characters, as it were, from Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, thrusting the "real" Rosencrantz and Guildenstern onto the stage and into the action. It is interesting to note that immediately preceding their emergence into *Hamlet*, there is a coin flip that comes up "tails," perhaps signaling the release of the characters from the "unnatural" world.

The initial scene of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern simultaneously playing in *Hamlet* and in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* has already been discussed in the section on the origin of the pair in Shakespeare. You may revisit that discussion to help recall their alarmed reaction to finding themselves in their roles, their transformed language, and the comic turn that accompanies the continued confusion as to who is Ros and who is Guil.

We will take up the commentary when the pair find themselves marooned again onstage (which is off-stage, as far as *Hamlet* is concerned). Another rehearsal of their

first memory—the messenger in the half-lit dawn—brings Ros and Guil once again to the question of what they are doing there. Ros probably speaks for the both of them when he says, "Well, I can tell you that I am sick to death of it."<sup>45</sup> Despite the notion that they are, on the whole, directionless, Guil wants to remind Ros that they have a comparatively narrow range of operation. He tells him, "we might have been left to sift the whole field of human nomenclature, like two blind men looting a bazaar for their own portraits."<sup>46</sup> Ros frets not only about his feeling stranded in no-man's land, but also about judgement from others on the way he has come off in public. He claims that Guil made him look ridiculous on the stage and declares a passionate desire for "a little consistency." Guil's response to this is both an echo of Beckett, in the way scripture or prayer are deformed in the character's speech, and also a commentary on how this "consistency" may be a kind of performed identity. "Give us this day our daily mask,"<sup>47</sup> he intones. Just a little later, he repeats this formula from "[The Lord's Prayer](#)," this time saying, "Give us this day our daily week."<sup>48</sup>

Ros' uncertainty about "direction" is both spatial and temporal. Guil is trying not to lose his composure in this tenuous situation as a character, advising Ros, "Keep an eye open, an ear cocked. Tread warily, follow instructions,"<sup>49</sup> to which Ros replies, "For how long."<sup>50</sup> Guil's response, beginning with "Till events have played themselves out,"<sup>51</sup> seems like it comes from a primer on the subject of theater. Moreover, as part of a plot that is already "written," Guil offers the comfort that their fates have been decided, allowing them, like children, to simply be led by the hand. There does seem to be some comfort taken in this since the two spend some time reviewing the mission to which they have been assigned by Claudius, reiterating the imperatives that they "draw him on to pleasures" (referring to Hamlet), "glean what afflicts him," and "receive such thanks as fits a king's remembrance."<sup>52</sup> The issue of "remembrance" leads them to question the nature of the word, until the two admit that they are playing with "Words, words. They are all we have to go on."<sup>53</sup> This very declaration may point to the insubstantiality of words themselves, which, as has been established, was one of the primary concerns of postmodern writers.

Speculating that to "glean what afflicts" Hamlet will require a successful interrogation, a series of effective questions, Ros and Guil resolve, for practice in the discipline, to play a game of questions. What commences is a rapid-fire linguistic game in which points are deducted for things that are not questions—statements, rhetoric, repetition, grunts, synonyms, and so on. This must be a bewildering scene



to see in the theater, as it is difficult enough to follow in print, even though the reader can take it in at his or her own pace. Echoes of Beckett arise again with a “play” on the sacred, as when Ros asks, “Is there a choice?” to which Guil responds “Is there a God?” and Ros follows by claiming “Foul—no *non sequiturs*.”<sup>54</sup> That this question of all questions is dismissed as a non sequitur is a pointed joke. The game of questions goes on for several pages, by turns ridiculous and meaningless, until the pair come to what are for them some very serious questions.

At one point, Guil violently seizes Ros and explodes in fury “WHO DO YOU THINK YOU ARE?”<sup>55</sup> (all-caps in Stoppard). For two characters who are lost on a stage, where they are born with no past or relationships to speak of, this is the central question. Another question that the pair seems to find even more important is: “When’s it going to end?”<sup>56</sup> The audience, having likely read or seen *Hamlet*, has a very good idea of the answer to this last question, which perhaps gives the audience an idea of why the two characters are so moved by it.

More questions follow, and it is established that Ros himself can be uncertain about his own identity, as he answers to both his own and Guildenstern’s name. They decide to practice for the interrogation of Hamlet by having Ros question Guil, who will play the part of Hamlet. Ros, who is literal-minded and perhaps incapable of artifice, keeps forgetting what his part in the interrogation is supposed to be. Nonetheless, the two eventually come to a useful understanding of at least the plot of *Hamlet*, which is found in a short paragraph on page forty-six, which could be very useful to many first-time readers of Shakespeare’s masterpiece.

At last, the moment of truth arrives, as the pair meet up with Hamlet and get ready for their interrogation. At their meeting, the running joke about the interchangeability of Ros and Guil’s identities continues, as Hamlet greets Rosencrantz by the name of his friend, Guildenstern.

## ACT TWO: PLAYING AT DEATH

### ACT TWO: SHORT SUMMARY

In Act Two, our heroes confront Hamlet, getting virtually nowhere—they make the discovery that Hamlet knows a hawk from a handsaw, but only when the wind is southerly. Ros and Guil again meet up with the Player, who bemoans his lack of audience and praises his troupe’s ability to feign dying. Ros and Guil witness a dress rehearsal and realize that they are already written as being destined for death.

Ros and Guil try to escape the stage. They seem destined for England and do in fact walk off stage. Four or five scenes from *Hamlet* appear in Act Two.

### ACT TWO: DETAILED REVIEW

Even though Act One has ended and Act Two has begun, there is no change of venue or dramatic shift in time. The previous scene continues, with the discussion between Hamlet and Ros and Guil, although the careful reader will know that much of the scene (about 130 lines) as written by Shakespeare has been omitted. One would have to suppose that the most seasoned of the theater attendees at Stoppard’s play would have a pretty thorough understanding of what happens in *Hamlet*, Shakespeare’s most heralded play.

One thing that is quite evident from this scene is that while Stoppard’s play has been funny and somewhat bawdy so far, Shakespeare’s work, too, has both of these qualities. In asking Ros and Guil how fortune has favored them—whether it is all good (the button on the cap of fortune) or very bad (the soles of her feet)—the response Hamlet receives is that it is at neither extreme. He decides that they live about her middle, in the area of her privates. Hamlet concludes, concerning fortune, that “O, most true, she is a strumpet.”<sup>57</sup>

One thing that happens as one grows in knowledge of Shakespeare and theater and language is that one notices just how many lines from Shakespeare’s works have inserted themselves into common parlance, at least in the language of metaphor and in the words of other writers. Several lines from Shakespeare that are often quoted appear in this section of Stoppard’s *Rosencrantz*. For instance, in trying to assure Ros and Guil that Denmark is a prison, Hamlet asserts that, “there is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so.”<sup>58</sup> This quip might be used to exemplify the slippery aspects of language embraced by philosophers and literary critics in the 1960s. At another point, when Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are trying to convince Hamlet that his unhappiness is due to his having high ambitions, Hamlet counters that it is not so, claiming, “I could be bounded in a nutshell, and count myself a king of infinite space—were it not that I have bad dreams.”<sup>59</sup> This phrase is particular to *Hamlet*, but it is one that is often quoted elsewhere.

What is most to the point, as far as Stoppard’s Ros and Guil are concerned, is that Hamlet catches them in a deception, as they refuse to say that they were sent for by the king to see what is making his nephew Hamlet act so strangely. Hamlet finally gives them leave to stop lying, confessing



that he has not been quite himself of late, finding no joy in the luxurious world at his disposal. In another oft-quoted passage from *Hamlet*, Shakespeare offers the following assessment of the natural world and Hamlet's unnatural assessment of it:

*What a piece of work is a man, and how noble in reason, how infinite in faculties, in form and moving, how express and admirable in action, how like an angel in apprehension, how like a god! the beauty of the world, the paragon of animals; and yet to me what is this quintessence of dust? Man delights not me—nor woman neither. . .*<sup>60</sup>

It is a stark confession of unhappiness, and it reveals much about the Rosencrantz and Guildenstern of both Shakespeare and Stoppard that the characters do not delve into the reasons for Hamlet's unhappiness, but instead try to distract him with news of the arrival of the tragedians.

In Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, Rosencrantz and Hamlet have a conversation about the tragedians that Stoppard does not include in *Rosencrantz*. They talk about the state of theater in England in Shakespeare's time by using the traveling troupe in Denmark as an example. The conversation reveals that putting on plays is far from lucrative and that there is even a degree of political peril for some of the men of the theater. Still, Hamlet is confident that the players will appeal to the king and his vanity, and so he begins to hatch his plot. It is with Hamlet's welcome of the tragedians that *Rosencrantz* rejoins the action of *Hamlet*, if for a short time.

The line that Stoppard fixes on is Hamlet's claim that, "I am but mad north-north west. When the wind is southerly I know a hawk from a hand saw"<sup>61</sup>—which is meant to assure Rosencrantz and Guildenstern that the king is wrong (or deceived) about Hamlet having lost his mind. It is a strange figure of speech that is in keeping with Hamlet's show of madness. Both of the things Hamlet cites are names used for cutting tools, but it could be that both are meant to be birds, and handsaw is a play on a name for a heron, "hernshaw."<sup>62</sup> With this enigmatic confession and a mocking of Polonius, who has come on stage to tell Hamlet what he already knows, the Tragedians arrive, and the confluence of Shakespeare and Stoppard ends. Stoppard's Ros and Guil are left to assess what has just happened and their progress in doing the king's bidding and getting their friend to reveal what ails him.

Ros not only seems to have the more negative assessment of how the two fared in their real "game of questions," but



*John Stride as Rosencrantz and Edward Petherbridge as Guildenstern in a 1967 performance of Stoppard's *Rosencrantz*.*

*Photograph by Anthony Crickmay*

also puts the blame squarely on Guil, who seems to want to defend himself and their performance. "Twenty-seven questions he got out in ten minutes, and answered three,"<sup>63</sup> assesses Ros, seeming to work with the scoring system the pair use for their game. "I was waiting for you to delve,"<sup>64</sup> he says to Guil, and then, quoting his own thoughts, "'When is he going to start delving,' I asked myself."<sup>65</sup> Moreover, in a wonderfully succinct summation of how Hamlet proceeds, or seems to proceed, once he adopts the counterfeit of madness, Ros claims that, "Half of what he said meant something else, and the other half didn't mean anything at all."<sup>66</sup>

Most of what the pair have to go on, they surmise, is the "illuminating claim to tell a hawk from a handsaw," "when the wind is southerly."<sup>67</sup> It is a prompt for them to try to assess the way the wind is blowing, but their attempts to orient themselves on stage are fraught with false starts. We are reminded of Guil's statement earlier—when the pair are caught up in the unnatural aspects of the consecutive "heads" and they feel ill-at-ease—that, "We are entitled to some direction." It is a comment on the human condition—that they are without an essential locus of meaning. It is also a commentary on theater, whose orientation is different from that of the real world (where downstage might be equated to "north," upstage to "south," etc.). Their futile quest is played to great comic effect, culminating in a suggestion that rather than lick a finger to better feel the



breeze's direction, Ros lick his toe. Unable to do so, Ros suggests that Guil lick it for him, and after Guil refuses, Ros offers to lick Guil's toe instead. Despair ensues.

Guil, the intellectual, speculates on the extent to which they are at the mercy of others—those who move the events (in the play) along. He makes a comparison to the Chinese philosopher who dreams he is a butterfly, awakening to wonder whether he might be the product of the dream of a butterfly. Then, to show the ways in which the pair don't really listen to each other, Ros takes an entirely different tack, bellowing "Fire" into the audience—in order, he claims, to "demonstrate the misuse of free speech. To prove that it exists."<sup>68</sup> One possibility here is that he wants to assert that if free speech exists, the pair aren't as trapped in events as they suppose they are. A second purpose arises when the fourth wall drops, and Ros regards the audience contemptuously, examining their lack of response to the "Fire" alarm: "Not a move. They should burn to death in their shoes,"<sup>69</sup> he concludes.

One task the critic has at these moments is to decide whether these kinds of seemingly disconnected events are integrated with the larger concerns of the play, or if they are simply interludes with which Stoppard wants to amuse his audience in between queries about selfhood, identity, and performed and imagined realities. Whatever the verdict, it is at this point that Stoppard returns to the repeated motif of gambling over coins. Here Ros plays at holding out two hands in order for Guil to guess which hand conceals the coin. Guil tricks his friend into showing that both hands are empty, and absurdly Ros seems to have lost track of where the coin is.

Just then, the gears of *Hamlet* begin to turn, with a small snippet of Shakespeare in which Hamlet entreats the Player to play the scenes that will entrap his uncle, the king, into revealing his complicity in the murder of Hamlet's father, King Hamlet. It is a brief interlude, after which the title characters are left with the Player onstage. When they admonish the Player to mind his tongue or, "we'll have it out and throw the rest of you away, like a nightingale at a Roman feast,"<sup>70</sup> the presence of the player seems to be forgotten, as the pair begin a back-and-forth of insults about their relative inability to summon meaningful language. Guil says, "You'd be *lost* for words...Like a mute in a monologue...Your lines will be cut."<sup>71</sup> This is, in part, a reference to how their speech, as characters, is dependent on the number of lines they have been given by the playwright.

This game of insults seems a bit like the game of questions they played earlier. When it has run its course, it is the Player who has a very specific complaint about Ros

and Guil—that they vanished earlier, at just the moment they were beginning their drama. More specifically, the complaint is that the actors were "tricked out of the single assumption that makes [our] existence viable—that someone is *watching*."<sup>72</sup> Like the proverbial question of whether a tree falling in a forest makes a sound, the actors feel that if they performed their drama to an empty house, they would fail to truly exist. Recall our earlier discussion of Pirandello's "characters" and their desire to act out the scene of their aborted existence. Also, note that part of the existential crisis is to always be subject to "the gaze of the other"—to exist as a recognized subject.

Trying to impress on Ros and Guil how having no audience makes him feel, the Player shows the obverse—how it would feel to Ros and Guil to have an audience at their most secret deeds when they expect privacy. The Player continues to lament, giving a synopsis of the complete play that they had performed to no audience. His vivid description is met with (perhaps ironic) appreciation from Guil, who describes it as "brilliantly re-created."<sup>73</sup> Guil shows himself to be a scripted character with limited faculties, intimating that the play's synopsis might have made him weep, "If these eyes could weep."<sup>74</sup>

The Player and Ros and Guil discuss the kind of theater that will be welcome at the court. When the Player begins to leave the stage, Guil responds, "Nobody leaves this room!"<sup>75</sup> To which the Player responds, "Why not?"<sup>76</sup>—echoing the Player's earlier statement: "I can come and go as I please."<sup>77</sup> It turns out that the Player has some inkling of the fate of Ros and Guil, for he warns them to "concentrate on not losing your heads"<sup>78</sup> (the certainty of this occurring mirrors the certainty of "heads" coming up in the coin flips). This caution comes as no surprise to the audience, who know from Shakespeare that this is the fate of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, but it unnerves the pair of characters, who seem not to have suspected the potential for this fate. They entreat the Player for some assistance, saying, "We don't know what's going on, or what to do with ourselves. We don't know how to act"<sup>79</sup>—which is another reference to the conjunction of life and theater.

Perhaps trying to help them, the Player, through a series of questions, tries to get to the heart of why Hamlet is called mad, or whether he may simply be melancholy or morose, and a tangled back-and-forth series follows. More misunderstandings ensue, as the Player says about Hamlet, "The old man [meaning Polonius] thinks that he is in love with his daughter," with Ros taking it to mean that the old man has incestuous thoughts. Eventually, this matter gets





Daniel Radcliffe (right) and Joshua McGuire (left) rehearse their parts as Rosencrantz and Guildenstern.

Photograph by Manuel Harlan

cleared up, and the Player finally does leave the stage.

Having been introduced to the potentially incipient fact of their deaths, the pair are led to meditate upon and discuss some attitudes toward that inevitability. The less intellectually inclined Ros takes the lead, imagining himself dead in a box and then imaging himself alive in a box (a coffin) and speculating on the timespan of eternity: "Eternity is a terrible thought. I mean, where's it going to end?"<sup>80</sup> Understanding that it is the action of the play into which they have been born, they desperately attempt to forbid anyone (from the play) to come onto the stage, which is the cue for the entrance of the entire entourage of Claudius, Gertrude, Polonius, and Ophelia.

At this point, Stoppard presents the part of *Hamlet* in which Queen Gertrude asks Rosencrantz and Guildenstern about their attempts to get to the heart of her son's behavior. Aside from a passage from the beginning of the act, this section from *Hamlet* is reproduced verbatim in Stoppard,

except for two things. One is that Stoppard has inserted stage directions when Ros and Guil give a positive assessment of their interaction with Hamlet. Ros' line, in which he describes Hamlet as "Niggard of question, but of our demands most free in his reply," is prefaced with the stage direction, "(a flat lie and he knows and shows it, perhaps catching Guil's eye)."<sup>81</sup> The other alteration is that in Shakespeare it is Rosencrantz and Guildenstern who *exeunt*; in Stoppard's text, however, they are always confined to the stage space, and so it is the others who leave and not the pair. Instead, they bemoan what they take to be the too-frequent comings and goings that punctuate their time.

In short order, Hamlet enters, offstage at first. As Ros tries to take control of his situation by leaving the stage, he makes it only as far as upstage when Hamlet returns. By now, Hamlet has become a portent for them, and there seems to be a kind of fearful reaction when Ros reports to Guil that "He's



coming.”<sup>82</sup> Trying to get an answer about what Hamlet is doing, Guil asks absurd and specific questions, such as whether he is walking on his feet or whether he is naked or selling toffee apples. They are tormented by uncertainty about how they will approach Hamlet and converse with him. Hamlet, though, is busy talking with Ophelia as the couple appears and promptly leaves the stage.

Almost immediately another figure enters whom Ros and Guil take to be the queen. They discover that it is Alfred, the boy actor, in the costume of the queen. It is the dress rehearsal, and the Player confesses that the actors are out of practice but promises wonderful performances when it comes time for the deaths. Perhaps inspired by what will eventually befall Ros and Guil, the conversation in this section quite often leads to death—the Player insists that he has actors who specialize in dying and that the rest come off quite well as killers.

In a commentary on theater and language (Shakespearian language), the Player is asked the purpose for the dumbshow that precedes the play (which happens in *Hamlet*), and he responds that, “it makes the action that follows more or less comprehensible.”<sup>83</sup> The Player also gives a reason to have part of the performance solely in gestures: “we are tied down to a language which makes up in obscurity what it lacks in style.”<sup>84</sup>

The mime itself is the same as it is in *Hamlet*, telling of the death of King Hamlet by poison and the Queen’s rather hasty conquest by the murderer. It is followed in Stoppard by the entrance of Hamlet and Ophelia, with Hamlet in a state of high agitation. The renunciation of marriage that he makes in his speech to Ophelia—the speech that ends in the command “To a nunnery, go”<sup>85</sup>—is a rejection of marriage in general, based on the marriage that he has seen between his own mother and the new king, Claudius. Chronologically, it is a jumbled sequence from Shakespeare’s play because these are rehearsals of the play that Hamlet plans to use to gauge Claudius’ reaction.

At a break in the rehearsal, the Player berates the tragedians for an inadequate performance, and Guil mistakes the point where they had stopped for the ending of the play. Again, the Player reminds them that it cannot be the end because not enough people are dead on the stage. It is nearly always the case in Greek, Roman, and Shakespearian tragedy that the ending of the play is also the end of quite a few of the characters’ lives, and of course *Hamlet* lives up to such an expectation. The Player notes that there is comfort in the fact that things play out as they must because “It is written.”<sup>86</sup> He offers a new definition of tragedy: “The bad end unhappily,

the good unluckily.”<sup>87</sup> This is, perhaps, a forecast for Ros and Guil, who on the whole seem not to be bad, but who will have a most unlucky end.

The rehearsal continues, but here there is a departure from the kind of play that is performed in *Hamlet*. First a scene from *Hamlet* is mimed, in which Hamlet, thinking his treacherous uncle is hiding in a closet while Hamlet speaks to his mother, stabs the person who is hiding. The person Hamlet stabs is Polonius, the father of Ophelia. The tragedians then enact the King’s decision to send Hamlet to England in the company of two spies, an occurrence that Stoppard’s audience knows mirrors what occurs to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. The Player narrates what happens in the play: the spies arrive in England and deliver a letter to the English king. The king reads it, and immediately orders the deaths of the two messengers. In a deft move, Stoppard has the two spies remove their cloaks just prior to their execution, revealing that they are dressed identically to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern.

After asking Guil whether he is familiar with the play, the Player boasts that this one is “A slaughterhouse—eight corpses all told,”<sup>88</sup> a boast which naturally brings the conversation back to the subject of death. Guil works under the conviction that death cannot be represented onstage, while the Player disagrees. He points to an event where one of his actors was caught stealing sheep and sentenced to death, and the Player arranged for the execution to take place during their performance, for extra realism. The irony is that the real death executed on stage was less convincing than the feigned deaths the troupe had done at other times. Guil then proposes to define what death really is—“It’s a man failing to reappear, that’s all,”<sup>89</sup> he says. This statement draws our attention, again, to the fact that Guil is not a person but a fictional character. His death occurs when he leaves the stage and does not reappear before the audience.

A nicely imagined bit of stagecraft marks a transition from the two spies—dead on the stage and covered with their own cloaks through a blackout—to the two cloaked figures sprawled on the stage who emerge as Ros and Guil. Ros and Guil awaken and resume their directionless behavior, which becomes literal, as they cannot discern east from other directions. When Ros claims that the sun has risen from a certain direction, Guil points out that “it was light all the time”<sup>90</sup>—a reminder yet again that they are characters on a stage lit by stage lights, rather than humans exposed to the light of the rising sun. The audience not only sees that the real world beyond the fourth wall has no relevance to what occurs on this stage, but also is reminded that Ros and



Guil are at the mercy of the action in which they are caught up. For instance, Guil says, “As soon as we make a move they’ll come pouring in from every side, shouting obscene instructions, confusing us with ridiculous remarks, messing us around from here to breakfast and getting our names wrong.”<sup>91</sup> This is an accurate description of his and Ros’ plights as characters.

Ros and Guil are right to be apprehensive. They are soon set upon by Claudius, who orders Ros and Guil to find Hamlet, now the killer of Polonius, and discover what Hamlet has done with Polonius’ body. As an aside, Guil, now obsessed with death, hopes that more tears are shed for their deaths than they perceive to be shed for Polonius. In any case, they set out to do the king’s bidding but are uncertain of which direction to go. They try different courses, marching one way and another, but it seems that there is a limit to how far they may stray from their present location on the stage—they are trapped in their identity as stage characters. They finally spy Hamlet, dragging the body of Polonius, and go so far as to take off their belts and join them together to make a barrier. Predictably in the slapstick mode, Ros’ trousers slowly slide down to his ankles, and Hamlet never comes anywhere near to a point where he might have been stopped by their belts. After Hamlet has left the stage, the two friends call him back, and there follows a performance of most of their interaction from *Hamlet* (Act Four, Scene Four, lines 2–30).

Stoppard stays within Shakespeare, after skipping forward to line twelve or so of the next act, where Claudius interviews the pair to discover what Hamlet has done with the body. Since they are as unable to discern Hamlet’s actions now as earlier, they become relieved and hopeful when Hamlet is escorted right past their area (their stage area), and they celebrate the end of their being caught up in this plot. Ros speaks for them both when he says, “I’m only glad that’s the last we’ve seen of him”<sup>92</sup>—him meaning, of course, Hamlet. However, Ros turns around and realizes that Hamlet is there. In a shocking development, the pair decide that they have received permission, even from Hamlet, to go, which they do, leaving the stage with only the stage directions: “They go.”<sup>93</sup>

## **ACT THREE READING GUIDE: “YOU CAN’T NOT-BE ON A BOAT”**

### **ACT THREE: SHORT SUMMARY**

Ros and Guil take temporary solace in being on a boat although they still lack direction. Their peace is broken

by the presence of Hamlet. They read their letter to the King of England asking to have Hamlet put to death, and they justify their part in it. The Tragedians arrive, having offended King Claudius. Pirates arrive, causing the disappearance of Hamlet, who is playing at king again. Ros and Guil re-read the letter, which is now their own death sentence. Guil, upset, stabs the Player, who only feigns a mortal wound. The Player discourses on death while his tragedians enact it. Ros and Guil wonder what to do before they disappear, and the last tableau of *Hamlet* appears on the stage.

### **ACT THREE: DETAILED REVIEW**

At the beginning of Act Three, the audience in the theater is encompassed by complete darkness. The voices of Ros and Guil are heard, and Ros, in particular, questions whether they have already died. He is alarmed because while he can feel a leg, it feels dead. He pinches it, and it turns out to be Guil’s leg. We know that they are on a boat, due to the exaggerated nautical phrases the other offstage inhabitants are heard to use (e.g., “Reef down, me hearties!”), and eventually we know that they are accompanied on this boat by Hamlet, who has lit a lantern. Again, we follow the path of the two characters from Shakespeare’s play.

Ros and Guil’s memory of the messenger who summoned them, which they repeatedly recalled in Act One, is here replaced by their new charge—to take Hamlet to England. Guil begins to speak of the freedom that is found on a boat, but then begins to think of the limitations of that freedom (“our truancy is defined by one fixed star”<sup>94</sup>) and concludes that they are simply programmed, scripted, for one purpose only: “we are brought round full circle to face again the single immutable fact—that we, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, bearing a letter from one king to another, are taking Hamlet to England.”<sup>95</sup> Having discovered that Hamlet is sleeping, they are faced with the tedium of being confined to the deck with nothing to do. Ros takes out a coin.

This time, Ros wants to cheer Guil up, so he hides two coins, one in each fist, every time. Guil begins getting disturbed, as he had been with the “heads” coin tosses, and eventually he tricks Ros into revealing that he has been cheating all along. The source of the coins is King Claudius, who has paid to send them on this mission—although neither is willing to say how much he received, thinking that there may have been different fees.

There is nothing in Shakespeare to indicate that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern know what is in the sealed letter they are to give to the king of England; the letter says





*In Act Three of *Rosencrantz, Ros and Guil* once again turn to a game involving coins.*

that Hamlet is to be executed when he reaches England. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern simply think that Hamlet's uncle cares for his nephew and so is having them take Hamlet out of harm's way after Polonius' death.

After Guil complains about Ros' lack of initiative in their social interactions, and Ros gets distraught with the seeming emptiness of everything, Guil, who had been so harsh a moment before, becomes very tender, and tries to console his friend. He insists that they do exist for a reason, that they have been given an assignment, and that although the end result of the assignment has no certain established goal, there is the certainty that they carry a letter. What becomes uncertain at that moment is that neither of them is certain where the letter is—Guil is sure that it is Ros whom the king entrusted with the letter. For once, however, the deductive reasoning through which Guil probes the secrets of life is effective, and he deduces that Ros does not have the letter. It must be in his own pocket, he says, and it is.

In what is no doubt intended as an insider joke to the audience sitting in the theater in London, Ros proclaims that he doesn't believe in England and cannot conjure up a picture of what it might be like to be in a country by that name. Aside from the joke, this also points to his lack of experience beyond what he has experienced onstage. One way the pair have been able to cast themselves into experience in the past has been to play roles, as when Ros played the role of Guil interviewing Hamlet, played by Guil. This time, in order to forecast what will happen when they greet the king in England, Ros takes the king's role, and Guil that of Ros and Guil. Ros' king is imperious and harsh, claiming no knowledge of what they are speaking of,

except for a knowledge of Hamlet, whom he dismisses as a lunatic. Finally, to placate the pretend king, Guil produces the real letter, which Ros, as king, snatches from him and opens. He reads the pleasantries and salutations and comes to the point "that on reading this letter, without delay, I should have Hamlet's head cut off---!"<sup>96</sup>

Here is a point of divergence. Literary critics read Rosencrantz and Guildenstern in Shakespeare's *Hamlet* as henchmen. Stoppard, on the other hand, sees them simply as ridiculous victims of an unlucky fate. In Shakespeare, when Hamlet himself is the one who unseals the letter they carry and reads it, Hamlet assumes that the pair are in cahoots with Claudius, and therefore Hamlet alters the instructions so that the bearers of the letter are to be put to death. Here, in *Rosencrantz*, it is evident that the pair of friends has no idea of the content of the letter they carry.

What to do, upon the discovery, is the question. Rosencrantz suffers pangs of conscience, saying "We're his friends," with his evidence of the friendship being limited to a quote from the Queen, who has established that they were "[F]rom our young days brought up with him."<sup>97</sup> When Guil notes that they have only the words of others to base this idea of friendship upon (they seem to have no memory of it), Ros responds, "But that's what we depend on."<sup>98</sup>

Ros, by now, has embraced the fact that they are scripted, carried along by inevitability, and he resorts to philosophical meditations on death to placate their collective conscience—he's mortal and would die in any case; he's one man in a vast population, so, no great matter; death is unknowable, so what is there to fear in it; death may be a release. They decide it is best to simply reseal the letter as best they can and proceed as if they don't know the content. Ros can only rehearse the events of his life within the play, showing what has brought him and Guil to this point. Stage directions indicate nightfall, then daybreak, and Ros, upon awakening, rehearses events again.

Ros and Guil hear familiar music, and the pair discover that the Tragedians are within the barrels that are onstage—the entire company is stowed away in three barrels. Guil intones another altered snatch of The Lord's Prayer when he says, upon hearing the music, "call us this day our daily tune."<sup>99</sup> This acts as a cue for the lids to pop open and the Player and Tragedians to emerge, "impossibly," from the barrels. It seems that the play they had performed at the request of Hamlet earned the king's disfavor, and they were forced to flee Elsinore, their lives in peril.

The subject of Hamlet comes up, and the Player asks if





Ros and Guil have spoken to Hamlet. Just as in *Hamlet*, they have not, and they rationalize that it would not make any difference if they had. Suddenly, Hamlet appears, walks to the front of the stage, and spits into the audience. Regarding this primal expression, Ros observes that, "A compulsion towards philosophical introspection is his chief characteristic."<sup>100</sup> This may be the most elemental and most Beckettian exchange in a play full of comic moments. Furthering their evaluation of Hamlet is Guil's list of his symptoms, which goes on for several lines (page 108). It is a theatrical tour-de-force that exemplifies the postmodern propensity for lists to encapsulate the fragments that comprise a life in the twentieth century. It is also another kind of synopsis of *Hamlet*.

Another rehearsal of what has happened to them and how they have ended up on this boat ensues and results in Ros' complaint that, "All we get is incidents! Dear God, is it too much to expect a little sustained action?!"<sup>101</sup> Immediately after this, the Pirates attack. And there is indeed action, with swords, martial exclamations like "To arms!", some keystone cops-like confusion, and displays of bravado, mixed with cowardice, and finally escape for Hamlet, Ros and Guil, and the Player, who all leap into the onstage barrels. This leap into the barrels has a dual significance. First, it is a reminder that Ros and Guil are always trapped in some space of confinement—the stage, the boat, their roles, these barrels—"bounded in a nutshell." Second, this, too, is an element borrowed from Beckett, who in *Endgame* confines the parents of Hamm in similar barrels (legless, to live out their days in this confinement). Beckett will also use such things as piles of earth to enclose a character and prevent his or her movement.

Ros' earlier wish for "a little sustained action" is half-fulfilled; it is action, but alas it is not sustained. A brief interlude ensues, with the sounds of fighting in the background. When the sounds subside, Ros and Guil emerge from one barrel and the Player from another. Hamlet has disappeared. In *Hamlet*, the title character reveals in a letter to his friend Horatio that he had boarded the pirate ship in the fighting, after which the pirates sailed away from the scene, and "thieves of mercy"<sup>102</sup> had released him for the promise of future favors.

Wondering at Hamlet's fate, Ros concludes that since Hamlet is no longer on their stage, "he's dead as far as we're concerned" to which the Player, prophetically for Ros and Guil, says, "or we are as far as he is."<sup>103</sup> The Player seems to have seen the play *Hamlet* and knows what will happen to these characters.



Daniel Radcliffe (right) and Joshua McGuire (left), as Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, read the letter intended for the king of England.

Again, the uncertainty of their situation is maddening to the pair, and they resort once more to play-acting to forecast their (difficult to conceive) arrival in England, this time with Guil playing the king. As before, there is back and forth about, among other things, which of them is Ros and which is Guil (Ros has difficulty with this one) until, as before, the king snatches the letter they have for him and tears it open. This time, of course, it is the letter that Hamlet composed as revenge against his friends. Having discovered the previous letter and deducing that his friends were in on the plot to kill him (unjustly, in Stoppard's version of events), Hamlet cleverly replaced it with a new version. The request at the end of this letter is altered and asks that the king immediately put the bearers, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, to death. Having expected the same letter as before, the pair are surprised and devastated, while the Player, witness to the reading, pronounces, "They're gone! It's all over!"<sup>104</sup>



Guil is incredulous that such minor characters as they should be marked for so important a death, but the Player, a long-time tragedian, observes that, "In our experience most things end in death."<sup>105</sup> This enrages Guil, who, despite all, wants to preserve the difference between acted death and experienced death. Shockingly, Guil snatches the dagger from the belt of the Player and plunges the blade into him up to the hilt. The Player "stands with huge, terrible eyes" and "makes small weeping sounds"<sup>106</sup> before falling to his knees and down to the floor of the stage. Guil makes a grand pronouncement about destiny, equating theirs with that of the Player, and, as the body grows still, the Tragedians begin to applaud, prompting the rise of the Player who pronounces his performance of a dying man "merely competent."<sup>107</sup> For a beat, Ros and Guil, and perhaps the audience, believe that the resurrection of the Player might be in the same vein as all the unnatural things they have witnessed (the consecutive heads, for instance). However, it turns out that the dagger was a retractable stage prop.

By this point, the tragedy has ended, and death is in the air. The Player is in his element, where death is concerned, as he recites a litany: "Deaths by suspension, convulsion, consumption, incision, execution, asphyxiation and malnutrition--! Climactic carnage, by poison and by steel--! Double deaths by duel--!"<sup>108</sup> As he lists the ways of dying, the Tragedians enact the kinds of deaths that occur in the last climactic scene of *Hamlet*—poison, poisoned rapier, and the simultaneous stabbing of two combatants, resulting in a pile of "corpses" arranged upstage. After his speech is over, it seems that the Player joins the pile of bodies on the stage, leaving Ros and Guil alone once again.

Guil, the philosopher, cannot admit this version of death into his mind—he is, perhaps, aware of the imminence of his own death. In a halting, nearly incoherent speech, he says, "not for us"; "Dying is not romantic"; and "It's the absence of presence, nothing more."<sup>109</sup> Ros and Guil review the terms by which they have lived (in the play) and wonder whether they might have refused the summons of the messenger. During this summary, Ros says, "I don't care. I've had enough. To tell the truth, I'm relieved"<sup>110</sup> and disappears. Guil does not even notice, as he goes on reviewing what brought them to this point. When Guil does notice that his companion is gone, he calls out for him, comically, by both of their names. Guil then insists that, "We'll know better next time,"<sup>111</sup> and he also disappears. This could give credence to Guil's conviction that death is merely the failure to reappear on stage.

It is the end of Ros and Guil, but not of the play. The stage

is re-lit, and the pile of corpses remains in place: "arranged in the approximate positions last held by the dead Tragedians, the tableau of court and corpses which is the last scene of *Hamlet*." Fittingly, the Ambassador makes the announcement that serves as Stoppard's title, "Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are dead."<sup>112</sup> In an odd statement, Horatio, who knows otherwise, says that Hamlet "never gave commandment for their deaths."<sup>113</sup> As it was Hamlet who altered the king's directives to the English king, he did indeed make the command, but it is possible that most audiences of *Hamlet* don't notice the seeming contradiction since it relates merely to minor characters.

Horatio continues to speak, and he provides a summary of events. His summation sounds like a combination of summaries given by Ros and Guil (how did we get to this place) and given by the Player (tales of "carnal, bloody and unnatural acts"<sup>114</sup>). For Stoppard, there is no *Exeunt*, simply a fading of the stage lights as Horatio's speech is overtaken by music.

## ROSENCRANTZ FIFTY YEARS LATER

The legacy of Stoppard's *Rosencrantz* is an illustrious one; it is taught in classes, reprised on world stages, has been an award-winning film, and is the subject of at least a hundred scholarly works of varying lengths. The premiere of the play on the stage of the National Theatre in England was initiated by the positive reviews the play received at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival. Positive reviews in London propelled the play to a year-long run at the Alvin Theater on Broadway, a commission that made Stoppard a wealthy man.

*Rosencrantz* can be considered a classic of the contemporary theater. One marker of a modern classic is the recognition given to its notable anniversaries. To mark the fiftieth anniversary of the publication of Stoppard's *Rosencrantz*, The National Theatre of England decided to re-stage *Rosencrantz* at its home at the Old Vic at the National, under the directorship of [David Leveaux](#). Daniel Radcliffe, the same actor who played Harry Potter, played the role of Rosencrantz. It is a kind of Stoppardian, or Pirandellesque, irony that Radcliffe is in the play. Not unlike the way Ros and Guil are forever chained to the play written by Shakespeare, or the Six Characters are forever yoked to the drama into which their author chained them and then abandoned them, Radcliffe will always be associated with the role of Harry Potter that made him so famous.

The fifty-years-on production was widely praised. A





Author Tom Stoppard's play *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* is taught in classes, reprised on world stages, has been an award-winning film, and is the subject of at least a hundred scholarly works.

March 2017 review in *Variety* magazine compared the 2017 production favorably to one in 2011 directed by the accomplished director Trevor Nunn, which is described as lumbering through "a weary two hours and 45 minutes," a version that "underlined the games but found little gravitas."<sup>115</sup> Part of the streamlining of the current version is due to more economy in what happens with the Tragedians, and the play also finds Ros and Guil delivering their repartee with what the reviewer calls "Adam Sorkin speed" (a reference to various Sorkin television productions, particularly *The West Wing*). Reviewer David Benedict praised Daniel Radcliffe for choosing the less showy role of Ros, allowing him to have an "effortless stillness," rather than showing the audience how hard he has worked. Susannah Clapp in her review in London's *The Observer* was appreciative of Radcliffe's "amiable and bewildered" Ros.<sup>116</sup> Helen Lewis, in *The New Statesman*, offers a left-handed compliment in saying that the play is an "unlikely success," grounded as it is in "an absurdist style that is wildly out-of-step with current trends in theater." She does, however, praise the production, especially the casting of Radcliffe in a less than central role, saying, "he is perfectly cast here as a character saddled with the nagging feeling that something very bad is happening just on the edge of his vision."<sup>117</sup>

The glory of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* is forever stamped in the cultural canon of the West, and powerful productions of the play have moved audiences for centuries. The role of Hamlet embodies honor, uncertainty, the strategic use of

madness, realization of the truth, and resolution to act. The deft wordplay and the deeply insightful representations of human psychology combine for a fulfilling and even thrilling theatrical experience. There are few theatrical feats so admirable as a brilliantly conceived and acted Hamlet. This is especially the case for any actor who handles the central role with grace, passion, and insight.

Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* is also a classic, albeit in a very different way. There are three plum roles in the play—Ros, Guil, and the Player—but the skill involved in a successful production owes more to how the players work with and against each other rather than how they inhabit a soliloquy or how they feign madness. The questions asked by the two plays are different. Sure, Hamlet's "to be, or not to be" has the ring of the existential about it, but Hamlet seems sure of his central being—his questions mostly have to do with the afterlife and of "what dreams may come, / When we've shuffled off this mortal coil." Ros and Guil question the nature of the "mortal coil," and their questions involve the reality of their lives, their origins, their destiny, and the seeming emptiness of everything around them.

For better or worse, audiences of *Rosencrantz* have had their relationship to *Hamlet* altered. Attributes of *Rosencrantz* infiltrated productions of *Hamlet* in the late 60s and early 70s. Stoppard himself reports seeing at least two productions of *Hamlet* in which *Rosencrantz* and *Guildenstern* are flipping coins as they make their first appearance. Viewers of *Hamlet* who know *Rosencrantz* will view the pair in Shakespeare as less eager to please the new King Claudius for their own profit and certainly less deserving of their final fate.

Stoppard's play was born in a moment when the striving for something new and original was tied up with absurdity, existentialism, and experimentalism in literature and theater. Even though some reviews of recent performances hint that the immediacy of the play has been diminished over time, one feels that the themes of uncertain reality and a desperation for life to be of significance will be human concerns for the conceivable future. Thus, the play retains its relevance, and audiences continue to enjoy the antic spirit with which it is performed. It is hoped that the readers of these pages will bring to their future interactions with the play some useful knowledge of the influences and the contexts of this play's creation.



## Section III

# Selected Shorter Works of Literature

### INTRODUCTION

In this section of the resource guide, we will closely examine nine shorter works of literature. While our longer literary selection—*Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*—was written by a British writer, all the shorter selections were written by American authors. The featured shorter works include three short stories, the lyrics of three songs (whose author, Bob Dylan, received the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2016), one essay, one poem, and one of the most famous letters in American history. Our readings here have been limited by time and space and have been selected in an effort to present students with a collection of works on topics relevant to a study of the United States in the 1960s.

While the postmodern aspects of the first work we will examine—Donald Barthelme’s short story “The Phantom of the Opera’s Friend”—has echoes of Stoppard and other writers discussed earlier in this resource guide, from there we will focus on works that relate to a wide range of subjects of particular relevance to the United States during the 1960s. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was the most visible and vocal leader of the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s, and his “Letter from a Birmingham Jail,” an iconic piece of prose written in 1963, is arguably the most famous written statement of the movement. Composed while imprisoned in a jail cell for participating in a nonviolent demonstration of civil disobedience, King’s letter is a masterwork of rhetoric that presents an overwhelming case in favor of continued opposition to the racist terror that defined the lives of so many Americans and the need for equal rights for African Americans.

Two writers included in this section—Toni Cade Bambara and Etheridge Knight—are representatives of the Black Arts Movement, a movement in the arts of the 1960s and 1970s that was often aligned with the political Black Power movement. The works of Black Arts writers addressed political issues of the day—racism and inequality—head on, in a populist style that drew on the use of African-American vernacular and reflected the influence of jazz, blues, and other aspects of African-American cultural life.

In addition to the issue of civil rights, cultural changes and the growth of the counterculture came to the fore in the 1960s. Folksinger Bob Dylan, an icon of the countercultural movement, wrote songs that were overtly political and addressed topics ranging from civil rights to the Vietnam War. Joan Didion’s “Where the Kissing Never Stops,” an essay that can be characterized as creative nonfiction, centers on another musical icon of the 1960s counterculture, the folksinger Joan Baez. Didion’s piece highlights the vast cultural divide between the youthful participants in the counterculture and those with more traditional views, and it underscores the divisive impact U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War had on American culture at large. Finally, while countercultural icons like Dylan and Baez were leading protests against the Vietnam War, many young Americans were called upon to fight the war. Tim O’Brien’s short story “Ambush,” from his collection *The Things They Carried*, gives voice to the horrific experiences of one such soldier and clearly demonstrates that the emotional burdens of war continue to be carried long after the fighting has ceased.

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**NOTE TO STUDENTS:** Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s “Letter from a Birmingham Jail” includes a deeply offensive racial slur. The narrator of Toni Cade Bambara’s short story “The Lesson” at times uses profane, coarse, and offensive language. Both King’s “Letter” and Bambara’s short story are acclaimed works of literature that have much to contribute to a discussion of life in the United States in the 1960s. It is our hope that Academic Decathletes will not only read and discuss these works with a scholarly appreciation for the authors’ writing and insights, but also will approach the subject matter with maturity and sensitivity.



## DONALD BARTHELME'S "THE PHANTOM OF THE OPERA'S FRIEND"

### DONALD BARTHELME: LIFE AND WORK

Donald Barthelme (1931–89) was an American writer who is best known for his postmodernist short stories though he also authored novels and even wrote a children's book. Like Tom Stoppard, Barthelme was influenced by the work of Samuel Beckett, among other postmodernist writers. Barthelme's stories often do not feature traditional plot structures, but rather are a collection of details, coming together as fragments to form a collage. Indeed, collage was a governing influence in Barthelme's works, as the author acknowledged, saying, "The principle of collage is the central principle of all art of the twentieth century."<sup>118</sup>

Barthelme's stories frequently involve characters who find themselves in absurd situations, and like the works of other postmodernists, Barthelme's writing embraces the notion of "play" and humor. His story "Me and Miss Mandible," for instance, is composed of diary entries of a thirty-five-year-old man who has been reassigned to the sixth grade. His demotion back to middle school comes as a result of his adult mistake as an insurance adjuster, which was to inform his elderly client how she could get the full amount of the settlement coming to her.

Barthelme's "The Balloon" imagines an enormous balloon inflated overnight to cover a great deal of New York City. The presence of this balloon transforms the way New Yorkers interact with their environment. The balloon—reviewed in the daily papers as "munching," or "*quelle catastrophe*"—anticipates the giant fabric sculptures used by the artist [Christo](#) to cover buildings, islands, and other large structures, with the intent to unsettle the viewer's relationship to those forms.

Barthelme's "Report," a parody on weapon design in the twentieth century, visits an engineering lab that develops weapons such as a hut-shrinking chemical and a rust that is capable of attacking the enemy's alphabet. The engineers in the story note that these weapons are in no danger of being used because they have a moral sense generated by computers. "The Dolt" features a man intent on becoming a writer, but who first must pass an exam, which in the past he has nearly passed, except for his difficulty with the written section.

Barthelme isn't always funny. As mentioned earlier, one of his interests is to bring the artistic practice of collage



*Author Donald Barthelme was an American writer best known for his postmodernist short stories.*

to literature, and so some of his "stories" are random selections of words placed on the page in a manner determined by chance. Some of his experimental writing presents odd characters that have so little direction or continuity that they can be experienced only as abstract images. Barthelme comments on the difficulty—or seeming inaccessibility—of this type of writing in his essay "Not-Knowing." In this essay, Barthelme defends some of his contemporary writers, and implicitly himself, against the charge that "this kind of writing has turned its back on the world." "Art is not difficult because it wishes to be difficult," writes Barthelme, "but because it wishes to be art."<sup>119</sup>

Barthelme left behind a substantial body of work that has influenced some of the most creative and intellectually probing literary artists of the twentieth-first century. In 2007, the literary journal *McSweeney's* published a volume with a special symposium entitled "Come Back Donald Barthelme," (a nod to the title of Barthelme's first collection of stories, *Come Back, Dr. Caligari*) in which twenty-one contemporary authors, among them George Saunders, paid homage to Barthelme and his influence on them. For writers in training, Barthelme is a force to be acknowledged. Among current writers who nod to Barthelme as a formative influence are Karen Russell, Ben Marcus, Steven Millhauser, and Ivan Vladislavic. Like Barthelme, these writers take the fabric of society apart and reassemble it in a way that allows their readers to see the absurdity at the heart of what is considered normal. Barthelme's serious comic voice, his deconstructive tendencies, and his deeply humanist center, stretch from his origins in the 1960s all the way to the present day.



## SELECTED WORK: “THE PHANTOM OF THE OPERA’S FRIEND” BY DONALD BARTHELME

“The Phantom of the Opera’s Friend” by Donald Barthelme. Copyright © 1981 Donald Barthelme, used by permission of The Wylie Agency LLC.

I have never visited him in his sumptuous quarters five levels below the Opera, across the dark lake.

But he has described them. Rich divans, exquisitely carved tables, amazing silk and satin draperies. The large, superbly embellished mantelpiece, on which rest two curious boxes, one containing the figure of a grasshopper, the other the figure of a scorpion...

He can, in discoursing upon his domestic arrangements, become almost merry. For example, speaking of the wine he has stolen from the private cellar of the Opera’s Board of Directors:

“A very adequate Montrachet! Four bottles! Each director accusing every other director! I tell you, it made me feel like a director myself! As if I were worth two or three millions and had a fat, ugly wife! And the trout was admirable. You know what the Poles say—fish, to taste right, must swim three times: in water, butter, and wine. All in all, a splendid evening!”

But he immediately alters the mood by making some gloomy observation. “Our behavior is mocked by the behavior of dogs.”

It is not often that the accents of joy issue from beneath that mask.

Monday. I am standing at the place I sometimes encounter him, a little door at the rear of the Opera (the building has 2,531 doors to which there are 7,593 keys). He always appears “suddenly”—a *coup de théâtre* that is, to tell the truth, more annoying than anything else. We enact a little comedy of surprise.

“It’s you!”

“Yes.”

“What are you doing here?”

“Waiting.”

But today no one appears, although I wait for half an hour. I have wasted my time. Except—

Faintly, through many layers of stone, I hear organ music. The music is attenuated but unmistakable. It is his great work *Don Juan Triumphant*. A communication of a kind.

I rejoice in his immense, buried talent.

But I know that he is not happy.

His situation is simple and terrible. He must decide whether to risk life aboveground or to remain forever in hiding, in the cellars of the Opera.

His tentative, testing explorations in the city (always at night) have not persuaded him to one course or the other. Too, the city is no longer the city he knew as a young man. Its meaning has changed.

At a café table, in a place where the light from the streetlamps is broken by a large tree, we sit silently over our drinks.

Everything that can be said has been said many times.

I have no new observations to make. The decision he faces has been tormenting him for decades.

“If after all I—”

But he cannot finish the sentence. We both know what is meant.

I am distracted, a bit angry. How many nights have I spent this way, waiting upon his sighs?

In the early years of our friendship I proposed vigorous measures. A new life! Advances in surgery, I told him, had made a normal existence possible for him. New techniques in—

“I’m too old.”



One is never too old, I said. There were still many satisfactions open to him, not the least the possibility of service to others. His music! A home, even marriage and children were not out of the question. What was required was boldness, the will to break out of old patterns...

Now as these thoughts flicker through our brains, he smiles ironically.

Sometimes he speaks of Christine:

"That voice!

"But I was perhaps overdazzled by the circumstances...

"A range from low C to the F above high C!

"Flawed, of course...

"Liszt heard her. 'Que, c'est beau!' he cried out.

"Possibly somewhat deficient in temperament. But I had temperament enough for two.

"Such goodness! Such gentleness!

"I would pull down the very doors of heaven for a—"

Tuesday. A few slashes of lightning in the sky...

Is one man entitled to fix himself at the center of a cosmos of hatred, and remain there?

The acid...

The lost love...

Yet all of this is generations cold. There have been wars, inventions, assassinations, discoveries...

Perhaps *practical affairs* have assumed, in his mind, a towering importance. Does he fear the loss of the stipend (20,000 francs per month) that he has not ceased to extort from the directors of the Opera?

But I have given him assurances. He shall want for nothing.

Occasionally he is overtaken by what can only be called fits of grandiosity.

"One hundred million cells in the brain! All intent on being the Phantom of the Opera!"

"Between three and four thousand human languages! And I am the Phantom of the Opera in every one of them!"

This is quickly followed by the deepest despair. He sinks into a chair, passes a hand over his mask.

"Forty years of it!"

Why must I have *him* for a friend?

I wanted a friend with whom one could be seen abroad. With whom one could exchange country weekends, on our respective estates!

I put these unworthy reflections behind me...

Gaston Leroux was tired of writing *The Phantom of the Opera*. He replaced his pen in its penholder.

"I can always work on *The Phantom of the Opera* later—in the fall, perhaps. Right now I feel like writing *The Secret of the Yellow Room*."

Gaston Leroux took the manuscript of *The Phantom of the Opera* and put it on a shelf in the closet.

Then, seating himself once more at his desk, he drew toward him a clean sheet of foolscap. At the top he wrote the words *The Secret of the Yellow Room*.

Wednesday. I receive a note urgently requesting a meeting.

"All men that are ruined are ruined on the side of their natural propensities," the note concludes.

This is surely true. Yet the vivacity with which he embraces ruin is unexampled, in my experience.

When we meet he is pacing nervously in an ill-lit corridor just off the room where the tympani are stored.

I notice that his dress, always so immaculate, is disordered, slept-in-looking. A button hangs by a thread from his waistcoat.

"I have brought you a newspaper," I say.

"Thank you. I wanted to tell you...that I have made up my mind."

His hands are trembling. I hold my breath.



"I have decided to take your advice. Sixty-five is not after all the end of one's life! I place myself in your hands. Make whatever arrangements you wish. Tomorrow night at this time I quit the Opera forever."

Blind with emotion, I can think of nothing to say.  
A firm handclasp, and he is gone.

A room is prepared. I tell my servants that I am anticipating a visitor who will be with us for an indefinite period. I choose for him a room with a splendid window, a view of the Seine; but I am careful also to have installed heavy velvet curtains, so that the light, with which the room is plentifully supplied, will not come as an assault.

The degree of light *he* wishes.

And when I am satisfied that the accommodations are all that could be desired, I set off to interview the doctor I have selected.

"You understand that the operation, if he consents to it, will have specific...psychological consequences?"

I nod.

And he shows me in a book pictures of faces with terrible burns, before and after having been reconstructed by his science. It is indeed an album of magical transformations.

"I would wish first to have him examined by my colleague Dr. W., a qualified alienist."

"This is possible. But I remind you that he has had no intercourse with his fellow men, myself excepted, for—"

"But was it not the case that *originally*, the violent emotions of revenge and jealousy—"

"Yes. But replaced now, I believe, by a melancholy so deep, so all-pervading—"

Dr. Mirabeau assumes a mock-sternness.

"Melancholy, sir, is an ailment with which I have had some slight acquaintance. We shall see if his distemper can resist a little miracle."

And he extends, into the neutral space between us, a shining scalpel.

But when I call for the Phantom on Thursday, at the appointed hour, he is not there.

What vexation!

Am I not slightly relieved?

Can it be that *he doesn't like me*?

I sit down on the curb, outside the Opera. People passing look at me. I will wait here for a hundred years. Or until the hot meat of romance is cooled by the dull gray of common sense once more.

## "THE PHANTOM OF THE OPERA'S FRIEND": ANALYSIS

In "The Phantom of the Opera's Friend," it is evident that there is something unconventional and unexpected in its situation and structure, but it is also revelatory about human psychology—the yearning to belong and the yearning for distinction. The story, which has some attributes of the principle of collage, finds its humor in imposing a mundane yearning for friendship and normalcy on the fantastical situation of the Phantom.

Barthelme constructs this story as a parody of the original *Phantom of the Opera*. The collage technique is evident, as some sections are composed of fragments. The impact of the story is deepened if the reader can understand how the Romanticism of the original Gaston Leroux text compares to the mundane realities of Barthelme's revision. Leroux's

novel, serialized in 1909–10, features the title character as a deformed conjurer; he is also called the Opera Ghost, and he is known by his love interest Christine as The Angel of Music. The plot has similarities to the tale of Beauty and the Beast; at one point the Phantom is unmasked, and his gruesome features are revealed. His obsessive love for Christine leads him to take desperate measures to possess her. He makes a chandelier drop into the audience during a performance, causing a fatality, and he threatens to blow up the opera house full of patrons if his demands to have her as his bride are not met. In the end, he experiences his first tender moment in a kiss from Christine and dies without wreaking more havoc on French music lovers.

"The Phantom of the Opera's Friend" was published in *The New Yorker* on February 7 of 1970. The story shared many techniques and ideas that Barthelme developed throughout the sixties. One can also date the sixties differently from





a strict chronology, as the title of Christopher B. Strain's history, *The Long Sixties: America 1955–1973*, suggests. Barthelme's story was published long before Andrew Lloyd Weber's musical put the majestic figure of the Phantom played by Michael Crawford on the Broadway stage in 1986. In 1925 the Phantom had been transformed into another popular culture form—a silent movie featuring Lon Chaney in the lead role. Fascination with the character of the Phantom hinges on his combination of greatness and monstrousness. Given the gifts of genius and artistry, the Phantom is deformed and mistreated until he escapes from the carnival side-show that exhibited him to onlookers into the depths of the opera house. He is ugly on the outside, but his music exhibits his inner beauty. He is repulsive, yet filled with tender desire.

Barthelme creates the Phantom not as a remarkable figure emerging only rarely from his subterranean haunts, but simply as a man who is observed by his acquaintance. Taking a figure of romance and turning him into a man who lacks confidence and self-esteem, who swings widely from grandiosity to melancholy, Barthelme compels us to see this figure of mythical reputation quite differently. Absent of the qualities that have given rise to his legend, the Phantom is ordinary and unremarkable.

In Barthelme's revision of the myth, the romantic center of the original is replaced by a male friendship between two unmarried men of culture, but the narrator has chosen his friend, the Phantom, unwisely. "I wanted a friend with whom one could be seen abroad. . .", the narrator laments, "With whom one could exchange country weekends, on our respective estates."<sup>120</sup> The narrator hopes to rehabilitate the Phantom through plastic surgery so that the Phantom might be able to go aboveground, out into the city.

The story is told in nine sections, all of them connected by the present dilemma of the logistics of the friendship, except for the sixth section, which reminds the reader of the fictional origin of the main character in the story. In a moment of metafiction, Gaston Leroux appears. It seems that Leroux is tired of writing *The Phantom*, and so he shelves it for a while to begin *The Secret of the Yellow Room*. Within the plot of the short story, this sixth section is a non sequitur, and after this intercession the Barthelme story continues.

For readers familiar with Barthelme's work, the non sequitur is no surprise, nor are the fragments he uses to construct the fourth section of the story. This fourth section is the only place in which the love interest, Christine, is mentioned, and it features eight unconnected and incomplete outbursts of



French author Gaston Leroux, who wrote *The Phantom of the Opera* in 1910.

memories of Christine.

The love of Christine is not the only romantic allusion in the story—the other comes with the romance of being a figure named in myth. At one point, the Phantom exalts in his distinctiveness, and in his status as "The Phantom of the Opera." In what the narrator, the friend, calls "fits of grandiosity," the Phantom celebrates himself:

*"One hundred million cells in the brain! All intent on being the Phantom of the Opera!"*

*"Between three and four thousand human languages! And I am the Phantom of the Opera in every one of them!"<sup>121</sup>*

Yet as he has shown before, the Phantom's behavior is unpredictable, with wide mood swings, and this celebration of his world renown "is quickly followed by the deepest despair," as he next laments, "'Forty years of it!'"<sup>122</sup>

The Phantom's status as deformed is not an unchangeable





Author Donald Barthelme, photographed in 1984.

condition, insists his friend the narrator, who has consulted with a doctor who has shown him pictures of successful facial reconstructions collected in “an album of magical transformations.”<sup>123</sup> The Phantom has been reluctant to commit himself to the operation; after all, he has lived his entire adult life secluded from the gaze of society. But at last, he informs his friend, he is ready to undergo the procedure. The friend is overjoyed, and makes all the arrangements until, on the fateful day, the failure of the Phantom to appear makes him doubt he will ever show. The Phantom, distinguished by his deformity, is in the end unwilling to sacrifice this uniqueness in order to join society as just another normal face in the crowd. The narrator, sitting on the curb outside the Opera, vows: “I will wait here for a hundred years,” in what is a grandiose statement of his own. And, he adds, in an unlikely yet memorable metaphor: “Or until the hot meat of romance is cooled by the dull gravy of common sense.”<sup>124</sup>

In her study of Barthelme’s short fiction, Barbara L. Coe suggests two literary precursors for this story. First, she suggests that the personas of both the friend and the Phantom resemble characters in the work of Edgar Allan Poe, such as the character of Roderick Usher from Poe’s story “The Fall of the House of Usher.” The resemblance between Poe’s characters and those of Barthelme’s story can be seen in the “dark, gothic chambers” in which the Phantom dwells and in the fact that the Phantom “indulges his aesthetic interests.”<sup>125</sup> The parodic overtones that treat the original myth of the Phantom of the Opera can also be seen as being equally directed toward Poe as the language switches between the formal diction of the nineteenth century and Barthelme’s short and abrupt conversational idiom. In the first meeting of the two characters, for

instance, the conversation is abrupt and truncated. Enacting their “little comedy of surprise,” their exchange is one in bursts: “‘It’s you!’ ‘Yes.’ ‘What are you doing here?’ ‘Waiting.’”<sup>126</sup>

Coe explores a second literary antecedent: Dante’s *Inferno*. The description of the Phantom’s quarters, which the narrator has never visited, “five levels below the Opera, across the dark lake” bring to mind Dante’s work.<sup>127</sup> Coe also cites the sins on the Phantom’s record, theft and extortion, and if one recalls Leroux’s original novel, sins like lust, envy, and wrath leading to murder can be added. Moreover, the Phantom’s self-assessment in Barthelme’s story adds pride to the list. Finally, in Leroux’s novel the Phantom’s composition, *Don Juan Triumphant*, is said to “burn with a fire that is not from heaven.”<sup>128</sup> Having been given the opportunity to rise up from beneath the Opera House to street level, there is at least the hope for Purgatory rather than heaven. The Phantom ultimately chooses the hell of his own making, his mythical residence, rather than lose his status. The friendship offered by the narrator is too small a compensation for the loss of his glorious suffering underneath the Opera House.

Donald Barthelme was a serious artist who relentlessly probed the relationship of language to the self and the possibilities of literature to approach the unsayable. He reminds the reader that there is no notion of self without the language in which to express it, and that language is often misleading, composed of myths that are subject to change. Much of his work challenged traditional narrative structure and brought to bear the possibilities offered by fragments, collage, narrative dead-ends, and parodic re-visions of accepted myths.

## “LETTER FROM A BIRMINGHAM JAIL”: AN ENDURING PLEA FOR ACTION AGAINST INJUSTICE

### INTRODUCTION

The advancement of the civil rights and human rights of African-American citizens was one of the outstanding accomplishments of the 1960s. Though the struggle for full civil rights continues to the present-day, it is still possible to look back on the Civil Rights Movement and acknowledge the substantial progress that was made during its most active years.

The list of people who contributed to the success of the movement is extensive—from Rosa Parks, who famously



refused to move to the back of the bus, to James Meredith, who became the first African-American student at the University of Mississippi in 1962. Jackie Robinson endured great personal trials on the way to becoming the first black man to play Major League Baseball, and Sidney Poitier was a formidable figure on the American movie screen. President Lyndon B. Johnson signed some of the most progressive civil rights legislation since the Emancipation Proclamation was declared by Abraham Lincoln. And tens of thousands of committed activists of all races and ethnicities risked personal harm, imprisonment, and loss of livelihood to march in the streets in protest against repressive laws and the brutal measures that were taken to suppress the call for equality in the United States.

The role played by the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. (1929–68) was paramount in the Civil Rights Movement. It was he, more than any other person, who mobilized the marches that called attention to the segregation, racism, and inequality that were so prevalent in the U.S. In this section of the resource guide, we will examine a significant piece of writing by King that serves as an example of the power of language to influence public opinion. Though he was known primarily as an orator who drew on his religious background as a preacher to address civic problems, making appeals that crossed lines between creeds and races, King was also a skilled craftsman of elegant and compelling essays.

The “Letter from a Birmingham Jail” is a prime example of King’s eloquent, rhetorically powerful writing. As an epistolary essay, the “Letter” makes strategic use of a second-person, direct address to a specific audience, while also appealing to a more general audience of readers. King’s essay invokes Christianity, patriotism, history, current events, and more, as he makes his case for the immediate necessity of nonviolent action to combat inequality.

## **THE LIFE OF DR. MARTIN LUTHER KING JR.**

The Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. is one of the most well-known figures of the twentieth century. Awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1964 (a year and some months after the publication of the “Letter”), he is commemorated in the U.S. with numerous statues, over 900 roadways that bear his name, and a national holiday. His legacy stems from his commitment to justice, his bravery in the face of opposition, his articulation of the principles of nonviolence that characterized the Civil Rights Movement, and his ability to enlist support from diverse groups of people. Some notable accomplishments in which King played a key role include



*Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. delivers his Nobel Prize acceptance speech at Oslo University on December 10, 1964.*

*AP Photo*

the desegregation of public services, schools, and housing across the United States.

A third-generation American Baptist preacher born in 1929, King came to national prominence in 1955 as a leader of the Montgomery, Alabama, bus boycotts. In 1957, he became the first president of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), an organization that he helped to found. Besides the Birmingham campaign, he was a leader in an unsuccessful series of actions in 1962 in Albany, Georgia, in the 1965 Selma to Montgomery marches, and in a campaign against housing segregation in Chicago. Perhaps his most well-known event was the 1963 March on Washington, at which he delivered his most famous speech, commonly known as his “[I Have a Dream](#)” speech.

A man of courage and dedication, King was conscious of the danger in which his activism and national prominence put him. On April 4, 1968, as he was about to launch a new venture to be called “The Poor People’s Campaign,” King was assassinated by white supremacist James Earl Ray. The race riots that followed in over a dozen major cities were contrary to King’s vision as he was committed to the ideals of nonviolent methods in the fight against injustice.

## **THE BIRMINGHAM CAMPAIGN**

King’s arrest in April of 1963 was only one of many significant events in that year in Birmingham, Alabama that made it a focal point for the Civil Rights Movement. The direct-action tactics that King and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference promoted in their “Project C” (for confrontation) in Birmingham came after a lengthy series of





*Young people participate in the Children's Crusade in Birmingham, Alabama, in 1963.*

economic boycotts that had a substantial negative impact on downtown businesses in Birmingham. To suppress the boycott, the city withdrew \$45,000 from a surplus food program that largely benefitted poor black families. Also, in advance of the expected marches and demonstrations, the city Commissioner for Public Safety, [Eugene "Bull" Connor](#), was granted an injunction to make public gatherings unlawful, raising the bail for those who were jailed for violating the ordinance from \$200 to \$1,500.

Despite the attempts to stop them, the marches and sit-ins went on, and the mass arrests that followed—including those of Dr. King and Reverend Ralph Abernathy, another prominent spokesman for the Civil Rights Movement—gained national attention. When the number of adults on hand for the demonstrations dwindled, a youth march, later dubbed by *Newsweek* magazine as "[The Children's Crusade](#)," was organized by SCLC leader James Bevel. Connor used high-pressure fire hoses and police dogs against them. Scenes

of these tactics and other violent police measures being used against youths as young as eight years of age were broadcast on national news networks and re-broadcast internationally, and the fight for full equality for African Americans gained substantial momentum.

The combination of boycotts, marches, mass arrests, and the resulting outcry against police violence did eventually result in some victories for blacks in Birmingham. On May 8, 1963, business leaders agreed to most of the protesters' demands. On May 10, the City of Birmingham agreed to desegregate lunch counters, restrooms, and other public spaces, as well as to release the imprisoned demonstrators on bail or on their own recognizance. That September, schools in Birmingham were desegregated, despite Governor George Wallace's attempt to use the National Guard to keep black students out. These were substantial victories, and they became a model for other similarly embattled cities and regions in the American South.





Rev. Ralph Abernathy (left) and Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. (right) lead the march to Birmingham, Alabama's city hall, which led to their arrest on April 12, 1963.

Photo by AP Photo/Horace Cort

Such victories did not come without great costs. White supremacists used bombs to quell dissent and force members of the African-American community into silence. On June 20, 1963, one such device was left in the motel that Martin Luther King had checked out of only hours earlier. And on September 16, 1963, a bomb planted by Ku Klux Klan members went off in the basement of the 16<sup>th</sup> Avenue Baptist Church in Birmingham, killing four young girls. Five months after composing the "Letter from a Birmingham Jail," Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. addressed the mourners for these young "heroines of a holy crusade for freedom and dignity" in his "[Eulogy for the Young Victims of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church Bombings](#)," as he continued to exhort his listeners to keep faith in the struggle.<sup>129</sup>

### CONTEXT OF THE "LETTER"

In April of 1963, sensing that events in Birmingham would bring widespread attention to the struggle of African Americans, the SCLC strategically allowed King to remain in jail longer than was necessary; he could have been bailed out almost immediately, but he was not. Shortly after he was jailed on April 12, an associate of King's smuggled in a newspaper that featured an editorial signed by eight white clergymen from various Christian and Jewish denominations. They called for a halt of demonstrations

and an end to direct action in favor of a gradual—and in the view of these clergy members, more lawful—movement toward equality for Southern Blacks.

These cosigners of the "[Call for Unity](#)" were the first audience of King's "Letter," as it was written as a response to this "Call." King's lengthy rebuttal of many of the points made in the clergymen's comparatively brief editorial is written in the second person, addressing the "you" whom King salutes as "My Dear Fellow Clergymen." Their status as clergymen allows him to frequently steer his argument toward religion and biblical analogies. In addition, their insistence that "these demonstrations are untimely and unwise"<sup>130</sup> allows King to make a strong case for the immediate need for direct action and for the wisdom of such an approach.

King began writing the "Letter" in the margins of the newspaper in which the "Call for Unity" was printed. He then continued writing on what were described by King as "scraps of paper" supplied by a black trustee in the jail, and King completed the draft of the essay on a legal pad that King's attorneys were able to leave with him. The various sections were collected at SCLC headquarters, where the Reverend Wyatt Walker and others worked to



compile the pieces. King's "Letter" was published in June in three publications: *Liberation*, *The Christian Century*, and *The New Leader*, and was reprinted as "The Negro is Your Brother" in the July 1963 edition of *The Atlantic Monthly*.

Though King's letter directly addressed the clergy members who had published the editorial urging an end to Civil Rights demonstrations, the letter was never sent directly to the cosigners of "A Call for Unity." However, the audience

for King's "Letter" ultimately became far wider than just those select group of clergy members. The "Letter" made a significant impact both on those already convinced of the need for action and the hundreds of thousands of American liberals who were as yet unconvinced of the urgent need to address the problems of racism and segregation in the U.S. through direct action and civil disobedience.

## SELECTED WORK: "LETTER FROM A BIRMINGHAM JAIL" BY DR. MARTIN LUTHER KING JR.

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16 April 1963

MY DEAR FELLOW CLERGYMEN,

While confined here in the Birmingham city jail, I came across your recent statement calling my present activities "unwise and untimely." Seldom, if ever, do I pause to answer criticism of my work and ideas. If I sought to answer all the criticisms that cross my desk, my secretaries would be engaged in little else in the course of the day, and I would have no time for constructive work. But since I feel that you are men of genuine good will and your criticisms are sincerely set forth, I would like to answer your statement in what I hope will be patient and reasonable terms.

I think I should give the reason for my being here in Birmingham, since you have been influenced by the argument of "outsiders coming in." I have the honor of serving as president of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, an organization operating in every southern state, with headquarters in Atlanta, Georgia. We have some eighty-five affiliated organizations all across the South—one of them being the Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights. Whenever necessary and possible, we share staff, educational and financial resources with our affiliates. Several months ago our local affiliate here in Birmingham asked us to be on call to engage in a nonviolent direct-action program if such were deemed necessary. We readily consented and when the hour came we lived up to our promises. So I am here, along with several members of my staff, because I have basic organizational ties here.

Beyond this, I am in Birmingham because injustice is here. Just as the eighth-century prophets left their little villages and carried their "thus saith the Lord" far beyond the boundaries of their hometowns; and just as the Apostle Paul left his little village of Tarsus and carried the gospel of Jesus Christ to practically every hamlet and city of the Graeco-Roman world, I too am compelled to carry the gospel of freedom beyond my particular hometown. Like Paul, I must constantly respond to the Macedonian call for aid.

Moreover, I am cognizant of the interrelatedness of all communities and states. I cannot sit idly by in Atlanta and not be concerned about what happens in Birmingham. Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly. Never again can we afford to live with the narrow, provincial "outside agitator" idea. Anyone who lives in the United States can never be considered an outsider anywhere in this country.

You deplore the demonstrations taking place in Birmingham. But I am sorry that your statement did not express a similar concern for the conditions that brought the demonstrations into being. I am sure that each of you would want to go beyond the superficial social analyst who looks merely at effects, and does not grapple with underlying causes. I would not hesitate to say that it is unfortunate that so-called demonstrations are taking place in Birmingham at this



time, but I would say in more emphatic terms that it is even more unfortunate that the white power structure of this city left the Negro community with no other alternative.

In any nonviolent campaign there are four basic steps: (1) collection of the facts to determine whether injustices are alive, (2) negotiation, (3) self-purification, and (4) direct action. We have gone through all of these steps in Birmingham. There can be no gainsaying of the fact that racial injustice engulfs this community.

Birmingham is probably the most thoroughly segregated city in the United States. Its ugly record of police brutality is known in every section of this country. Its unjust treatment of Negroes in the courts is a notorious reality. There have been more unsolved bombings of Negro homes and churches in Birmingham than any city in this nation. These are the hard, brutal and unbelievable facts. On the basis of these conditions Negro leaders sought to negotiate with the city fathers. But the political leaders consistently refused to engage in good faith negotiation.

Then came the opportunity last September to talk with some of the leaders of the economic community. In these negotiating sessions certain promises were made by the merchants—such as the promise to remove the humiliating racial signs from the stores. On the basis of these promises Rev. Shuttlesworth and the leaders of the Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights agreed to call a moratorium on any type of demonstrations. As the weeks and months unfolded we realized that we were the victims of a broken promise. The signs remained. Like so many experiences of the past we were confronted with blasted hopes, and the dark shadow of a deep disappointment settled upon us. So we had no alternative except that of preparing for direct action, whereby we would present our very bodies as a means of laying our case before the conscience of the local and national community. We were not unmindful of the difficulties involved. So we decided to go through a process of self-purification. We started having workshops on nonviolence, and we repeatedly asked ourselves the questions, “Are you able to accept blows without retaliating?” “Are you able to endure the ordeals of jail?” We decided to set our direct-action program around the Easter season, realizing that with the exception of Christmas, this was the largest shopping period of the year. Knowing that a strong economic-withdrawal program would be the by-product of direct action, we felt that this was the best time to bring pressure on the merchants for the needed changes. Then it occurred to us that the March election was ahead and so we speedily decided to postpone action until after election day. When we discovered that Mr. Connor was in the run-off, we decided again to postpone action so that the demonstrations could not be used to cloud the issues. At this time we agreed to begin our nonviolent witness the day after the run-off.

This reveals that we did not move irresponsibly into direct action. We too wanted to see Mr. Connor defeated; so we went through postponement after postponement to aid in this community need. After this we felt direct action could be delayed no longer.

You may well ask, “Why direct action? Why sit ins, marches, etc.? Isn’t negotiation a better path?” You are exactly right in your call for negotiation. Indeed, this is the purpose of direct action. Nonviolent direct action seeks to create such a crisis and establish such creative tension that a community that has constantly refused to negotiate is forced to confront the issue. It seeks so to dramatize the issue that it can no longer be ignored. I just referred to the creation of tension as a part of the work of the nonviolent resister. This may sound rather shocking. But I must confess that I am not afraid of the word *tension*. I have earnestly worked and preached against violent tension, but there is a type of constructive nonviolent tension that is necessary for growth. Just as Socrates felt that it was necessary to create a tension in the mind so that individuals could rise from the bondage of myths and half-truths to the unfettered realm of creative analysis and objective appraisal, we must see the need of having nonviolent gadflies to create the kind of tension in society that will help men rise from the dark depths of prejudice and racism to the majestic heights of understanding and brotherhood. So the purpose of the direct action is to create a situation so crisis-packed that it will inevitably open the door to negotiation. We, therefore, concur with you in your call for negotiation. Too long has our beloved Southland been bogged down in the tragic attempt to live in monologue rather than dialogue.

One of the basic points in your statement is that our acts are untimely. Some have asked, “Why didn’t you give the new administration time to act?” The only answer that I can give to this inquiry is that the new administration must be prodded about as much as the outgoing one before it acts. We will be sadly mistaken if we feel that the election of Mr. Boutwell will bring the millennium to Birmingham. While Mr. Boutwell is much more articulate and gentle than Mr. Connor, they are both segregationists, dedicated to the task of maintaining the status quo. The hope I see in Mr. Boutwell is that he will be reasonable enough to see the futility of massive resistance to desegregation. But he will not



see this without pressure from the devotees of civil rights. My friends, I must say to you that we have not made a single gain in civil rights without determined legal and nonviolent pressure. History is the long and tragic story of the fact that privileged groups seldom give up their privileges voluntarily. Individuals may see the moral light and voluntarily give up their unjust posture; but as Reinhold Niebuhr has reminded us, groups are more immoral than individuals.

We know through painful experience that freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor; it must be demanded by the oppressed. Frankly, I have never yet engaged in a direct action movement that was "well timed," according to the timetable of those who have not suffered unduly from the disease of segregation. For years now I have heard the word "Wait!" It rings in the ear of every Negro with a piercing familiarity. This "Wait" has almost always meant "Never." It has been a tranquilizing thalidomide, relieving the emotional stress for a moment, only to give birth to an ill-formed infant of frustration. We must come to see with the distinguished jurist of yesterday that "justice too long delayed is justice denied." We have waited for more than 340 years for our constitutional and God-given rights. The nations of Asia and Africa are moving with jet-like speed toward the goal of political independence, and we still creep at horse and buggy pace toward the gaining of a cup of coffee at a lunch counter. I guess it is easy for those who have never felt the stinging darts of segregation to say, "Wait." But when you have seen vicious mobs lynch your mothers and fathers at will and drown your sisters and brothers at whim; when you have seen hate-filled policemen curse, kick and even kill your black brothers and sisters with impunity; when you see the vast majority of your twenty million Negro brothers smothering in an airtight cage of poverty in the midst of an affluent society; when you suddenly find your tongue twisted and your speech stammering as you seek to explain to your six-year-old daughter why she can't go to the public amusement park that has just been advertised on television, and see tears welling up in her eyes when she is told that Funtown is closed to colored children, and see the depressing clouds of inferiority begin to form in her little mental sky, and see her begin to distort her little personality by unconsciously developing a bitterness toward white people; when you have to concoct an answer for a five-year-old son asking in agonizing pathos: "Daddy, why do white people treat colored people so mean?"; when you take a cross-county drive and find it necessary to sleep night after night in the uncomfortable corners of your automobile because no motel will accept you; when you are humiliated day in and day out by nagging signs reading "white" and "colored"; when your first name becomes "nigger" and your middle name becomes "boy" (however old you are) and your last name becomes "John," and your wife and mother are never given the respected title "Mrs."; when you are harried by day and haunted by night by the fact that you are a Negro, living constantly at tiptoe stance, never quite knowing what to expect next, and plagued with inner fears and outer resentments; when you are forever fighting a degenerating sense of "nobodiness"; then you will understand why we find it difficult to wait. There comes a time when the cup of endurance runs over, and men are no longer willing to be plunged into an abyss of injustice where they experience the blackness of corroding despair. I hope, sirs, you can understand our legitimate and unavoidable impatience.

You express a great deal of anxiety over our willingness to break laws. This is certainly a legitimate concern. Since we so diligently urge people to obey the Supreme Court's decision of 1954 outlawing segregation in the public schools, it is rather strange and paradoxical to find us consciously breaking laws. One may well ask, "How can you advocate breaking some laws and obeying others?" The answer is found in the fact that there are two types of laws: there are *just* and there are *unjust* laws. I would agree with St. Augustine that "an unjust law is no law at all."

Now, what is the difference between the two? How does one determine whether a law is just or unjust? A just law is a man-made code that squares with the moral law or the law of God. An unjust law is a code that is out of harmony with the moral law. To put it in the terms of St. Thomas Aquinas: An unjust law is a human law that is not rooted in eternal and natural law. Any law that uplifts human personality is just. Any law that degrades human personality is unjust. All segregation statutes are unjust because segregation distorts the soul and damages the personality. It gives the segregator a false sense of superiority, and the segregated a false sense of inferiority. To use the words of Martin Buber, the great Jewish philosopher, segregation substitutes an "I-it" relationship for an "I-thou" relationship and ends up relegating persons to the status of things. So segregation is not only politically, economically and sociologically unsound, but it is morally wrong and sinful. Paul Tillich has said that sin is separation. Isn't segregation an existential expression of man's tragic separation, an expression of his awful estrangement, his terrible sinfulness? So I can urge men to disobey segregation ordinances because they are morally wrong.

Let us turn to a more concrete example of just and unjust laws. An unjust law is a code that a majority inflicts on





a minority that is not binding on itself. This is difference made legal. On the other hand, a just law is a code that a majority compels a minority to follow and that it is willing to follow itself. This is sameness made legal.

Let me give another explanation. An unjust law is a code inflicted upon a minority which that minority had no part in enacting or creating because they did not have the unhampered right to vote. Who can say that the legislature of Alabama which set up the segregation laws was democratically elected? Throughout the state of Alabama all types of conniving methods are used to prevent Negroes from becoming registered voters and there are some counties without a single Negro registered to vote despite the fact that the Negro constitutes a majority of the population. Can any law set up in such a state be considered democratically structured?

These are just a few examples of unjust and just laws. There are some instances when a law is just on its face and unjust in its application. For instance, I was arrested Friday on a charge of parading without a permit. Now there is nothing wrong with an ordinance which requires a permit for a parade, but when the ordinance is used to preserve segregation and to deny citizens the First Amendment privilege of peaceful assembly and peaceful protest, then it becomes unjust.

I hope you can see the distinction I am trying to point out. In no sense do I advocate evading or defying the law as the rabid segregationist would do. This would lead to anarchy. One who breaks an unjust law must do it *openly, lovingly* (not hatefully as the white mothers did in New Orleans when they were seen on television screaming, "nigger, nigger, nigger"), and with a willingness to accept the penalty. I submit that an individual who breaks a law that conscience tells him is unjust, and willingly accepts the penalty by staying in jail to arouse the conscience of the community over its injustice, is in reality expressing the very highest respect for law.

Of course, there is nothing new about this kind of civil disobedience. It was seen sublimely in the refusal of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego to obey the laws of Nebuchadnezzar because a higher moral law was at involved. It was practiced superbly by the early Christians who were willing to face hungry lions and the excruciating pain of chopping blocks, before submitting to certain unjust laws of the Roman Empire. To a degree, academic freedom is a reality today because Socrates practiced civil disobedience.

We can never forget that everything Adolf Hitler did in Germany was "legal" and everything the Hungarian freedom fighters did in Hungary was "illegal." It was "illegal" to aid and comfort a Jew in Hitler's Germany. But I am sure that if I had lived in Germany during that time I would have aided and comforted my Jewish brothers even though it was illegal. If I lived in a Communist country today where certain principles dear to the Christian faith are suppressed, I believe I would openly advocate disobeying these antireligious laws. I must make two honest confessions to you, my Christian and Jewish brothers. First, I must confess that over the last few years I have been gravely disappointed with the white moderate. I have almost reached the regrettable conclusion that the Negro's great stumbling block in the stride toward freedom is not the White Citizens Counciler or the Ku Klux Klanner, but the white moderate who is more devoted to "order" than to justice; who prefers a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice; who constantly says, "I agree with you in the goal you seek, but I can't agree with your methods of direct action"; who paternalistically believes he can set the timetable for another man's freedom; who lives by a myth of time and who constantly advised the Negro to wait until a "more convenient season." Shallow understanding from people of good will is more frustrating than absolute misunderstanding from people of ill will. Lukewarm acceptance is much more bewildering than outright rejection.

I had hoped that the white moderate would understand that law and order exist for the purpose of establishing justice, and that when they fail to do this they become dangerously structured dams that block the flow of social progress. I had hoped that the white moderate would understand that the present tension of the South is merely a necessary phase of the transition from an obnoxious negative peace, where the Negro passively accepted his unjust plight, to a substance-filled positive peace, where all men will respect the dignity and worth of human personality. Actually, we who engage in nonviolent direct action are not the creators of tension. We merely bring to the surface the hidden tension that is already alive. We bring it out in the open where it can be seen and dealt with. Like a boil that can never be cured as long as it is covered up but must be opened with all its pus-flowing ugliness to the natural medicines of air and light, injustice must likewise be exposed, with all of the tension its exposing creates, to the light of human conscience and the air of national opinion before it can be cured.

In your statement you asserted that our actions, even though peaceful, must be condemned because they



precipitate violence. But can this assertion be logically made? Isn't this like condemning the robbed man because his possession of money precipitated the evil act of robbery? Isn't this like condemning Socrates because his unswerving commitment to truth and his philosophical delivings precipitated the misguided popular mind to make him drink the hemlock? Isn't this like condemning Jesus because His unique God-consciousness and never-ceasing devotion to His will precipitated the evil act of crucifixion? We must come to see, as federal courts have consistently affirmed, that it is immoral to urge an individual to withdraw his efforts to gain his basic constitutional rights because the quest precipitates violence. Society must protect the robbed and punish the robber.

I had also hoped that the white moderate would reject the myth of time. I received a letter this morning from a white brother in Texas which said: "All Christians know that the colored people will receive equal rights eventually, but it is possible that you are in too great a religious hurry. It has taken Christianity almost two thousand years to accomplish what it has. The teachings of Christ take time to come to earth." All that is said here grows out of a tragic misconception of time. It is the strangely irrational notion that there is something in the very flow of time that will inevitably cure all ills. Actually time is neutral. It can be used either destructively or constructively. I am coming to feel that the people of ill will have used time much more effectively than the people of good will. We will have to repent in this generation not merely for the vitriolic words and actions of the bad people, but for the appalling silence of the good people. We must come to see that human progress never rolls in on wheels of inevitability. It comes through the tireless efforts and persistent work of men willing to be co-workers with God, and without this hard work time itself becomes an ally of the forces of social stagnation. We must use time creatively, and forever realize that the time is always ripe to do right. Now is the time to make real the promise of democracy, and transform our pending national elegy into a creative psalm of brotherhood. Now is the time to lift our national policy from the quicksand of racial injustice to the solid rock of human dignity.

You spoke of our activity in Birmingham as extreme. At first I was rather disappointed that fellow clergymen would see my nonviolent efforts as those of the extremist. I started thinking about the fact that I stand in the middle of two opposing forces in the Negro community. One is a force of complacency made up of Negroes who, as a result of long years of oppression, have been so completely drained of self-respect and a sense of "somebodiness" that they have adjusted to segregation, and, of a few Negroes in the middle class who, because of a degree of academic and economic security, and because at points they profit by segregation, have become insensitive to the problems of the masses. The other force is one of bitterness and hatred, and comes perilously close to advocating violence. It is expressed in the various black nationalist groups that are springing up over the nation, the largest and best known being Elijah Muhammad's Muslim movement. Nourished by the contemporary frustration over the continued existence of racial discrimination. It is made up of people who have lost faith in America, who have absolutely repudiated Christianity, and who have concluded that the white man is an incurable "devil." I have tried to stand between these two forces, saying that we need not follow the "do-nothingism" of the complacent or the hatred and despair of the black nationalist. There is the more excellent way of love and nonviolent protest. I'm grateful to God that, through the Negro church, the dimension of nonviolence entered our struggle. If this philosophy had not emerged, I am convinced that by now many streets of the South would be flowing with floods of blood. And I am further convinced that if our white brothers dismiss as "rabble-rousers" and "outside agitators" those of us who employ nonviolent direct action and refuse to support our nonviolent efforts, millions of Negroes, out of frustration and despair, will seek solace and security in black nationalist ideologies, a development that will lead inevitably to a frightening racial nightmare.

Oppressed people cannot remain oppressed forever. The urge for freedom will eventually come. This is what happened to the American Negro. Something within has reminded him of his birthright of freedom; something without has reminded him that he can gain it. Consciously and unconsciously, he has been swept in by what the Germans call the *Zeitgeist*, and with his black brothers of Africa, and his brown and yellow brothers of Asia, South America and the Caribbean, the United States Negro is moving with a sense of cosmic urgency toward the promised land of racial justice. Recognizing this vital urge that has engulfed the Negro community, one should readily understand public demonstrations. The Negro has many pent-up resentments and latent frustrations. He has to get them out. So let him march sometime; let him have his prayer pilgrimages to the city hall; understand why he must have sit-ins and freedom rides. If his repressed emotions do not come out in these nonviolent ways, they will come out in ominous expressions of violence. This is not a threat; it is a fact of history. So I have not said to my people "get rid of your discontent." But I have tried to say that this normal and healthy discontent can be channelized through the creative outlet of nonviolent direct action. Now this



approach is being dismissed as extremist. I must admit that I was initially disappointed in being so categorized.

But as I continued to think about the matter I gradually gained a bit of satisfaction from being considered an extremist. Was not Jesus an extremist in love—"Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, pray for them that despitefully use you." Was not Amos an extremist for justice—"Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream." Was not Paul an extremist for the gospel of Jesus Christ—"I bear in my body the marks of the Lord Jesus." Was not Martin Luther an extremist—"Here I stand; I can do none other so help me God." Was not John Bunyan an extremist—"I will stay in jail to the end of my days before I make a butchery of my conscience." Was not Abraham Lincoln an extremist—"This nation cannot survive half slave and half free." Was not Thomas Jefferson an extremist—"We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal." So the question is not whether we will be extremists but what kind of extremist will we be. Will we be extremists for hate or will we be extremists for love? Will we be extremists for the preservation of injustice—or will we be extremists for the cause of justice? In that dramatic scene on Calvary's hill, three men were crucified. We must not forget that all three were crucified for the same crime—the crime of extremism. Two were extremists for immorality, and thusly fell below their environment. The other, Jesus Christ, was an extremist for love, truth and goodness, and thereby rose above his environment. So, after all, maybe the South, the nation and the world are in dire need of creative extremists.

I had hoped that the white moderate would see this. Maybe I was too optimistic. Maybe I expected too much. I guess I should have realized that few members of a race that has oppressed another race can understand or appreciate the deep groans and passionate yearnings of those that have been oppressed and still fewer have the vision to see that injustice must be rooted out by strong, persistent and determined action. I am thankful, however, that some of our white brothers have grasped the meaning of this social revolution and committed themselves to it. They are still all too few in quantity, but they are big in quality. Some like Ralph McGill, Lillian Smith, Harry Golden, and James Dabbs have written about our struggle in eloquent, prophetic and understanding terms. Others have marched with us down nameless streets of the South. They have languished in filthy, roach-infested jails, suffering the abuse and brutality of angry policemen who view them as "dirty nigger-lovers." They, unlike so many of their moderate brothers and sisters, have recognized the urgency of the moment and sensed the need for powerful "action" antidotes to combat the disease of segregation.

Let me rush on to mention my other disappointment. I have been so greatly disappointed with the white church and its leadership. Of course, there are some notable exceptions. I am not unmindful of the fact that each of you has taken some significant stands on this issue. I commend you, Rev. Stallings, for your Christian stance on this past Sunday, in welcoming Negroes to your worship service on a nonsegregated basis. I commend the Catholic leaders of this state for integrating Spring Hill College several years ago.

But despite these notable exceptions I must honestly reiterate that I have been disappointed with the church. I do not say that as one of the negative critics who can always find something wrong with the church. I say it as a minister of the gospel, who loves the church; who was nurtured in its bosom; who has been sustained by its spiritual blessings and who will remain true to it as long as the cord of life shall lengthen.

I had the strange feeling when I was suddenly catapulted into the leadership of the bus protest in Montgomery several years ago that we would have the support of the white church. I felt that the white ministers, priests and rabbis of the South would be some of our strongest allies. Instead, some have been outright opponents, refusing to understand the freedom movement and misrepresenting its leaders; all too many others have been more cautious than courageous and have remained silent behind the anesthetizing security of stained-glass windows.

In spite of my shattered dreams of the past, I came to Birmingham with the hope that the white religious leadership of this community would see the justice of our cause, and with deep moral concern, serve as the channel through which our just grievances would get to the power structure. I had hoped that each of you would understand. But again I have been disappointed. I have heard numerous religious leaders of the South call upon their worshipers to comply with a desegregation decision because it is the *law*, but I have longed to hear white ministers say, "Follow this decree because integration is morally *right* and the Negro is your brother." In the midst of blatant injustices inflicted upon the Negro, I have watched white churches stand on the sideline and merely mouth pious irrelevancies and sanctimonious trivialities. In the midst of a mighty struggle to rid our nation of racial and economic injustice, I have heard so many ministers say, "Those are social issues, with which the gospel has no real concern," and I have watched so many churches commit themselves to a completely otherworldly religion which made a strange distinction between body and soul, the



sacred and the secular.

So here we are moving toward the exit of the twentieth century with a religious community largely adjusted to the status quo, standing as a taillight behind other community agencies rather than a headlight leading men to higher levels of justice.

I have traveled the length and breadth of Alabama, Mississippi and all the other southern states. On sweltering summer days and crisp autumn mornings I have looked at her beautiful churches with their lofty spires pointing heavenward. I have beheld the impressive outlay of her massive religious education buildings. Over and over I have found myself asking: "What kind of people worship here? Who is their God? Where were their voices when the lips of Governor Barnett dripped with words of interposition and nullification? Where were they when Governor Wallace gave a clarion call for defiance and hatred? Where were their voices of support when tired, bruised and weary Negro men and women decided to rise from the dark dungeons of complacency to the bright hills of creative protest?"

Yes, these questions are still in my mind. In deep disappointment I have wept over the laxity of the church. But be assured that my tears have been tears of love. There can be no deep disappointment where there is not deep love. Yes, I love the church; I love her sacred walls. How could I do otherwise? I am in the rather unique position of being the son, the grandson and the great grandson of preachers. Yes, I see the church as the body of Christ. But, oh! How we have blemished and scarred that body through social neglect and fear of being nonconformists.

There was a time when the church was very powerful. It was during that period when the early Christians rejoiced when they were deemed worthy to suffer for what they believed. In those days the church was not merely a thermometer that recorded the ideas and principles of popular opinion; it was a thermostat that transformed the mores of society. Wherever the early Christians entered a town the power structure got disturbed and immediately sought to convict them for being "disturbers of the peace" and "outside agitators." But they went on with the conviction that they were "a colony of heaven," and had to obey God rather than man. They were small in number but big in commitment. They were too God-intoxicated to be "astronomically intimidated." They brought an end to such ancient evils as infanticide and gladiatorial contest.

Things are different now. The contemporary church is often a weak, ineffectual voice with an uncertain sound. It is so often the arch-supporter of the status quo. Far from being disturbed by the presence of the church, the power structure of the average community is consoled by the church's silent and often vocal sanction of things as they are.

But the judgment of God is upon the church as never before. If the church of today does not recapture the sacrificial spirit of the early church, it will lose its authentic ring, forfeit the loyalty of millions, and be dismissed as an irrelevant social club with no meaning for the twentieth century. I am meeting young people every day whose disappointment with the church has risen to outright disgust.

Maybe again, I have been too optimistic. Is organized religion too inextricably bound to the status quo to save our nation and the world? Maybe I must turn my faith to the inner spiritual church, the church within the church, as the true *ecclesia* and the hope of the world. But again I am thankful to God that some noble souls from the ranks of organized religion have broken loose from the paralyzing chains of conformity and joined us as active partners in the struggle for freedom. They have left their secure congregations and walked the streets of Albany, Georgia, with us. They have gone through the highways of the South on tortuous rides for freedom. Yes, they have gone to jail with us. Some have been kicked out of their churches, and lost support of their bishops and fellow ministers. But they have gone with the faith that right defeated is stronger than evil triumphant. Their witness has been the spiritual salt that has preserved the true meaning of the gospel in these troubled times. They have carved a tunnel of hope through the dark mountain of disappointment.

I hope the church as a whole will meet the challenge of this decisive hour. But even if the church does not come to the aid of justice, I have no despair about the future. I have no fear about the outcome of our struggle in Birmingham, even if our motives are at present misunderstood. We will reach the goal of freedom in Birmingham and all over the nation, because the goal of America is freedom. Abused and scorned though we may be, our destiny is tied up with America's destiny. Before the pilgrims landed at Plymouth, we were here. Before the pen of Jefferson etched across the pages of history the majestic words of the Declaration of Independence, we were here. For more than two centuries our foreparents labored in this country without wages; they made cotton king; and they built the homes of their masters in the midst of brutal injustice and shameful humiliation—and yet out of a bottomless vitality they continued to thrive and develop. If the inexpressible cruelties of slavery could not stop us, the opposition we now face will surely fail.



We will win our freedom because the sacred heritage of our nation and the eternal will of God are embodied in our echoing demands.

I must close now. But before closing I am impelled to mention one other point in your statement that troubled me profoundly. You warmly commended the Birmingham police force for keeping "order" and "preventing violence." I don't believe you would have so warmly commended the police force if you had seen its angry violent dogs literally biting six unarmed, nonviolent Negroes. I don't believe you would so quickly commend the policemen if you would observe their ugly and inhuman treatment of Negroes here in the city jail; if you would watch them push and curse old Negro women and young Negro girls; if you would see them slap and kick old Negro men and young boys; if you will observe them, as they did on two occasions, refuse to give us food because we wanted to sing our grace together. I'm sorry that I can't join you in your praise for the police department.

It is true that the police have been rather disciplined in their public handling of the demonstrators. In this sense they have been rather publicly "nonviolent." But for what purpose? To preserve the evil system of segregation. Over the last few years I have consistently preached that nonviolence demands that the means we use must be as pure as the ends we seek. So I have tried to make it clear that it is wrong to use immoral means to attain moral ends. But now I must affirm that it is just as wrong, or even more so, to use moral means to preserve immoral ends. Maybe Mr. Connor and his policemen have been rather publicly nonviolent, as Chief Pritchett was in Albany, Georgia, but they have used the moral means of nonviolence to maintain the immoral end of flagrant racial injustice. T. S. Eliot has said that there is no greater treason than to do the right deed for the wrong reason.

I wish you had commended the Negro sit inners and demonstrators of Birmingham for their sublime courage, their willingness to suffer and their amazing discipline in the midst of the most inhuman provocation. One day the South will recognize its real heroes. They will be the James Merediths, courageously and with a majestic sense of purpose facing jeering and hostile mobs, and the agonizing loneliness that characterizes the life of the pioneer. They will be old, oppressed, battered Negro women, symbolized in a seventy-two-year-old woman in Montgomery, Alabama, who rose up with a sense of dignity and with her people decided not to ride segregated buses, and responded to one who inquired about her tiredness with ungrammatical profundity: "My feet is tired, but my soul is rested." They will be the young high school and college students, young ministers of the gospel and a host of their elders, courageously and nonviolently sitting in at lunch counters and willingly going to jail for conscience' sake. One day the South will know that when these disinherited children of God sat down at lunch counters they were in reality standing up for the best in the American dream and the most sacred values in our Judeo-Christian heritage, and thusly, carrying our whole nation back to those great wells of democracy which were dug deep by the Founding Fathers in the formulation of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence.

Never before have I written a letter this long (or should I say a book?). I'm afraid that it is much too long to take your precious time. I can assure you that it would have been much shorter if I had been writing from a comfortable desk, but what else is there to do when you are alone for days in the dull monotony of a narrow jail cell other than write long letters, think strange thoughts and pray long prayers?

If I have said anything in this letter that is an overstatement of the truth and is indicative of an unreasonable impatience, I beg you to forgive me. If I have said anything that is an understatement of the truth and is indicative of my having a patience that makes me patient with anything less than brotherhood, I beg God to forgive me.

I hope this letter finds you strong in the faith. I also hope that circumstances will soon make it possible for me to meet each of you, not as an integrationist or a civil rights leader, but as a fellow clergyman and a Christian brother. Let us all hope that the dark clouds of racial prejudice will soon pass away and the deep fog of misunderstanding will be lifted from our fear-drenched communities and in some not too distant tomorrow the radiant stars of love and brotherhood will shine over our great nation with all their scintillating beauty.

Yours for the cause of Peace and Brotherhood,

MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR.



## THE “LETTER”: AUDIENCE, ETHOS, PATHOS, AND LOGOS

The tone of King’s “Letter” is far from confrontational. It offers gentle correctives, a vision of events from a different perspective than his audience has taken, and information that the signers had not taken into account. King establishes a gracious tone from the outset, explaining that “since I feel that you are men of genuine good will and your criticisms are sincerely set forth, I would like to answer your statement in what I hope will be patient and reasonable terms.”<sup>131</sup>

Ethos is a category of rhetorical appeal that dates to Aristotle, and it is understood as the demonstration of the credibility of the rhetor (or speaker/writer). In an ethos-oriented appeal, King makes a two-pronged case for his ethical position: as one who has the credentials to express these ideas in the “Letter” and as a capable leader in the Civil Rights Movement. This is intended, in part, to answer the veiled critique of King and his organization that was delivered in the “Call,” which claimed that the demonstrations were “organized and led in part by outsiders.” In response to this, King asserts that the SCLC has eighty-five affiliate organizations across the South, one of which, the Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights, expressly invited the SCLC to bring its resources to bear in a nonviolent direct-action program in Birmingham. King does more than justify himself, claiming that he is called to Birmingham to fight injustice in the same way that the apostle Paul was called far beyond his homeland to spread the gospel. He reminds his audience, in perhaps the most oft-quoted phrase from the “Letter,” that “injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.” His strong argument about the necessity of a national response to the local problem in Birmingham is expressed in the apt metaphor, “We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny.”

In order to further establish his credibility—his ethos—King enlists theologians, saints, national leaders, and philosophers to his cause, claiming that he is simply acting in agreement with those men who are models of intelligence, morality, and righteousness. He cites Protestant theologian Reinhold Niebuhr to illustrate that groups of people can be more immoral than individuals, and to make the case that privileged groups in the U.S. were not likely to voluntarily give up their advantages. Saint Augustine supplies King with the observation that, “An unjust law is no law at all.” King also references Saint Thomas Aquinas and the Jewish theologian Martin Buber to underscore his point that an unjust law needs to be overturned. King cites Buber when he writes that segregation turns the “I-thou”

relationship into an “I-it” one, denying the humanity of African-Americans. King redefines and re-situates our understanding of what constitutes an “extremist” by categorizing Abraham Lincoln and Thomas Jefferson, along with the biblical figure Amos, Paul the apostle, the protestant reformer Martin Luther, and others as “extremists” for their causes. These precedents that King cites indicate that it is not he alone who holds the truths for which he campaigns—there is a lengthy and honored precedent for his actions and ideas.

Establishing the authority to speak for the movement as he does is essential, as it couches the argument in reasonable terms, as he establishes his argument’s *logos*. *Logos* is a rhetorical and literary device whereby a statement or argument attempts to persuade the listener/reader through the use of logic or reason. In his “Letter,” King makes several arguments designed to appeal to the reason of his audience. Take for example, his logical outline of the step-by-step process followed by their campaign of nonviolent direct-action:

*In any nonviolent campaign there are four basic steps: (1) collection of the facts to determine whether injustices are alive, (2) negotiation, (3) self-purification, and (4) direct action. We have gone through all of these steps in Birmingham.*

When King aligns his participation in direct-action demonstrations with the actions of the eighth-century prophets who “carried their ‘thus saith the Lord’ far beyond the boundaries of their hometowns” and with the Apostle Paul’s spreading of the gospel far beyond his home village, King presents a well-reasoned, logical justification for his involvement in the Birmingham protests that would appeal in a rather specific way to the clergymen whom he is addressing.

Perhaps the most important attribute of the letter is the way it provokes an emotional response in the reader through *pathos*-oriented rhetorical appeals. Properly done, a pathetic appeal does not display the rhetor’s anger, fear, or love, but instead stimulates these emotions in the audience, something King does with a great deal of force in the central moment of his “Letter.” For King, the most crucial complaint in the “Call for Unity” is that the direct-action program is “untimely.” He precedes the appeal to emotions with the observation that, “[I] have never yet engaged in a direct-action movement that was ‘well timed’ according to the timetable of those who have not suffered unduly from the disease of segregation.”<sup>132</sup> To those who advise



African-American leaders to “wait,” he responds that this has been ineffective, a way to tranquilize the masses and keep them in a static and unproductive state.

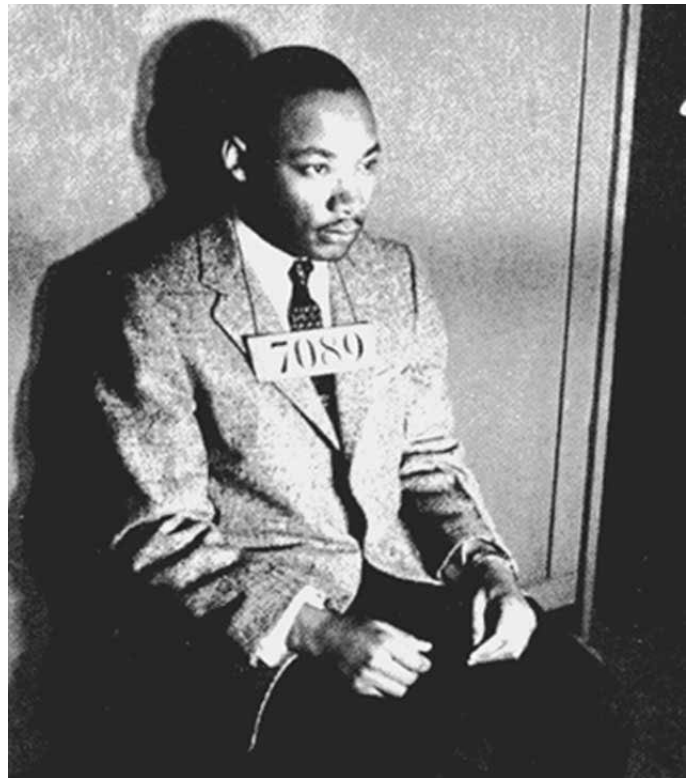
King then begins a series of emotional appeals to “those who have never felt the stinging darts of segregation.”<sup>133</sup> Using the device of anaphora, with the repetition of phrases that begin with “when,” the conjunction most evocative of time, he suggests situations in which a reasonable person would feel rage, humiliation, frustration, and defeat. When you have seen, and felt, and been treated in a manner in which black people have been treated regularly in the American South, he suggests, then you will understand the immediate necessity to act. The entire passage implies that the writer has been a personal witness to the situations he describes. The first few of scenarios are experiences of the black masses:

*But when you have seen vicious mobs lynch your mothers and fathers at will and drown your sisters and brothers at whim; when you have seen hate-filled policemen curse, kick, brutalize and even kill your black brothers and sisters with impunity; when you see the vast majority of your twenty million Negro brothers smoldering in an airtight cage of poverty in the midst of an affluent society. . . .*<sup>134</sup>

At this point, King shifts his focus to the experiences had by parents. King appeals to every parent’s desire to shield his or her offspring from suffering:

*...when you suddenly find your tongue twisted and your speech stammering as you seek to explain to your six-year-old daughter why she can’t go to the public amusement park that has just been advertised on television, and see the tears welling in her little eyes when she is told that Funtown is closed to colored children, and see the depressing clouds of inferiority begin to form in her little mental sky, and see her begin to distort her little personality by unconsciously developing a bitterness toward white people...*<sup>135</sup>

The specificity of the story compels the audience to see King himself as the parent who has undergone this humiliation. The daughter is a specific age, and Funtown is a specific place. The repetition of the word “little” reinforces that this victim of segregation is a blameless and impressionable child. The result—the bitterness toward white people—becomes for the audience a reasonable reaction with which they strongly empathize.



Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was jailed for his involvement in direct-action protests seeking civil rights for African Americans.

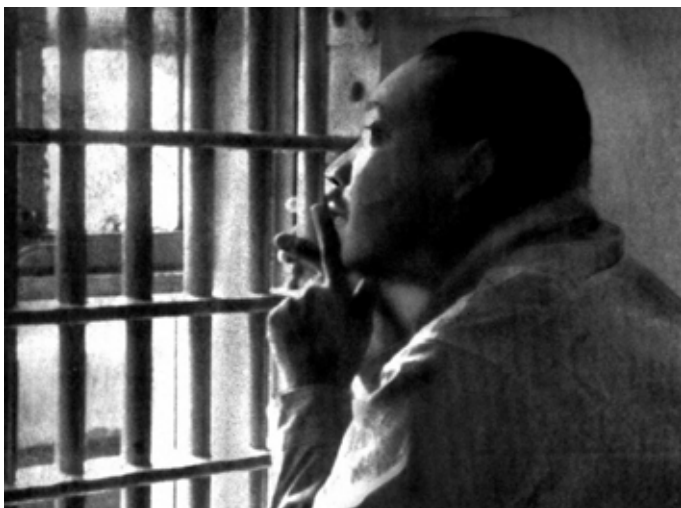
Several other situations are invoked in what remains of that paragraph:

*...when you have to concoct an answer for a five-year-old son asking in agonizing pathos: “Daddy, why do white people treat colored people so mean?”; when you take a cross-county drive and find it necessary to sleep night after night in the uncomfortable corners of your automobile because no motel will accept you; when you are humiliated day in and day out by nagging signs reading “white” and “colored”...*

King finally comes to the answer to these experiences: “Then you will understand why we find it difficult to wait,” he tells the writers of the “Call,” and by extension every reader of the “Letter.”

As discussed earlier, the *logos* of a text refers most commonly to its structure, its presentation of points on the way toward making an argument that appeals to the audience’s logic and reason. The word “*logos*” can also be translated to simply mean a “word” that is uttered in





Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. looks out the window of a jail cell. This photo was taken by the Rev. Wyatt Tee Walker in October 1967, when both leaders served time in the Jefferson County Jail in Birmingham.

Photograph United Press International

order to express a concept. King's rhetorical *logos* uses a strategy whereby he examines the meaning of a word from different perspectives, casting new light on what the word might signify. Three such words are "tension," "law," and "extremism."<sup>136</sup>

When King advocates sit-ins, marches, and other forms of direct action, he does so not for the sake of the action, but for the tension it causes that leads to precisely what the writers of the "Call" most strongly support—negotiations with government representatives to change unjust policies. "I must confess I am not afraid of the word *tension*" (italics his), proclaims King, stating that he has "preached against violent tension" but sees tremendous potential in "constructive nonviolent tension that is necessary for growth."<sup>137</sup> King insists that until a situation reaches a critical level of discomfort, it is too easy for those in power to protect and maintain the status quo.

After establishing that the present is the right moment for direct action, and that his action plan will lead to productive negotiations—which is a *logos*-oriented appeal to his audience—King turns to the clergy's concerns about demonstrators' willingness to break laws. This strategy augments his direct response to "A Call for Unity" with a response to "[An Appeal for Law and Order and Common Sense](#)," a previous editorial that was published on January 16, 1963, by many of the same signatories. King opens his inquiry into the topic of the law by pointing out that

his group is diligent about urging people to obey the law, namely the Supreme Court's *Brown v. Board of Education* decision in 1954 that outlawed segregation in public schools. He acknowledges the apparent paradox that some laws must be broken in order to urge adherence to another law, but goes on to differentiate between just and unjust laws.

Before giving concrete examples of just and unjust laws, King undertakes a historical and philosophical discussion of the law as it is addressed by [Augustine](#), [Aquinas](#), [Tillich](#), and [Buber](#). He examines the morality of law in an essential manner that claims that a just law is natural and recognizes the inherent value of all human beings. "An unjust law," he writes, "is a code that a majority inflicts on a minority that is not binding on itself." The inverse, he concludes, is a just law.<sup>138</sup> He furthers his case by calling unjust a "code inflicted upon a minority that the minority had no part in enacting or creating because they did not have the unhampered right to vote"—a condition that was clearly evident in Alabama in 1963.<sup>139</sup>

Reminding his audience from where it is he that he writes, King admits that there is nothing essentially wrong with a law that requires a permit for a parade. He goes on to write, "but when the ordinance is used to preserve segregation and to deny citizens the First Amendment privilege of peaceful assembly and peaceful protest, then it becomes unjust." He claims that he breaks the law "*openly, lovingly*" (his italics) and with a willingness to accept the consequences. He equates his violation of the law to various historical examples that hold particular appeal to his audience of clergy—the civil disobedience of Christians who adhered to a higher moral law than that of earthly governments and those who offered aid to Jews in Nazi Germany even though it was unlawful to do so. Obedience to an unjust law, King implies, is a moral compromise that must not be tolerated, and this line of thought allows him to express his disappointment with the "white moderate" who has insisted that all advancement toward racial equality must be done "lawfully."

Another word that King examines is "extremism." After expressing disappointment that nonviolent action would be seen as extreme, he situates his methods in the middle of two opposing forces in the black community. He calls them "'the do-nothingism' of the complacent, and the hatred and despair of the black nationalist." The former refers to blacks who have either adjusted to segregation and/or have achieved middle-class status. The latter are black nationalist groups like Elijah Muhammed's [Nation of Islam](#),







Author Toni Cade Bambara.

which [Malcolm X](#) belonged to for much of his public life. Here King rejects the label of “extremist,” showing that between complacency and violent confrontation, he and those in the Civil Rights Movement hold the middle ground.

However, he then goes on to reevaluate what it means to be an extremist and does some further work to establish his *ethos*, embracing the label of “extremist” as one that links him with Jesus, Martin Luther, Thomas Jefferson, Abraham Lincoln, and others. They are “extremists for love.” He uses the positive value of “creative extremists” as a contrast to the notions held first by white moderates and then by the white church and its leadership. In this way, he chides the various denominations who have seen the evils of segregation and taken a wait-and-see approach.

### **CONCLUSION: KAIROS AND TELOS**

King’s logical argument maintains its rational tone throughout. The overall effect is one in which the reader feels a build-up of force behind the points in the argument, as points are articulated, one by one. Two more Aristotelean rhetorical terms can help us gain a further understanding of the force of King’s argument. One is *kairos*, a rhetorical appeal that “acknowledge[s] and draw[s] support from the particular setting, time, and place where a speech occurs.”<sup>140</sup> The fact that the “Letter” was written in a jail contributes to the *ethos* behind King’s arguments. He excuses the length of his letter by asking, “[W]hat else is there to do when you are alone for days in

the dull monotony of a narrow jail cell other than write long letters, think strange thoughts, and pray long prayers?”<sup>141</sup>

*Telos* in Aristotelean rhetoric concerns the purpose of a speech—why it is written and delivered in the first place. While King seems to address this “Letter” to the greater understanding of some specific clergy, his larger purpose is to lay out the significant ethical, moral, and practical elements of the Civil Rights struggle. Indeed, King’s “Letter” was never delivered to any of the signers of “The Call for Unity,” but it was published in journals and magazines and ultimately in an estimated fifty-eight textbooks intended for use in college composition courses.<sup>142</sup> King’s “Letter” provides a compelling argument on behalf of activists while at the same time serving as an instructive example of effective argumentation.

## **TONI CADE BAMBARA’S “THE LESSON”**

### **TONI CADE BAMBARA: LIFE AND WORK**

Toni Cade Bambara (1939–95), the author of “The Lesson,” was active in the [Black Arts Movement](#) (BAM) in the 1960s and early 1970s, was influenced by the political direction of much of the writing in BAM, and was a leading voice of Black Feminism. She was the author of two collections of short stories and two novels, as well as many influential essays, including the preface to the feminist anthology *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*. A native of Harlem in New York City, she worked with a number of arts organizations and as the recreation director in the psychiatric ward of Metropolitan Hospital. Her career as writer-in-residence and as a teacher of screenwriting brought her to colleges in New Jersey, Philadelphia, Atlanta, and Missouri.

Bambara’s first collection in which “The Lesson” appeared, titled *Gorilla, My Love*, was published in 1972 and included fifteen stories written between 1960 and 1970. Many of these stories featured narrators or protagonists similar to Sylvia in “The Lesson”: tough-talking and indomitable young girls who turn out to be more sensitive than they at first appear.



## SELECTED WORK “THE LESSON” BY TONI CADE BAMBARA

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Back in the days when everyone was old and stupid or young and foolish and me and Sugar were the only ones just right, this lady moved on our block with nappy hair and proper speech and no makeup. And quite naturally we laughed at her, laughed the way we did at the junk man who went about his business like he was some big-time president and his sorry-ass horse his secretary. And we kinda hated her too, hated the way we did the winos who cluttered up our parks and pissed on our handball walls and stank up our hallways and stairs so you couldn't halfway play hide-and-seek without a goddamn gas mask. Miss Moore was her name. The only woman on the block with no first name. And she was black as hell, cept for her feet, which were fish-white and spooky. And she was always planning these boring-ass things for us to do, us being my cousin, mostly, who lived on the block cause we all moved North the same time and to the same apartment then spread out gradual to breathe. And our parents would yank our heads into some kinda shape and crisp up our clothes so we'd be presentable for travel with Miss Moore, who always looked like she was going to church, though she never did. Which is just one of the things the grown-ups talked about when they talked behind her back like a dog. But when she came calling with some sachet she'd sewed up or some gingerbread she'd made or some book, why then they'd all be too embarrassed to turn her down and we'd get handed over all spruced up. She'd been to college and said it was only right that she should take responsibility for the young ones' education, and she not even related by marriage or blood. So they'd go for it. Specially Aunt Gretchen. She was the main gofer in the family. You got some ole dumb shit foolishness you want somebody to go for, you send for Aunt Gretchen. She been screwed into the go-along for so long, it's a blood-deep natural thing with her. Which is how she got saddled with me and Sugar and Junior in the first place while our mothers were in a la-de-da apartment up the block having a good ole time.

So this one day Miss Moore rounds us all up at the mailbox and it's pure-dee hot and she's knocking herself out about arithmetic. And school suppose to let up in summer I heard, but she don't never let us. And the starch in my pinafore scratching the shit outta me and I'm really hating this nappy-head bitch and her goddamn college degree. I'd much rather go to the pool or to the show where it's cool. So me and Sugar leaning on the mailbox being surly, which is a Miss Moore word. And Flyboy checking out what everybody brought for lunch. And Fat Butt already wasting his peanut-butter-and-jelly sandwich like the pig he is. And Junebug punchin on Q.T.'s arm for potato chips. And Rosie Giraffe shifting from one hip to the other waiting for somebody to step on her foot or ask her if she from Georgia so she can kick ass, perferably Mercedes'. And Miss Moore asking us do we know what money is, like we a bunch of retards. I mean real money, she say, like it's only poker chips or monopoly papers we lay on the grocer. So right away I'm tired of this and say so. And would much rather snatch Sugar and go to the Sunset and terrorize the West Indian kids and take their hair ribbons and their money too. And Miss Moore files that remark away for next week's lesson on brotherhood, I can tell. And finally I say we oughta get to the subway cause it's cooler and besides we might meet some cute boys. Sugar done swiped her mama's lipstick, we ready.

So we heading down the street and she's boring us silly about what things cost and what our parents make and how much goes for rent and how money ain't divided up right in this country. And then she gets to the part about we all poor and live in the slums, which I don't feature. And I'm ready to speak on that, but she steps out in the street and hails two cabs just like that. Then she hustles half the crew in with her and hands me a five-dollar bill and tells me to calculate 10 percent tip for the driver. And we're off. Me and Sugar and Junebug and Flyboy hangin out the window and hollering to everybody, putting lipstick on each other cause Flyboy a faggot anyway, and making farts with our sweaty armpits. But I'm mostly trying to figure how to spend this money. But they all fascinated with the meter ticking and Junebug starts laying bets as to how much it'll read when Flyboy can't hold his breath no more. Then Sugar lays bets as to how much it'll be when we get there. So I'm stuck. Don't nobody want to go for my plan, which is to jump out at the next light and run off to the first bar-b-que we can find. Then the driver tells us to get the hell out cause we there already. And the meter reads eight-five cents. And I'm stalling to figure out the tip and Sugar say give him a dime. And



I decide he don't need it bad as I do, so later for him. But then he tries to take off with Junebug foot still in the door so we talk about his mama something ferocious. Then we check out that we on Fifth Avenue and everybody dressed up in stockings. One lady in a fur coat, hot as it is. White folks crazy.

"This is the place," Miss Moore say, presenting it to us in the voice she uses at the museum. "Let's look in the windows before we go in."

"Can we steal?" Sugar asks very serious like she's getting the ground rules squared away before she plays. "I beg your pardon," say Miss Moore, and we fall out. So she leads us around the windows of the toy store and me and Sugar screamin, "This is mine, that's mine, I gotta have that, that was made for me, I was born for that," till Big Butt drowns us out.

"Hey, I'm going to buy that there." "That there? You don't even know what it is, stupid."

"I do so," he say punchin on Rosie Giraffe. "It's a microscope."

"Whatcha gonna do with a microscope, fool?"

"Look at things."

"Like what, Ronald?" ask Miss Moore. And Big Butt ain't got the first notion. So here go Miss Moore gabbing about the thousands of bacteria in a drop of water and the somethinorother in a speck of blood and the million and one living things in the air around us is invisible to the naked eye. And what she say that for? Junebug go to town on that "naked" and we rolling. Then Miss Moore ask what it cost. So we all jam into the window smudgin it up and the price tag say \$300. So then she ask how long'd take for Big Butt and Junebug to save up their allowances. "Too long," I say. "Yeh," adds Sugar, "outgrown it by that time." And Miss Moore say no, you never outgrow learning instruments. "Why, even medical students and interns and, "blah, blah, blah. And we ready to choke Big Butt for bringing it up in the first damn place.

"This here costs four hundred eighty dollars," say Rosie Giraffe. So we pile up all over her to see what she pointin out. My eyes tell me it's a chunk of glass cracked with something heavy, and different-color inks dripped into the splits, then the whole thing put into a oven or something. But for \$480 it don't make sense.

"That's a paperweight made of semi-precious stones fused together under tremendous pressure," she explains slowly, with her hands doing the mining and all the factory work.

"So what's a paperweight?" asks Rosie Giraffe.

"To weigh paper with, dumbbell," say Flyboy, the wise man from the East.

"Not exactly," say Miss Moore, which is what she say when you warm or way off too. "It's to weigh paper down so it won't scatter and make your desk untidy." So right away me and Sugar curtsy to each other and then to Mercedes who is more the tidy type.

"We don't keep paper on top of the desk in my class," say Junebug, figuring Miss Moore crazy or lyin one.

"At home, then," she say. "Don't you have a calendar and a pencil case and a blotter and a letter-opener on your desk at home where you do your homework?" And she know damn well what our homes look like cause she nosy around in them every chance she gets.

"I don't even have a desk," say Junebug. "Do we?"

"No. And I don't get no homework neither," say Big Butt.

"And I don't even have a home," say Flyboy like he do at school to keep the white folks off his back and sorry for him. Send this poor kid to camp posters is his specialty.

"I do," says Mercedes. "I have a box of stationery on my desk and a picture of my cat. My godmother bought the stationery and the desk. There's a big rose on each sheet and the envelopes smell like roses."

"Who wants to know about your smelly-ass stationery," say Rosie Giraffe fore I can get my two cents in.

"It's important to have a work area all your own so that ..."

"Will you look at this sailboat, please," say Flyboy, cutting her off and pointin to the thing like it was his. So once again we tumble all over each other to gaze at this magnificent thing in the toy store which is just big enough to maybe sail two kittens across the pond if you strap them to the posts tight. We all start reciting the price tag like we in assembly. "Handcrafted sailboat of fiberglass at one thousand one hundred ninety-five dollars."

"Unbelievable," I hear myself say and am really stunned. I read it again for myself just in case the group recitation put me in a trance. Same thing. For some reason this pisses me off. We look at Miss Moore and she lookin at us,



waiting for I dunno what.

"Who'd pay all that when you can buy a sailboat set for a quarter at Pop's, a tube of glue for a dime, and a ball of string for eight cents? It must have a motor and a whole lot else besides," I say. "My sailboat cost me about fifty cents."

"But will it take water?" say Mercedes with her smart ass.

"Took mine to Alley Pond Park once," say Flyboy. "String broke. Lost it. Pity."

"Sailed mine in Central Park and it keeled over and sank. Had to ask my father for another dollar."

"And you got the strap," laugh Big Butt. "The jerk didn't even have a string on it. My old man wailed on his behind."

Little Q.T. was staring hard at the sailboat and you could see he wanted it bad. But he too little and somebody'd just take it from him. So what the hell. "This boat for kids, Miss Moore?"

"Parents silly to buy something like that just to get all broke up," say Rosie Giraffe.

"That much money it should last forever," I figure.

"My father'd buy it for me if I wanted it."

"Your father, my ass," say Rosie Giraffe getting a chance to finally push Mercedes.

"Must be rich people shop here," say Q.T.

"You are a very bright boy," say Flyboy. "What was your first clue?" And he rap him on the head with the back of his knuckles, since Q.T. the only one he could get away with. Though Q.T. liable to come up behind you years later and get his licks in when you half expect it.

"What I want to know," I says to Miss Moore though I never talk to her, I wouldn't give the bitch that satisfaction, "is how much a real boat costs? I figure a thousand'd get you a yacht any day."

"Why don't you check that out," she says, "and report back to the group?" Which really pains my ass. If you gonna mess up a perfectly good swim day least you could do is have some answers. "Let's go in," she say like she got something up her sleeve. Only she don't lead the way. So me and Sugar turn the corner to where the entrance is, but when we get there I kinda hang back. Not that I'm scared, what's there to be afraid of, just a toy store. But I feel funny, shame. But what I got to be shamed about? Got as much right to go in as anybody. But somehow I can't seem to get hold of the door, so I step away for Sugar to lead. But she hangs back too. And I look at her and she looks at me and this is ridiculous. I mean, damn, I have never ever been shy about doing nothing or going nowhere. But then Mercedes steps up and then Rosie Giraffe and Big Butt crowd in behind and shove, and next thing we all stuffed into the doorway with only Mercedes squeezing past us, smoothing out her jumper and walking right down the aisle. Then the rest of us tumble in like a glued-together jigsaw done all wrong. And people looking at us. And it's like the time me and Sugar crashed into the Catholic church on a dare. But once we got in there and everything so hushed and holy and the candles and the bowin and the handkerchiefs on all the drooping heads, I just couldn't go through with the plan. Which was for me to run up to the altar and do a tap dance while Sugar played the nose flute and messed around in the holy water. And Sugar kept givin me the elbow. Then later teased me so bad I tied her up in the shower and turned it on and locked her in. And she'd be there till this day if Aunt Gretchen hadn't finally figured I was lyin about the boarder taking a shower.

Same thing in the store. We all walkin on tiptoe and hardly touchin the games and puzzles and things. And I watched Miss Moore who is steady watchin us like she waiting for a sign. Like Mama Drewery watches the sky and sniffs the air and takes note of just how much slant is in the bird formation. Then me and Sugar bump smack into each other, so busy gazing at the toys, 'specially the sailboat. But we don't laugh and go into our fat-lady bump-stomach routine. We just stare at that price tag. Then Sugar run a finger over the whole boat. And I'm jealous and want to hit her. Maybe not her, but I sure want to punch somebody in the mouth.

"Watcha bring us here for, Miss Moore?"

"You sound angry, Sylvia. Are you mad about something?" Givin me one of them grins like she tellin a grown-up joke that never turns out to be funny. And she's lookin very closely at me like maybe she plannin to do my portrait from memory. I'm mad, but I won't give her that satisfaction. So I slouch around the store bein very bored and say, "Let's go."

Me and Sugar at the back of the train watchin the tracks whizzin by large then small then gettin gobbled up in the dark. I'm thinkin about this tricky toy I saw in the store. A clown that somersaults on a bar then does chin-ups just cause you yank lightly at his leg. Cost \$35. I could see me asking my mother for a \$35 birthday clown. "You wanna who that costs what?" she'd say, cocking her head to the side to get a better view of the hole in my head. Thirty-five



dollars could buy new bunk beds for Junior and Gretchen's boy. Thirty-five dollars and the whole household could visit Granddaddy Nelson in the country. Thirty-five dollars would pay for the rent and the piano bill too. Who are these people that spend that much for performing clowns and \$1,000 for toy sailboats? What kinda work they do and how they live and how come we ain't in on it? Where we are is who we are, Miss Moore always pointin out. But it don't necessarily have to be that way, she always adds then waits for somebody to say that poor people have to wake up and demand their share of the pie and don't none of us know what kind of pie she talkin about in the first damn place. But she ain't so smart cause I still got her four dollars from the taxi and she sure ain't getting it. Messin up my day with this shit. Sugar nudges me in my pocket and winks.

Miss Moore lines us up in front of the mailbox where we started from, seem like years ago, and I got a headache for thinkin so hard. And we lean all over each other so we can hold up under the draggy-ass lecture she always finishes us off with at the end before we thank her for borin us to tears. But she just looks at us like she readin tea leaves. Finally she say, "Well, what did you think of F.A.O. Schwarz?"

Rosie Giraffe mumbles, "White folks crazy."

"I'd like to go there again when I get my birthday money," says Mercedes, and we shove her out the pack so she has to lean on the mailbox by herself.

"I'd like a shower. Tiring day," say Flyboy.

Then Sugar surprises me by sayin, "You know, Miss Moore, I don't think all of us here put together eat in a year what that sailboat costs." And Miss Moore lights up like somebody goosed her. "And?" she say, urging Sugar on. Only I'm standin on her foot so she don't continue.

"Imagine for a minute what kind of society it is in which some people can spend on a toy what it would cost to feed a family of six or seven. What do you think?"

"I think," say Sugar pushing me off her feet like she never done before, cause I whip her ass in a minute, "that this is not much of a democracy if you ask me. Equal chance to pursue happiness means an equal crack at the dough, don't it?" Miss Moore is besides herself and I am disgusted with Sugar's treachery. So I stand on her foot one more time to see if she'll shove me. She shuts up, and Miss Moore looks at me, sorrowfully I'm thinkin. And somethin weird is goin on, I can feel it in my chest.

"Anybody else learn anything today?" looking dead at me. I walk away and Sugar has to run to catch up and don't even seem to notice when I shrug her arm off my shoulder.

"Well, we got four dollars anyway," she says.

"Uh, hunh."

"We could go to Hascombs and get half a chocolate layer and then go to the Sunset and still have plenty money for potato chips and ice-cream sodas."

"Uh, hunh."

"Race you to Hascombs," she say.

We start down the block and she gets ahead which is O.K. by me cause I'm going to the West End and then over to the Drive to think this day through. She can run if she want to and even run faster. But ain't nobody gonna beat me at nuthin.

## "THE LESSON": ANALYSIS

Sylvia, the protagonist and narrator of Toni Cade Bambara's "The Lesson," is sassy and quick-witted, exuberant, and intelligent. She is a streetwise, keen observer of her world, and in the course of the day on which the story is set, she comes to know something of the unknown expanse of the world outside her familiar boundaries, acknowledging the limited geography of her street. The lesson that she learns may alter the course of her life; the lesson for the reader comes as an expanded

awareness of poverty in a black urban environment.

The great appeal of the story is the lively, colorful voice with which the narrator, Sylvia, captures her environment and the action of the day in question. The rapid succession of colorful observations creates a vivid picture of the Harlem neighborhood in which Sylvia lives and the unique cast of characters that populate this world. Sylvia's in-your-face, direct approach renders her generally likeable to the reader, and the expression of her attitudes, thoughts, and





Toni Cade Bambara.

desires make her a character with whom a wide range of readers can identify. The sympathetic nature of a young black girl raised in poverty in the inner city can be a revelation for readers with little exposure to urban life.

The reader knows Sylvia's name because Miss Moore addresses her that way. She is likely to be known by a different moniker by her peers, as her friends go by Sugar, Fat Butt, Flyboy, and Rosie Giraffe. Only Mercedes seems to go without a nickname, and the others regard her with disdain. They feel she is pretentious and uppity, aligning her with Miss Moore, the woman who has taken it upon herself to educate the neighborhood children.

It is through the lengthy description of Miss Moore that Sylvia as narrator captures the setting of the story. One of the first of Miss Moore's characteristics that gets mentioned is that she "talked proper," a trait that young Sylvia shows does not apply to herself. One assumes that Miss Moore speaks in a relatively proper manner, what a linguist might label Standard American English (SAE), while the story is written in African-American Vernacular English (AAVE), also known as Black American English or Ebonics.<sup>143</sup> The language does establish a community, a "we" who are entitled to pass judgement on Miss Moore. "Quite naturally, we laughed at her," Sylvia declares unequivocally, and "we kind of hated her too." The community feeling extends to the adults in the neighborhood, who "talked behind her back like a dog."<sup>144</sup> The grownups tolerate Miss Moore, and even spruce up their homes in expectation of her visits, because Miss Moore, having been to college, has taken responsibility for the education of the neighborhood youths. A secondary reason for their appreciation of Miss Moore is that she takes the children off their hands for an afternoon from time to time.

Sylvia's attitude toward Miss Moore and her lessons on the day in question prepare the reader for an adult with middle-class pretensions—someone who acts "dicty" in African-American parlance. "[S]he's knocking herself out about arithmetic," complains Sylvia, and "school suppose to let up in the summer."<sup>145</sup> The reader understands early on that Miss Moore is speaking of economics in the U.S., with an informed understanding of the disparity between the haves and have-nots. She will challenge the confidence and surety with which Sylvia masters her world as the day goes on. Before they get in their cabs for the momentous trip, Miss Moore "gets to the part about how we all poor and live in the slums," a point of view, according to Sylvia, "which I don't feature"—here "feature" is used to mean "comprehend" or "understand" or "agree with." To Sylvia, her world is simply *the world*, for which she has no basis for comparison. Before she is able to voice her opposition to this idea of their poverty, she and her friends are loaded into cabs for a trip to the F.A.O. Schwartz toy store.

The juxtaposition of this group of streetwise, unruly kids and the Manhattan landmark of high-priced toys is comic and devastatingly sad. While readers may laugh at the manner in which the children apprehend their surroundings, it is also apparent that their misunderstandings are wholly due to their unfamiliarity with such luxurious kinds of playthings. Fat Butt spies a microscope that he lays claim to, but when Miss Moore, addressing him by his given name of Ronald, asks what he would do with such an instrument, he has no clue. Miss Moore has a ready explanation, which Sylvia reports:

*So here go Miss Moore gabbing about the thousands of bacteria in a drop of water and the somthinorother in a speck of blood and the million and one living things in the air around us that is invisible to the naked eye. And what she say that for? Junebug go to town on that 'naked' and we rolling.<sup>146</sup>*

The humor comes from the very informative lecture from which the children gather only that the word "naked" has been used.

But Miss Moore's intent has not been to educate her charges on the use of the microscope—the real lesson begins when she asks the price of the microscope. When they discover that it costs \$300, they realize that such a thing would be unobtainable for young Big Butt. (According to an online CPI calculator, \$300 in circa 1969 would be equivalent to over \$2,000 in 2017). This discovery rapidly leads to others—a paperweight made of semi-precious stones for \$480, and the central object



of scrutiny, a handcrafted sailboat with a price tag of nearly \$1,200. The seemingly unflappable Sylvia is taken aback by this: “‘Unbelievable,’ I hear myself say and am really stunned.”<sup>147</sup> This revelation has penetrated Sylvia’s defenses. The sailboat’s price has a particular relevance for the group of children because they all have experiences of sailing boats on the local waterways of Alley Pond or Central Park.

But the difficulty of holding in their minds their own sailboat experiences and the inconceivable \$1,200 for a toy is palpable. They imagine that fifty cents would buy a sailboat kit at the local store, and they tell stories of the sorry fates of their past sailboat adventures, in which boats either sunk or were lost as they blew across the pond. The question Sylvia asks, despite her claim that she never addresses Miss Moore, is about the comparable price of a real yacht; she believes that a thousand dollars would be sufficient for a real, full-sized yacht. Moore suggests that Sylvia do some research on the question and report back to the group, which refreshes Sylvia’s animosity toward her.

Sylvia, her best friend Sugar, and the whole group are deeply and profoundly affected by the new world in which they find themselves. The supremely confident Sylvia has lost her secure footing, and when Miss Moore suggests that they go into the store, she hesitates and hangs back, rather than boldly plunging in. “Not that I’m scared,” she insists, because, “what’s there to be afraid of, just a toy store. But I feel funny, shame.”<sup>148</sup> The awkwardness felt by the group is vividly expressed in the description of their entry to the store. After the self-confident Mercedes has calmly entered the store, “[T]hen the rest of us tumble in like a glued-together jigsaw done all wrong.”<sup>149</sup> After some uncomfortable meandering in the store, they leave and take the subway home.

A last reckoning of the different worlds is inspired by Sylvia’s thoughts on a \$35 semi-mechanical clown she spies at the store. Imagining how her mother would respond if asked for a \$35 toy clown, she posits how the money could be used in her world:

*Thirty-five dollars could buy new bunk beds for Junior and Gretchen’s boy. Thirty-five dollars and the whole household could go visit Grand-daddy Nelson in the country. Thirty-five dollars would pay for the rent and the piano bill.*<sup>150</sup>

The re-connection to her own world causes her to wonder about the other world and what kind of people could afford a thousand-dollar sailboat.

When Miss Moore asks for a coming-to-terms with the day, Sylvia’s friend Sugar, in what is described by Sylvia as “treachery,” gives Miss Moore what she desires, asking what kind of democracy it is that fails to give all citizens an “equal crack at the dough.” It is a question with an obvious answer, and “Miss Moore is beside herself” with happiness to have been asked it. Sylvia sees Sugar’s response to Miss Moore as a sham, and the reader begins to suspect the same when Sugar wants to take a few dollars pilfered from the cab money given to them by Miss Moore to buy junk food. Sylvia, however, is unable to simply return to normalcy after the profound revelations of the day. She leaves Sugar to go off by herself and “to think this day through,” vowing that “ain’t nobody gonna beat me at nuthin.” Miss Moore seems to have planted a seed of realization and resolve that is potentially transformative for one of her “students.”

## **ETHERIDGE KNIGHT: “THE IDEA OF ANCESTRY”**

### **ETHERIDGE KNIGHT: LIFE AND WORK**

A number of prominent black activists and artists who came of age in the 1960s experienced dramatic social and intellectual rebirths while they served time in prison. A revolution in black consciousness took place in their prison cells. As one of many examples, one can look to *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, which traces the eponymous memoirist’s development, as he spends much of his youth as a small-time criminal, but becomes a politically conscious orator and a leader in the struggle for civil rights. Eldridge Cleaver’s *Soul on Ice* is a series of essays that likewise traces the development of a criminal into a leader of the Black Power Movement. George Jackson’s *Soledad Brother: The Prison Letters of George Jackson* tells the story of an eighteen-year-old petty criminal who is incarcerated for life and reinvents himself as a committed revolutionary. Imprisonment can be dehumanizing and contrary to rehabilitation for many young offenders, but for these men it served to connect them with revolutionaries, intellectuals, and spiritual leaders. In prison, they developed their formidable intelligence and applied it in critiques of the American social system, which they viewed as unjust.

Etheridge Knight (1931–91), author of the poem “The Idea of Ancestry,” ranks among the most important prison writers of the 1960s, though the emphasis of Knight’s writing is on personal experience and the varieties of language rather than on revolutionary consciousness. Knight spent most of the decade, from 1960–68, in an Indiana prison, where he

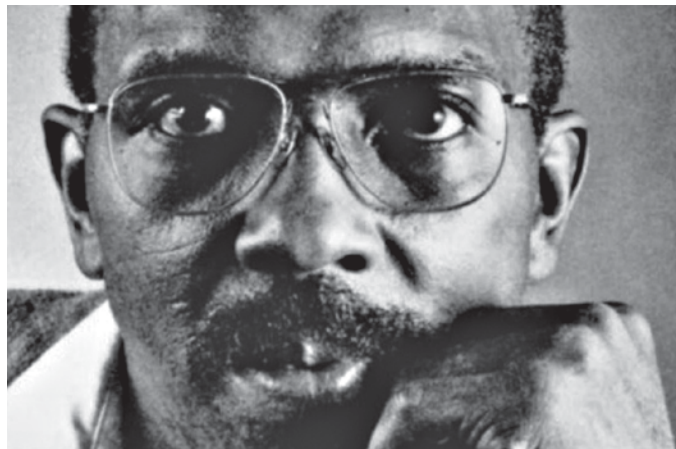


dedicated himself to reading and to expressing himself in poetry.

When he was sixteen, Knight dropped out of school, joined the army, and served in the Korean War as a medical technician. He was injured by shrapnel and subsequently became addicted to opiates. Knight's ensuing life of drug dealing and theft was a direct result of his need to feed his opiate habit. In the decade following his release from the army in 1960, Knight spent his time in pool halls, bars, and underground gambling parlors, where he was immersed in urban slang. He would take this ear for language into prison with him, where he began writing his poems in the early 1960s.

Knight began to see himself as part of a community of black poets, and he began correspondences with several accomplished poets, including Dudley Randall, Gwendolyn Brooks, and Sonia Sanchez (to whom he would be married from 1968–70). Impressed by Knight's developing talent, Randall arranged to have his first collection, *Poems from Prison*, published nearly a year prior to Knight's release from prison.

Upon gaining his freedom, and with the success of his poems, especially in live performances, Knight was in the forefront of the Black Arts Movement, along with writers like Amiri Baraka, Haki Madhubuti, and Sanchez. Their aim was to produce writing that would be relevant and important to a black audience. Several other collections



The poet Etheridge Knight.

followed *Poems from Prison*, and Knight served as editor-in-chief of an anthology entitled *Black Voices from Prison*.

It was only in 1977 that Knight made the decision to go on methadone in order to stop using heroin. In 1990 he earned his B.A. degree in American Poetry and Criminal Justice, and in the early 1990s, he took temporary teaching positions at the University of Pittsburgh, the University of Hartford, and Lincoln University. In 1991, Knight died of lung cancer. Knight's obituary in *The New York Times* included a quote from him, in which he sums up the stages of his life: "I died in Korea from a shrapnel wound and narcotics resurrected me. I died in 1960 from a prison sentence and poetry brought me back to life."<sup>151</sup>

## SELECTED WORK: "THE IDEA OF ANCESTRY" BY ETHERIDGE KNIGHT

"The Idea of Ancestry" from *The Essential Etheridge Knight*, by Etheridge Knight, © 1986. Reprinted by permission of the University of Pittsburgh Press.

1

Taped to the wall of my cell are 47 pictures: 47 black faces: my father, mother, grandmothers (1 dead), grandfathers (both dead), brothers, sisters, uncles, aunts, cousins (1st and 2nd), nieces, and nephews. They stare across the space at me sprawling on my bunk. I know their dark eyes, they know mine. I know their style, they know mine. I am all of them, they are all of me; they are farmers, I am a thief, I am me, they are thee.





I have at one time or another been in love with my mother,  
1 grandmother, 2 sisters, 2 aunts (1 went to the asylum),  
and 5 cousins. I am now in love with a 7-yr-old niece  
(she sends me letters in large block print, and  
her picture is the only one that smiles at me).

I have the same name as 1 grandfather, 3 cousins, 3 nephews,  
and 1 uncle. The uncle disappeared when he was 15, just took  
off and caught a freight (they say). He's discussed each year  
when the family has a reunion, he causes uneasiness in  
the clan, he is an empty space. My father's mother, who is 93  
and who keeps the Family Bible with everybody's birth dates  
(and death dates) in it, always mentions him. There is no  
place in her Bible for "whereabouts unknown."

2

Each fall the graves of my grandfathers call me, the brown  
hills and red gullies of mississippi send out their electric  
messages, galvanizing my genes. Last yr/like a salmon quitting  
the cold ocean-leaping and bucking up his birth stream/I  
hitchhiked my way from LA with 16 caps in my pocket and a  
monkey on my back. And I almost kicked it with the kinfolks.  
I walked barefooted in my grandmother's backyard/I smelled the  
old  
land and the woods/I sipped cornwhiskey from fruit jars with the  
men/  
I flirted with the women/I had a ball till the caps ran out  
and my habit came down. That night I looked at my grandmother  
and split/my guts were screaming for junk/but I was almost  
contented/I had almost caught up with me.  
(The next day in Memphis I cracked a croaker's crib for a fix.)

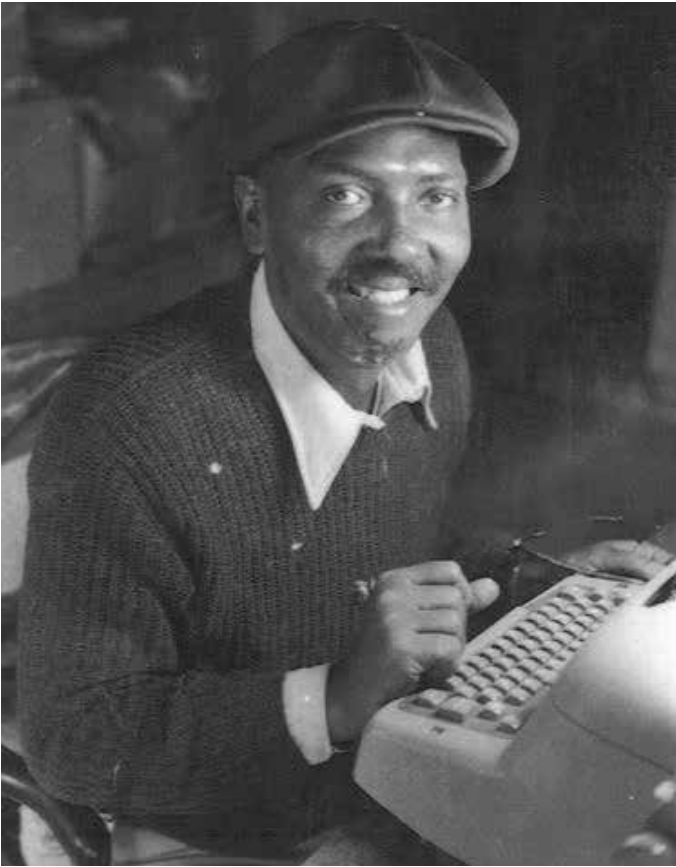
This yr there is a gray stone wall damming my stream, and when  
the falling leaves stir my genes, I pace my cell or flop on my bunk  
and stare at 47 black faces across the space. I am all of them,  
they are all of me, I am me, they are thee, and I have no children  
to float in the space between.

### **"THE IDEA OF ANCESTRY": ANALYSIS**

Knight's poem "The Idea of Ancestry" describes the poet's attempt to survive the loneliness and isolation of his prison existence. To maintain his connection to the outside world, he has collected photographs of his extended family and displays them in his cell. The numbers in the poem signify to the reader the importance of family—there are forty-seven pictures on the cell wall, from parents and grandparents to second cousins, nieces, and nephews. The speaker of the

poem feels his spatial separation from his family members; not only are they "outside" and he "inside" prison, but the faces in the pictures "stare across the space"<sup>152</sup> at him while he is sprawled on his bunk. His connections with the various family members are defined by their resemblances to him ("I know their dark eyes, they know mine"), by their shared way of being in the world ("I know their style, they know mine"), and by the blood ancestry that is mentioned in the title ("I am all of them, they are all of me").<sup>153</sup> However, while the





*The poet Etheridge Knight.*

*Photo courtesy of the Indiana Historical Society*

traits they have in common link the speaker with his family, their vastly differing circumstances separate them from one another; “[T]hey are farmers, I am a thief,” announces the speaker, citing why they cannot all be together.

For the narrator, the women in the photos represent various aspects of love, as he names twelve different family members with whom he has been in love. The reader is meant to take this to be a maternal love, or family fondness, since the list includes mother, grandmother, cousins, and a niece. It is the seven-year-old niece who generates love in the present, since “she sends [me] letters in large block print, and her picture is the only one that smiles,”<sup>154</sup> a description that foregrounds the depth of his emotional connections at the same time that it highlights his isolation. While the image of a child smiling may seem heartening, the fact that all the speaker has is a photograph of this smile—not the child physically present—underscores the loneliness of his circumstances.

While the speaker of this poem never names himself, he lists eight family members with whom he shares his given name,

one which is more common as a surname. The matriarch of the family keeps a Bible in which the birth dates and birth names of all the generations in the family are recorded. One uncle with the speaker’s name disappeared from the family after hopping a freight train when he was fifteen years old. Although his absence “causes uneasiness in the clan,” the grandmother, who keeps the records, always mentions him at holidays because “there is no place in the Bible for ‘whereabouts unknown.’”<sup>155</sup> This uncle’s fate reflects the fate of the speaker, as a relative who is in prison could cause similar uneasiness. The positive note is that the prisoner, too, would retain his position in the list of names written in this Bible.

Part two of the poem testifies to a connection not only to family members, but to the Mississippi landscape in which the narrator was raised, “the brown hills and red gullies” which “send out their electric messages,” calling the narrator home. He feels the instinct to make his way home in the autumn, and his journey is likened to a salmon swimming upstream to spawn. The fullness of family gathering is captured in his account of the visit, as the speaker “sips cornwhiskey from fruit jars with the men” and “flirted with the women”<sup>156</sup> until the craving for a drug fix overcomes him, and he leaves this scene of contentment and connectedness. Led by his cravings to Memphis, he “cracked a croaker’s crib for a fix,” meaning that he broke into a doctor’s office to find some drugs that would satisfy his addiction. It is, presumably, for this crime that the narrator now sits in his cell.

In the last stanza, the narrator returns to the spawning salmon imagery, saying in reference to the prison walls that bound him, “[T]his year there is a gray stone wall damming my stream.” In place of the yearly family reunion, he must make do with the photographs of his loved ones. His thoughts of family cause him to reflect on the potential for him to become a father. He laments, “I am me, they are thee, and I have no sons / to float in the space between.”<sup>157</sup> The poem, a powerful testimony of the meaning of family becomes a lament about what is lost when crime leads to incarceration.

The poem employs several obvious techniques to achieve its effect. In fairly standard language, extensive lists are used to construct the family tree. It is close to being a prose poem, with only line breaks to give it the shape of a poem. In part two, slashes, (called virgules in formal analysis) are used in lieu of periods. Aside from the brief bit of urban slang, one mannerism in particular deserves commentary: in part one, Knight abbreviates the word “year” to “yr,” in



reference to his niece's age and in section two of the poem, he uses the shortened form "yr" twice. The only suggestion offered here is that the narrator may seek to shorten the significance or perceived duration of a year in prison by making the word itself shorter.

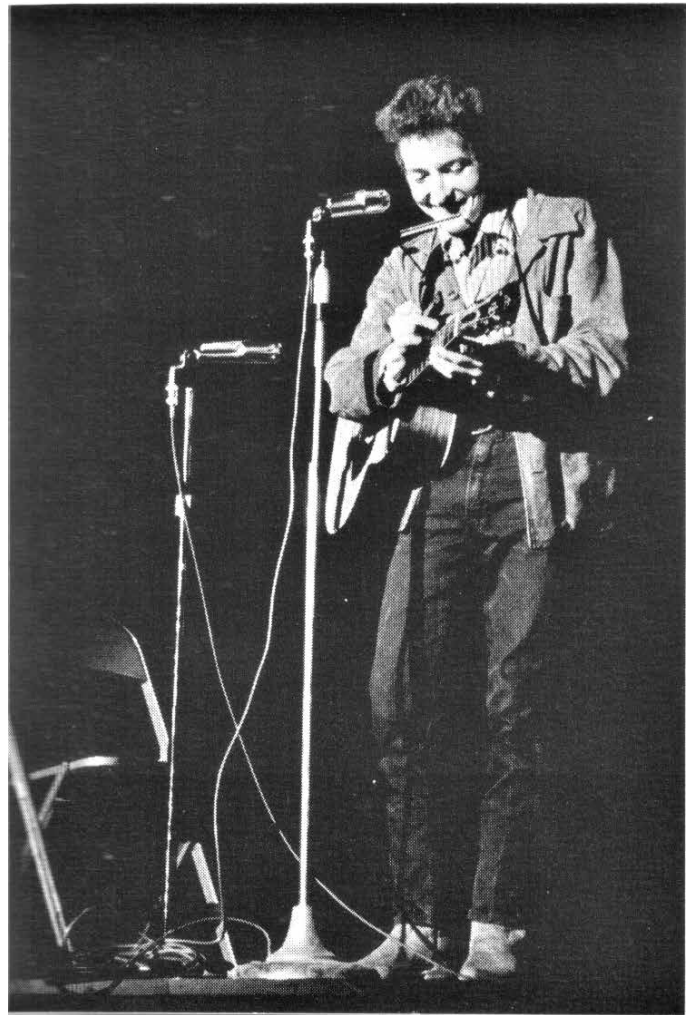
## THREE EARLY SONGS OF BOB DYLAN

### BOB DYLAN: LIFE AND WORK

Earlier in this resource guide, we looked at the writer Luigi Pirandello's theories of "relativism" and human identity. The "character" of the Father in *Six Characters in Search of an Author* expresses this notion when he says, "we all . . . think of ourselves as one single person: but it's not true: each of us is several different persons, and all those people live inside of us. With one person we seem like this, and with another we seem very different."<sup>158</sup> The multiplicity of personas that exist in one identity increases with the passage of time. A cultural figure who exemplifies this notion of relativism is Bob Dylan (b.1941). He has been "different people" for different audiences throughout his long career.

A fictional depiction of many Dylans in the film *I'm Not There*, written and directed by Todd Haynes, represents this multiplicity. In the film, Dylan is played by six different actors, including a woman (Cate Blanchett), a young black actor (Carl Franklin), an older man (Richard Gere), and some Hollywood stars (Heath Ledger, Ben Whishaw, and Christian Bale). He's a Woody Guthrie emulator, a folk-singer phenomenon, an actor playing a folk-singing phenomenon, a dream vision who evokes French Symbolist poet Arthur Rimbaud, a Billy the Kid figure in a fantasy western town, and a version of the "character" from the famous documentary film made of Dylan's 1965 tour of England, *Dont [sic] Look Back*. Dylan fulfills all these descriptions and more. At one time, he was a fervent evangelistic Christian, at another he adopted the stage persona of a minstrel in white face, and at times he has been a mysterious recluse. Dylan's mercurial persona has fascinated the public for decades.

Dylan's music career has stretched from the release of his debut album in 1962 to the present day. He has released some thirty-eight albums of original songs that range from folk to blues to country-rock to rock-and-roll, with variations on all these genres. He's recorded an album of Christmas music and two of American crooner standards. His transformations might be seen as simply the continual



Bob Dylan performing at St. Lawrence University, New York, in 1963.

growth of an artist and musician who has lived through different moments over a nearly sixty-year career.

Our discussion here will focus on the very young Dylan as he was just finding his poetic voice. Three early songs helped cement his reputation as the leading poet of American music and as the spokesman for his generation, the latter a title which he virulently rejected, insisting that he was just "a song and dance man." The three songs on which we will focus appear on two albums, recorded in 1963 and 1964, and show us several facets of Dylan's approach to song lyrics. Composed in the folk tradition, while at the same time departing from it, the three songs are among Dylan's most politically charged songs. One is a strong critique of the military industrial complex, another is a cautionary tale of nuclear winter, and the last is a testimony of racial inequality.



Dylan arrived at New York's Greenwich Village, the center of the folk music scene, in the winter of 1961. He had left his native Minnesota, drawn by the chance to perform regularly on the stages of New York City's many clubs and also to visit his idol, Woody Guthrie, composer of thousands of songs, among them "This Land is Your Land." According to folk music great Dave Van Ronk, of the many admirers of Guthrie on the folk music scene in New York, Dylan was one of the very few to visit Guthrie in the hospital where he was suffering from Huntington's Disease. Dylan established himself on the small stages of clubs and coffeehouses where folk music was played, a quirky, nervous twenty-year-old with a guitar, a harmonica, and a voice that David Bowie once characterized as "sand and glue." There is a raw authenticity that comes across in Dylan's treatment of the folk songs he performed, and soon he came to the attention of influential music critics and signed a record deal with Columbia Records.

Of the twelve songs on Dylan's first album, only two were original. The others were renditions of folk and blues standards. It was not until his second album, *The Freewheeling Bob Dylan*, that the poetry that would bring Dylan renown was featured. Even in his original songs there was a liberal borrowing from his revered folk tradition. The tune for "Masters of War," for instance, is copied from a Scottish/English ballad, "Nottamun Town," and "A Hard Rain's A'Gonna Fall" takes its tune from another ballad, "Lord Randall." This practice of "borrowing" melodies was common in the folk music of the late fifties and early sixties and does not detract from the startling originality of the songs that Dylan wrote during this time.

There was no way that Dylan could have been prepared for the amount of attention, even idolatry, that he would receive in response to his early music. It reached a level that precluded a normal life for him by the late 1960s. But early on, Dylan made a deliberate and calculated attempt to write songs that would get published and heard and which would result in financial reward. One way for fledgling songwriters to gain an audience in the early sixties was to be published in *Broadside* magazine, which specialized in politically charged and topical songs. Dylan tailored some of his songwriting to appeal to the editors of *Broadside*, and all three of the songs on which we will focus were printed in the magazine. These are songs that cement Dylan's early reputation as a visionary poet and a voice of people who reject the status quo of war and of racism. The discussion that follows will analyze the influences on the songs, their poetic intent, and the impact these songs had on the culture of the 1960s and beyond.



*Folksinger Woody Guthrie, photographed in 1943. Bob Dylan was drawn to New York, where he arrived in 1961, in part to visit Guthrie, his idol, who was ailing.*

One significant sign of the lasting allure of Dylan's lyrics is the homage paid by the many artists who have recorded their own versions of Dylan's songs. In the early days of Dylan's writing career, other artists had higher sales figures for their versions of his songs than Dylan did himself, among them the folk group Peter, Paul and Mary and the rock group The Byrds. The legendary soul and jazz singer Nina Simone recorded an entire album of Bob Dylan songs, as did the folk artist Odetta. Rock greats such as The Grateful Dead and Pearl Jam, punk rockers like the Ramones and Lou Reed, and country artists like Johnny Cash and Glen Campbell have all paid tribute to Dylan by putting their own stamp on his songs. The list is long, and grows longer with time. The transformation of Dylan's acoustic three-stanza ballad to a raucous rock classic in Jimi Hendrix's version of "[All Along the Watchtower](#)" is widely recognized in many lists of all-time great songs.

In a surprise announcement, the Nobel Prize for Literature was awarded to Bob Dylan in 2016, to the dismay of many who would prefer to keep literature and popular culture separate. And while it reduces the force of his work to



separate the lyrics from the melody, there are pieces on his albums in the sixties from *The Freewheeling Bob Dylan* to *Blond on Blond* of 1966, and again in the seventies on *Desire* and *Blood on the Tracks*, that are recognized by such esteemed critics as Christopher Ricks as being among the best poetry produced in the twentieth century. In his book *Dylan's Visions of Sin*, Ricks—an Oxford scholar who has written books on Milton, Tennyson, T.S. Eliot, and other

giants—compares Dylan's verse with a compendium of the great writers of world literature. When Dylan's poetry is combined with his music, it makes a strong impact on the consciousness of the listener, compelling the listener to more closely examine events both mundane and monumental. As a prose writer, Dylan has written, in his *Chronicles, Volume One*, a stellar cultural history of the latter half of the twentieth century.

## SELECTED WORK: "A HARD RAIN'S A-GONNA FALL" BY BOB DYLAN

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Oh, where have you been, my blue-eyed son?  
Oh, where have you been, my darling young one?  
I've stumbled on the side of twelve misty mountains  
I've walked and I've crawled on six crooked highways  
I've stepped in the middle of seven sad forests  
I've been out in front of a dozen dead oceans  
I've been ten thousand miles in the mouth of a graveyard  
And it's a hard, and it's a hard, it's a hard, and it's a hard  
And it's a hard rain's a-gonna fall

Oh, what did you see, my blue-eyed son?  
Oh, what did you see, my darling young one?  
I saw a newborn baby with wild wolves all around it  
I saw a highway of diamonds with nobody on it  
I saw a black branch with blood that kept drippin'  
I saw a room full of men with their hammers a-bleedin'  
I saw a white ladder all covered with water  
I saw ten thousand talkers whose tongues were all broken  
I saw guns and sharp swords in the hands of young children  
And it's a hard, and it's a hard, it's a hard, it's a hard  
And it's a hard rain's a-gonna fall

And what did you hear, my blue-eyed son?  
And what did you hear, my darling young one?  
I heard the sound of a thunder, it roared out a warnin'  
Heard the roar of a wave that could drown the whole world  
Heard one hundred drummers whose hands were a-blazin'  
Heard ten thousand whisperin' and nobody listenin'  
Heard one person starve, I heard many people laughin'  
Heard the song of a poet who died in the gutter  
Heard the sound of a clown who cried in the alley



And it's a hard, and it's a hard, it's a hard, it's a hard  
And it's a hard rain's a-gonna fall

Oh, who did you meet, my blue-eyed son?  
Who did you meet, my darling young one?  
I met a young child beside a dead pony  
I met a white man who walked a black dog  
I met a young woman whose body was burning  
I met a young girl, she gave me a rainbow  
I met one man who was wounded in love  
I met another man who was wounded with hatred  
And it's a hard, it's a hard, it's a hard, it's a hard  
It's a hard rain's a-gonna fall

Oh, what'll you do now, my blue-eyed son?  
Oh, what'll you do now, my darling young one?  
I'm a-goin' back out 'fore the rain starts a-fallin'  
I'll walk to the depths of the deepest black forest  
Where the people are many and their hands are all empty  
Where the pellets of poison are flooding their waters  
Where the home in the valley meets the damp dirty prison  
Where the executioner's face is always well hidden  
Where hunger is ugly, where souls are forgotten  
Where black is the color, where none is the number  
And I'll tell it and think it and speak it and breathe it  
And reflect it from the mountain so all souls can see it  
Then I'll stand on the ocean until I start sinkin'  
But I'll know my song well before I start singin'  
And it's a hard, it's a hard, it's a hard, it's a hard  
It's a hard rain's a-gonna fall

## **"A HARD RAIN'S A' GONNA FALL": ANALYSIS**

The earliest of the three Dylan compositions on which we will focus, "[A Hard Rain](#)" is the most startling in its imagery. It is a series of impressions that a traveler brings home from a journey, or quest, that features visions, sounds, and encounters from a world beyond imagining. In the end, the accumulated experiences of the traveler, the "blue-eyed son" of the opening line, ends in a resolution that he will testify about what it is that he has witnessed.

The song is patterned after the traditional ballad "[Lord Randall](#)," which also features a question posed to a son. In the original, the verses attest that Randall has been poisoned by his "true-love" and lists the things he

bequeaths to his loved ones. In the end, when asked, "What d'ye leave to your true-love, my son?" the response is "hell and fire," as punishment for her perfidy in poisoning him. Dylan adopts the basic structure of "Lord Randall," beginning "Oh where have you been, my blue-eyed son?" Each of the five stanzas begins with a question to the blue-eyed son about his travels, and each response is a litany of five to seven things that he encountered on the path. The refrain that follows each stanza is a couplet that repeats the word "hard" four times in the first line before ending in the declaration that "it's a hard rain's a-gonna fall."<sup>159</sup>

Each stanza varies the query to the "blue-eyed son," asking, in order, where he has been, what he has seen, what he has heard, and who he has met. In the final stanza, he is asked to project future actions, as he is asked "What'll



you do now?" The questions are simple and could very well have come from the traditional ballad. The answers are what shock the reader/listener. Where he's been, for instance, seems to come from some lost books of the Bible, or from a fever dream or a surrealist's nightmare. He's been where Ulysses has been, or Sindbad the Sailor, or Jason with his Argonauts: on "twelve misty mountains," "six crooked highways," "seven sad forests," "out in front of a dozen dead oceans," places you cannot find on a map. Even the mode of wandering has the feel of desperation, and the blue-eyed son says "I've stumbled" and "I've walked and I've crawled." Rather than try to interpret individual lines of the song definitively, we might more productively recognize the cumulative effect of the images that pile mystery upon mystery and create the song's otherworldly atmosphere.

The imagery of the song reveals that the world is in a state of crisis and neglect. In the opening stanza, the forests are sad, the oceans are dead, and the chilling ending, "I've been ten thousand miles in the mouth of a graveyard," seems to depict the world as a giant necropolis. The blue-eyed son may have been given a vision that extends back in time, to where all the deaths that have ever occurred accumulate to make this impossibly enormous "mouth of a graveyard." Stretching this vision, the mist on the twelve mountains might be read to be a pollution that enshrouds the world. The stanza reads as apocalyptic, a vision of the world as moribund, lifeless.

What is certain, after each of the stanzas, is that "it's a hard rain's a-gonna fall." This line brings images of the flood in the biblical book of *Genesis*—the only human survivors of which were Noah and his family. But in that story, the rainbow stands for a promise that God will never again send floods to destroy mankind, however much evil is present in the land. Dylan's song was composed in an atmosphere of Cold War tensions, and people were acutely conscious of the threat of a nuclear war. Shortly after the song was written, the Cuban missile crisis made the threat of this kind of rain even more present in the public mind.

"What have you seen" is the next query to the blue-eyed son," and the answers here are no less disturbing and mysterious. One of Dylan's poetic influences is the French Symbolist poet [Arthur Rimbaud](#), whose poetic theory involved "the derangement of all the senses." Rimbaud poems, such as his poem "[Barbarian](#)," include imagery that contains some of the audacity of Dylan's images here. In "Barbarian," Rimbaud talks of a different kind of voyage, undertaken under the "banner of raw meat against the

silk of seas and arctic flowers." The witness in this poem sees visions like "live embers raining in gusts of frost."<sup>160</sup> Rimbaud's effect depends on the juxtaposition of fire and ice, of the visceral raw meat against the beauty of nature.

Dylan's lines share the sensory derangement of Rimbaud's images, as he gives impossible traits to objects and people. One instance of this is the "roomful of men with their hammer's a-bleedin'"—a hallucination that might evoke the slaughterhouse or, on the other hand, could refer to something beyond perceivable reality. The "black branch with blood that kept dripping" is an equally ominous vision, like a scene from a horror show.

The overall impact of the sights he witnesses is of a lost innocence. The opening vision of a "newborn baby with wild wolves all around it" could give some comfort if one remembers the stories of feral children, like Mowgli in *The Jungle Book*, raised by wild animals. But most myths of feral children involve the abandonment of the child in the first place, and in the overall pattern of the Dylan stanza, the child and wolf encounter does not bode well, probably suggesting the triumph of greed and avarice over helpless innocence. Later in the stanza, there are "guns and sharp swords in the hands of young children." Combined with the two bloody images, this creates a vision of a world of constant warfare, where even young children are enlisted to do battle. In these circumstances, the ten thousand talkers whose tongues were all broken signal the end of rational discourse.

While the second stanza involves the sense of sight, responding to the query of "what did you see?", the third stanza involves the sense of hearing, answering "what did you hear?" Whereas the sense of sight is selective—one can choose to close one's eyes or turn away from the offending vision—with sound, sensory input is less easily avoided. Here, the sounds continue to evoke a sense of the apocalyptic. The thunder warns the listener of some unknown future event. A cataclysm is promised by the sound of "a wave that could drown the whole world." In this stanza, there is a hint of synesthesia, the use of one sense to describe another, when the speaker hears "one person starving." Against whatever a person starving sounds like, he "hears many people laughing," a reference to the indifference of the many to the suffering of the individual.

The poet referenced in the phrase "Heard the song of a poet who died in the gutter" may be one of the ten thousand who are whispering and to whom no one is listening. It may also be a reference to Bob Dylan's namesake, the poet Dylan Thomas, who died in 1953 in New York City. It is possible





French symbolist poet Arthur Rimbaud, c. 1872. Rimbaud's poetry influenced Bob Dylan's writing.

that this line is supposed to evoke the tragic end of a type, that of the unacknowledged visionary. The next line presents another type, that of the "little tramp" embodied by Charlie Chaplin, to whom Dylan has been compared. The "sound of a clown who cried in the alley" is an image that juxtaposes merriment and sadness.

In the "who did you meet" stanza, the dark foreboding seems to offer at least the possibility that there is some cause for hopefulness. The first image of a young girl beside a dead pony saddens, but the girl's refusal to abandon her animal companion is admirable. It is tempting to see the white man who walks a black dog as a symbol of racial oppression, but that seems too blatant, too obvious for this Dylan poem. The woman whose body was burning carries yet more ambivalence—is it the fire of fever and disease or a punishment for sins? One might read the next female figure of "a young girl, she gave me a rainbow" as a symbol of hope, beauty, and generosity. Even the next two lines, featuring men who are wounded, are figures with whom the reader can identify. One, wounded in love, has at least known that love. The other is wounded with hatred, and offers us a logical reaction to the experience of hatred. The hopeful attributes of these mysterious people help pave the way for the last stanza, which is an outright offering of a hopeful response to all that the blue-eyed son has seen and experienced.

"What will you do now?" is the question that drives the last stanza, and the answer is a kind of poet's credo for how he will use his gifts as a poet, witness, and even a visionary. The poet, here the blue-eyed son, makes a vow that he will not shrink from experience. He will re-enter the world from which he has returned and will "go to the depths of the deepest black forests" and all the places that seem so threatening, including "where hunger is ugly, where souls are forgotten." Having witnessed what there is to see, he will then use his voice so that others can acknowledge the depths of experience and suffering: "And I'll tell it and think it and speak it and breathe it / And reflect from the mountain so all souls can see it." It is a grandiose claim from a young, blue-eyed son, but given the circumstances of where he has been, what he has seen, what he has heard, and whom he has met, the need for such a voice is evident. Before the last refrain, one more reminder of the hard rain that is sure to fall, he gives his listener a final reassurance that he will fit himself to the task, claiming, "I'll know my song well before I start singing."

The first public performance of "A Hard Rain" was at a folk music gathering called a hootenanny at Carnegie Hall in New York on September 22, 1962. When the organizer, Pete Seeger, cautioned each performer that they had about ten minutes to perform three songs, Dylan alerted him to a problem: "One of my songs is ten minutes long." The folk artist Dave Van Ronk was in the audience that day, and when he heard the song, he said he just had to leave and go and walk around. His view was that "it was unlike anything that had come before it, and it was clearly the beginning of a revolution."<sup>161</sup>

It has been suggested that "A Hard Rain" was written in response to the Cuban Missile Crisis—this suggestion was even printed in the liner notes to *The Freewheelin' Bob Dylan*, the album on which "A Hard Rain" appeared. However, the timeline of events is such that this could not be the case—Dylan performed the song in September of 1962 and the Cuban Missile Crisis occurred in October of the same year. "A Hard Rain" can be seen as a poem that responds to a world in crisis from the effects of industrialization, from the Cold War, and from the seemingly callous attitude of the wealthy toward the impoverished. The impact of "A Hard Rain's A-Gonna Fall" has continued to make its mark in the decades beyond the 1960s; notably, the song was chosen as the official song of the 2009 Climate Change Conference.





## SELECTED WORK: "MASTERS OF WAR" BY BOB DYLAN

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Come you masters of war  
You that build all the guns  
You that build the death planes  
You that build the big bombs  
You that hide behind walls  
You that hide behind desks  
I just want you to know  
I can see through your masks

You that never done nothin'  
But build to destroy  
You play with my world  
Like it's your little toy  
You put a gun in my hand  
And you hide from my eyes  
And you turn and run farther  
When the fast bullets fly

Like Judas of old  
You lie and deceive  
A world war can be won  
You want me to believe  
But I see through your eyes  
And I see through your brain  
Like I see through the water  
That runs down my drain

You fasten the triggers  
For the others to fire  
Then you set back and watch  
When the death count gets higher  
You hide in your mansion  
As young people's blood  
Flows out of their bodies  
And is buried in the mud

You've thrown the worst fear  
That can ever be hurled  
Fear to bring children  
Into the world  
For threatening my baby  
Unborn and unnamed  
You ain't worth the blood  
That runs in your veins



How much do I know  
To talk out of turn  
You might say that I'm young  
You might say I'm unlearned  
But there's one thing I know  
Though I'm younger than you  
Even Jesus would never  
Forgive what you do

Let me ask you one question  
Is your money that good  
Will it buy you forgiveness  
Do you think that it could  
I think you will find  
When your death takes its toll  
All the money you made  
Will never buy back your soul

And I hope that you die  
And your death'll come soon  
I will follow your casket  
In the pale afternoon  
And I'll watch while you're lowered  
Down to your deathbed  
And I'll stand o'er your grave  
'Til I'm sure that you're dead

### **"MASTERS OF WAR": ANALYSIS**

The song "Masters of War" was written after the Cuban Missile Crisis, in the winter of 1962–63. Like "A Hard Rain," this song too should be considered as a response not to one event, but to a condition in which humankind finds itself. It should also not be considered a Vietnam protest song, although it was turned into one by the anti-war movement. The origin or inspiration for the song was probably Dwight D. Eisenhower's [farewell address](#) from the White House on January 17, 1961—a speech in which Eisenhower cautioned the country to be mindful of the growing power of what he termed "the military industrial complex." Dylan changes the military industrial complex to the "masters of war," addressing the title figures in the second person.

Each stanza of the song is an accusation made to the captains of industry that profit from making the machinery of war. Behind each accusation is a second charge—that the builders then put the guns in the hands of the powerless, while those who profit shield themselves from any personal

involvement in fighting and dying. The speaker of the poem continually asserts that he is wise to the game that is being played by these profiteers. Each stanza repeats a motif—masters of war start the machinery of war and cower in their mansions while the world is at risk—but each stanza approaches this accusation from a different point. Consider the following stanza in which the charge is made that the current state of warfare puts people in fear of reproducing:

*You've thrown the worst fear  
That can ever be hurled  
Fear to bring children  
Into the world  
For threatening my baby  
Unborn and unnamed  
You ain't worth the blood  
That runs in your veins.*

Thus, the speaker makes the chilling accusation that it is not harm to himself alone that he fears, but the consequences of war on his unborn children, adding a dimension of emotion





Bob Dylan, photographed in New York in the early 1960s.

to the accusations. The simple rhyme scheme creates a stark mood, and each stanza ends on a declarative and emphatic last rhyme.

The song works as a complement to another critique of American expansionism, Dylan's song "[With God on Our Side](#)." In that song, the history of American wars is recounted, with the sarcastic justification that they were all done "with God on our side." In "Masters of War," any possibility of using God's will as justification for the

build-up of arms is short-circuited with the inclusion of two biblical figures. The first biblical reference equates the masters of war with [Judas Iscariot](#). Just like Judas, "you lie and deceive," the speaker charges his addressee. Later in the song, he recounts the rebuke that he is too young to understand the realities of the world and the complexities of international relations. The speaker admits to being young and unlearned, but he is confident in his knowledge when he says: "But there's one thing I know / Though I'm younger than you / Even Jesus would never / forgive what you do."

The absence of forgiveness certainly extends to the speaker of the poem, who in the last stanza utters the ultimate curse: "And I hope that you'll die / And your death will come soon." It is a shocking kind of utterance from the world of folk music. Another folk singer, Judy Collins, enjoyed some success singing this song at her concerts, but she was unwilling to sing the harsh last stanza that wishes death on the masters of war. Dylan surprised himself with this stanza, saying in an interview: "I don't sing songs which hope that people will die, but I couldn't help it with this one."<sup>162</sup> The song ends with the speaker staying at the funeral of the masters of war, making sure that the coffin is buried and that he can be certain they are dead. The song has a simplicity, forthrightness, and pure anger that made it a fitting anthem later in the decade for protesters against a war whose brutal realities were made shockingly visible on the nightly news.

## SELECTED WORK: "THE LONESOME DEATH OF HATTIE CARROLL" BY BOB DYLAN

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William Zanzinger killed poor Hattie Carroll  
With a cane that he twirled around his diamond ring finger  
At a Baltimore hotel society gath'rin'  
And the cops were called in and his weapon took from him  
As they rode him in custody down to the station  
And booked William Zanzinger for first-degree murder  
But you who philosophize disgrace and criticize all fears  
Take the rag away from your face  
Now ain't the time for your tears

William Zanzinger, who at twenty-four years  
Owns a tobacco farm of six hundred acres  
With rich wealthy parents who provide and protect him



And high office relations in the politics of Maryland  
 Reacted to his deed with a shrug of his shoulders  
 And swear words and sneering, and his tongue it was snarling  
 In a matter of minutes on bail was out walking  
 But you who philosophize disgrace and criticize all fears  
 Take the rag away from your face  
 Now ain't the time for your tears

Hattie Carroll was a maid of the kitchen  
 She was fifty-one years old and gave birth to ten children  
 Who carried the dishes and took out the garbage  
 And never sat once at the head of the table  
 And didn't even talk to the people at the table  
 Who just cleaned up all the food from the table  
 And emptied the ashtrays on a whole other level  
 Got killed by a blow, lay slain by a cane  
 That sailed through the air and came down through the room  
 Doomed and determined to destroy all the gentle  
 And she never done nothing to William Zanzinger  
 But you who philosophize disgrace and criticize all fears  
 Take the rag away from your face  
 Now ain't the time for your tears

In the courtroom of honor, the judge pounded his gavel  
 To show that all's equal and that the courts are on the level  
 And that the strings in the books ain't pulled and persuaded  
 And that even the nobles get properly handled  
 Once that the cops have chased after and caught 'em  
 And that the ladder of law has no top and no bottom  
 Stared at the person who killed for no reason  
 Who just happened to be feelin' that way without warnin'  
 And he spoke through his cloak, most deep and distinguished  
 And handed out strongly, for penalty and repentance  
 William Zanzinger with a six-month sentence  
 Oh, but you who philosophize disgrace and criticize all fears  
 Bury the rag deep in your face  
 For now's the time for your tears

## **"THE LONESOME DEATH OF HATTIE CARROLL": ANALYSIS**

A common practice in politically inclined folk music is to use the news of the day to compose topical songs. One well-known example of this kind of song in the rock genre is Neil Young's song "[Ohio](#)," a lament about the shootings of four protesters at Kent State University in 1970. Woody Guthrie's songbook is filled with songs that have topical themes, and contemporaries of Dylan, like Phil Ochs, made their reputation by commenting on current affairs, such as

in Ochs's anti-draft song "[I Ain't Marching Anymore](#)." Dylan has several songs about faces in the news, like "[The Ballad of George Jackson](#)," which told the story of a Black Panther Party member shot in Folsom prison, or "[Only a Pawn in Their Game](#)," which comments on strategies of racial division like the assassination of civil rights activist Medgar Evers.

Dylan learned the sad story of the death of Hattie Carroll as he traveled home to New York from the [March on Washington](#) on August 28, 1963. On the day of the march, the sentence against William Zanzinger, accused of

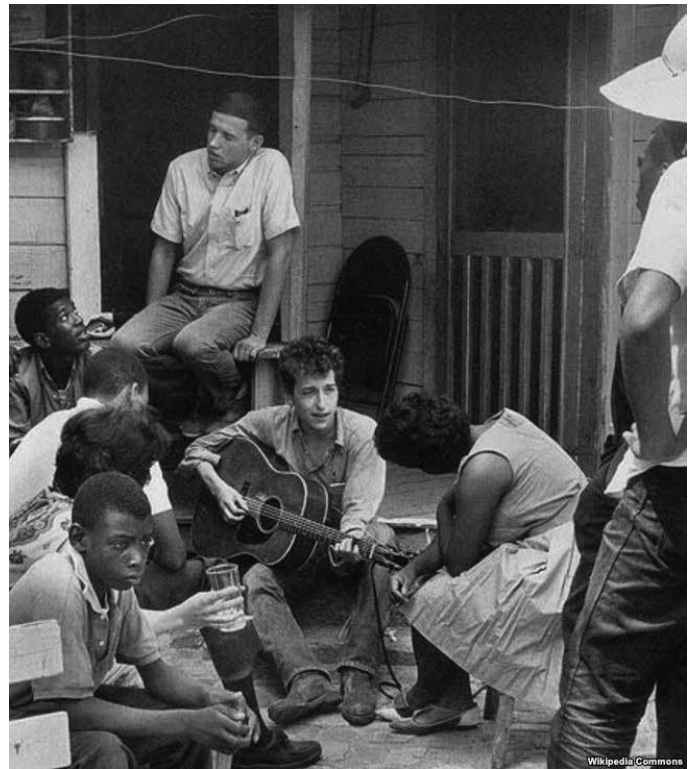


killing a black barmaid named Hattie Carroll, was handed down. The charges against Zantzinger were reduced from second-degree murder to manslaughter. His fine was \$625, and his sentence of six months in jail was deferred so that he could supervise the harvest of his tobacco crop. He served his time in a local jail rather than in a state prison so that he would be protected from other inmates who might have heard about the well-publicized incident.

Dylan's [song](#) paints the crime that was committed by Zantzinger, whom Dylan renamed Zanzinger, as more severe than it was in reality. The opening lines, "William Zanzinger killed poor Hattie Carroll / With a cane that he twirled around his diamond ring finger," summons the vision of a brutal attack by a protected man of wealth. The detail that Dylan leaves out is that Zantzinger that evening had arrived at the Emerson Hotel in Baltimore with a plastic toy cane that would not have had sufficient weight to deal a death blow. In a drunken, racist spree, Zantzinger attacked at least two other employees before he struck Hattie Carroll with the cane for not bringing his next bourbon quickly enough. Within five minutes of the attack, Carroll complained to another barmaid of feeling deathly ill and said that Zantzinger had greatly upset her. She collapsed at the hotel, was hospitalized, and died eight hours later. The cause of death was not ruled to be blunt-force trauma, and an autopsy suggested a brain hemorrhage was the cause of death, complicated by hardened arteries, an enlarged heart, and high blood pressure. The fact that the three-judge panel sentenced Zantzinger to jail and levied him with a fine indicates that he was indeed culpable; if it were not for the attack, Carroll may have continued to live. It is also very likely that his sentence was more lenient given the circumstances of the racially segregated South in which he lived.

Dylan's song uses the case of Zanzinger and Carroll to present a vivid depiction of unequal treatment under the law in the South. The song is in four stanzas: the first describes the crime and the arrest, the second the privileged life of Zanzinger, the third the humble existence of Hattie Carroll, and the last the announcement of Zanzinger's sentence. Each stanza ends with an address to the listener—"you who philosophize disgrace, and criticize all fears." The first three stanzas advise this audience to put away their handkerchiefs. "Take the rag away from your face, now ain't the time for your tears," the speaker commands. This implies that all of this is business as usual, and that no one should be shocked at the events that led to Hattie Carroll's death.

The portrayal of Zanzinger shows him as a man born into privilege with little regard for his victim. "With rich



*Bob Dylan with members of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), a key organization in the Civil Rights Movement, in Greenwood, Mississippi, 1963.*

wealthy parents who provide and protect him / And high office relations in the politics of Maryland," he seems to have very little to fear from the outcome of the trial—he "Reacted to the deed with a shrug of his shoulders / And swear words and sneering, and his tongue it was snarling." This portrayal has some foundation in the actual events of the trial date; in response to his sentence, Zanzinger was quoted by the *Herald Tribune* as saying, "I'll just miss a lot of snow." In contrast, the portrait of Hattie Carroll, fifty-one-year-old mother of ten children, focuses on the menial tasks through which she ekes out a living and on the fact that she committed no offense against Zanzinger.

Dylan wants to provoke a strong reaction to this miscarriage of justice. The last stanza begins with a tongue-in-cheek report on the proceedings and attributes to the judge a desire to demonstrate "that all's equal and the courts are on the level" and that the "ladder of law has no top and no bottom." This insistence on equal treatment under the law is undermined by the six-month sentence for murder. Grief is now warranted, for blatantly corrupt institutions control the country, and the "you" to whom the comments are addressed are instructed to "Bury the rag deep in your face, / For now's the time for your tears."



It is well enough to read these lyrics as poems and evaluate the way they have been constructed, but listening to them as songs is even more richly rewarding. These songs are delivered on Dylan’s recordings in an impressively simple manner—all of them feature just Dylan on guitar to accompany his voice. The fact that these songs can take on a different character in different arrangements on recording studio outtakes and in concert recordings over the years is a testament to the many incarnations of Dylan that have emerged over the years.

## JOAN DIDION ON JOAN BAEZ: “WHERE THE KISSING NEVER STOPS”

### INTRODUCTION

For the purpose of a curriculum on the 1960s, the entry from Joan Didion, “Where the Kissing Never Stops,” connects in multiple ways to the other selected works. The subject of Didion’s essay, Joan Baez, a musician and committed activist, was a presence on many of the campaigns led by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., including the one in Birmingham in 1963. A leading figure of the New Folk Revival, Baez was linked with Bob Dylan musically and, for a brief interval, romantically. Didion’s essay also illuminates the range of opinions of Californians in the mid-1960s, from conservative to hippie to New Left intellectual. Though Didion dates the essay in 1966, she did not publish it until 1968.

### NEW JOURNALISM

Joan Didion’s “Where the Kissing Never Stops” represents a sedate form of the New Journalism practiced by writers like Tom Wolfe (*The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*), Hunter S. Thompson (*Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*), and others. New Journalism was first developed in the 1960s and 1970s. With New Journalism, reporters were no longer invisible to the reader and no longer felt they had to maintain a thorough impartiality. Writers such as Wolfe, Thompson, Didion, and others began reporting their stories with a significant degree of subjectivity. The writers themselves often became immersed and involved in the stories on which they were reporting—first-person storytelling was not unusual—and they did not shy away from presenting a subjective perspective on events. New Journalism writers often focused more on “truth” than facts and frequently used narrative storytelling and literary devices.

### JOAN DIDION: LIFE AND WORK

Joan Didion (b.1934) is an American journalist and writer who has published several collections of essays, six book-

length essays, and five novels, and she has written several screenplays. A graduate of the University of California at Berkeley, Didion entered and won the Prix de Paris essay competition sponsored by *Vogue* magazine; this helped her get a position with the publication, where she worked in various capacities for seven years. While working there, she published her first novel, *River Run*, in 1963, and wrote many of the essays that would later be collected in *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*, her first collection of essays. Most of the essays were originally published in *The Saturday Evening Post*, *Vogue*, or *Holiday*, and “Where the Kissing Never Stops” appeared in *The New York Times Magazine* in 1966 under the title “Just Folks at a School for Non-Violence.”

The majority of the essays in *Slouching Towards Bethlehem* are linked thematically; they are Didion’s impressions of the moment in her native state of California. The title essay offers a profile of the residents of the Haight-Ashbury district in San Francisco, a notorious hippie mecca. The title of the collection—*Slouching Towards Bethlehem*—is taken from W. B. Yeats’s poem “[The Second Coming](#)”:

*The darkness drops again; but now I know  
That twenty centuries of stony sleep  
Were vexed to nightmare by a rocking cradle  
And what rough beast, its hour come round at  
last  
Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?*<sup>163</sup>

While Yeats’ poem applied the allusion of a Biblical apocalypse and the Second Coming to a world devastated and reconfigured by the First World War, Didion’s title speaks to the tremendous social and political upheaval and cultural shifts experienced in the United States in the 1960s.



Writer Joan Didion, photographed in the 1960s.

Photograph: Netflix



## SELECTED WORK: “WHERE THE KISSING NEVER STOPS” BY JOAN DIDION

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Outside the Monterey County Courthouse in Salinas, California, the Downtown Merchants’ Christmas decorations glittered in the thin sunlight that makes the winter lettuce grow. Inside, the crowd blinked uneasily in the blinding television lights. The occasion was a meeting of the Monterey County Board of Supervisors, and the issue, on this warm afternoon before Christmas 1965, was whether or not a small school in the Carmel Valley, the Institute for the Study of Nonviolence, owned by Miss Joan Baez, was in violation of Section 32-C of the Monterey County Zoning Code, which prohibits land use “detrimental to the peace, morals, or general welfare of Monterey County.” Mrs. Gerald Petkuss, who lived across the road from the school, had put the problem in another way. “We wonder what kind of people would go to a school like this,” she asked quite early in the controversy. “Why they aren’t out working and making money.”

Mrs. Petkuss was a plump young matron with an air of bewildered determination, and she came to the rostrum in a strawberry-pink knit dress to say that she had been plagued “by people associated with Miss Baez’s school coming up to ask where it was although they knew perfectly well where it was—one gentleman I remember had a beard.”

“Well I don’t care,” Mrs. Petkuss cried when someone in the front row giggled. “I have three small children, that’s a big responsibility, and I don’t like to have to worry about ...” Mrs. Petkuss paused delicately. “About who’s around.”

The hearing lasted from two until 7:15 p.m., five hours and fifteen minutes of participatory democracy during which it was suggested, on the one hand, that the Monterey County Board of Supervisors was turning our country into Nazi Germany, and, on the other, that the presence of Miss Baez and her fifteen students in the Carmel Valley would lead to “Berkeley-type” demonstrations, demoralize trainees at Fort Ord, paralyze Army convoys using the Carmel Valley road, and send property values plummeting throughout the county. “Frankly, I can’t conceive of anyone buying property near such an operation,” declared Mrs. Petkuss’s husband, who is a veterinarian. Both Dr. and Mrs. Petkuss, the latter near tears, said that they were particularly offended by Miss Baez’s presence on her property during the weekends. It seemed that she did not always stay inside. She sat out under trees, and walked around the property.

“We don’t start until one,” someone from the school objected. “Even if we did make noise, which we don’t, the Petkusses could sleep until one, I don’t see what the problem is.”

The Petkusses’ lawyer jumped up. “The problem is that the Petkusses happen to have a very beautiful swimming pool, they’d like to have guests out on weekends, like to use the pool.”

“They’d have to stand up on a table to see the school.”

“They will, too,” shouted a young woman who had already indicated her approval of Miss Baez by reading aloud to the supervisors a passage from John Stuart Mill’s *On Liberty*. “They’ll be out with spyglasses.”

“That is *not* true,” Mrs. Petkuss keened. “We see the school out of three bedroom windows, out of one living-room window, it’s the only direction we can look.”

Miss Baez sat very still in the front row. She was wearing a long-sleeved navy-blue dress with an Irish lace collar and cuffs, and she kept her hands folded in her lap. She is extraordinary looking, far more so than her photographs suggest, since the camera seems to emphasize an Indian cast to her features and fails to record either the startling fineness and clarity of her bones and eyes or, her most striking characteristic, her absolute directness, her absence of guile. She has a great natural style, and she is what used to be called a lady. “Scum,” hissed an old man with a snap-on bow tie who had identified himself as “a veteran of two wars” and who is a regular at such meetings. “Spaniel.” He seemed to be referring to the length of Miss Baez’s hair, and was trying to get her attention by tapping with his walking stick, but her eyes did not flicker from the rostrum. After a while she got up, and stood until the room was completely quiet. Her opponents sat tensed, ready to spring up and counter whatever defense she was planning to make of her politics, of her school, of beards, of “Berkeley-type” demonstrations and disorder in general.

“Everybody’s talking about their forty- and fifty-thousand-dollar houses and their property values going down,”



she drawled finally, keeping her clear voice low and gazing levelly at the supervisors. "I'd just like to say one thing. I have more than one *hundred* thousand dollars invested in the Carmel Valley, and I'm interested in protecting my property too." The property owner smiled disingenuously at Dr. and Mrs. Petkuss then, and took her seat amid complete silence.

She is an interesting girl, a girl who might have interested Henry James, at about the time he did Verena Tarrant, in *The Bostonians*. Joan Baez grew up in the more evangelistic thickets of the middle class, the daughter of a Quaker physics teacher, the granddaughter of two Protestant ministers, an English-Scottish Episcopalian on her mother's side, a Mexican Methodist on her father's. She was born on Staten Island, but raised on the edges of the academic community all over the country; until she found Carmel, she did not really come from anywhere. When it was time to go to high school, her father was teaching at Stanford, and so she went to Palo Alto High School, where she taught herself "House of the Rising Sun" on a Sears, Roebuck guitar, tried to achieve a vibrato by tapping her throat with her finger, and made headlines by refusing to leave the school during a bomb drill. When it was time to go to college, her father was at M.I.T. and Harvard, and so she went a month to Boston University, dropped out, and for a long while sang in coffee bars around Harvard Square. She did not much like the Harvard Square life ("They just lie in their pads, smoke pot, and do stupid things like that," said the ministers' granddaughter of her acquaintances there), but she did not yet know another.

In the summer of 1959, a friend took her to the first Newport Folk Festival. She arrived in Newport in a Cadillac hearse with "JOAN BAEZ" painted on the side, sang a few songs to 13,000 people, and there it was, the new life. Her first album sold more copies than the work of any other female folksinger in record history. By the end of 1961 Vanguard had released her second album, and her total sales were behind those of only Harry Belafonte, the Kingston Trio, and the Weavers. She had finished her first long tour, had given a concert at Carnegie Hall which was sold out two months in advance, and had turned down \$100,000 worth of concert dates because she would work only a few months a year.

She was the right girl at the right time. She had only a small repertory of Child ballads ("What's Joanie still doing with this Mary Hamilton?" Bob Dylan would fret later), never trained her pure soprano and annoyed some purists because she was indifferent to the origins of her material and sang everything "sad." But she rode in with the folk wave just as it was cresting. She could reach an audience in a way that neither the purists nor the more commercial folksingers seemed to be able to do. If her interest was never in the money, neither was it really in the music: she was interested instead in something that went on between her and the audience. "The easiest kind of relationship for me is with ten thousand people," she said. "the hardest is with one."

She did not want, then or ever, to entertain; she wanted to move people, to establish with them some communion of emotion. By the end of 1963 she had found, in the protest movement, something upon which she could focus the emotion. She went into the South. She sang at Negro colleges, and she was always there where the barricade was, Selma, Montgomery, Birmingham. She sang at the Lincoln Memorial after the March on Washington. She told the Internal Revenue Service that she did not intend to pay the sixty percent of her income tax that she calculated went to the defense establishment. She became the voice that meant protest, although she would always maintain a curious distance from the movement's more ambiguous moments. ("I got pretty sick of those Southern marches after a while," she would say later. "All these big entertainers renting little planes and flying down, always about 35,000 people in town.") She had recorded only a handful of albums, but she had seen her face on the cover of *Time*. She was just twenty-two.

Joan Baez was a personality before she was entirely a person, and, like anyone to whom that happens, she is in a sense the hapless victim of what others have seen in her, written about her, wanted her to be and not to be. The roles assigned to her are various, but variations on a single theme. She is the Madonna of the disaffected. She is the pawn of the protest movement. She is the unhappy analyst. She is the singer who would not train her voice, the rebel who drives the Jaguar too fast, the Rima who hides with the birds and the deer. Above all, she is the girl who "feels" things, who has hung on to the freshness and pain of adolescence, the girl ever wounded, ever young. Now, at an age when the wounds begin to heal whether one wants them to or not, Joan Baez rarely leaves the Carmel Valley.





Although all Baez activities tend to take on certain ominous overtones in the collective consciousness of Monterey County, what actually goes on at Miss Baez's Institute for the Study of Nonviolence, which was allowed to continue operating in the Carmel Valley by a three-two vote of the supervisors, is so apparently ingenuous as to disarm even veterans of two wars who wear snap-on bow ties. Four days a week, Miss Baez and her fifteen students meet at the school for lunch: potato salad, Kool-Aid, and hot dogs broiled on a portable barbeque. After lunch they do ballet exercises to Beatles records, and after that they sit around on the bare floor beneath a photomural of Cypress Point and discuss their reading: *Gandhi on Nonviolence*, Louis Fischer's *Life of Mahatma Gandhi*, Jerome Frank's *Breaking the Thought Barrier*, Thoreau's *On Civil Disobedience*, Krishnamurti's *The First and Last Freedom* and *Think on These Things*, C. Wright Mill's *The Power Elite*, Huxley's *Ends and Means*, and Marshall McLuhan's *Understanding Media*. On the fifth day, they meet as usual but spend the afternoon in total silence, which involves not only not talking but also not reading, not writing, and not smoking. Even on discussion days, this silence is invoked for regular twenty-minute or hour intervals, a regimen described by one student as "invaluable for clearing your mind of personal hangups" and by Miss Baez as "just about the most important thing about the school."

There are no admission requirements, other than that applicants must be at least eighteen years old; admission to each session is granted to the first fifteen who write and ask to come. They come from all over, and they are on the average very young, very earnest, and not very much in touch with the larger scene, less refugees from it than children who do not quite apprehend it. They worry a great deal about "responding to one another with beauty and tenderness," and their response to one another is in fact so tender that an afternoon at the school tends to drift perilously into the never-never. They debate whether or not it was a wise tactic for the Vietnam Day Committee at Berkeley to try to reason with Hell's Angels "on the hip level."

"O.K.," someone argues. "So the Angels just shrug and say 'our thing's violence.' How can the V.D.C. guy answer that?"

They discuss a proposal from Berkeley for an International Nonviolent Army: "The idea is, we go to Vietnam and we go into these villages, and then if they burn them, we burn too."

"It has a beautiful simplicity," someone says.

Most of them are too young to have been around for the memorable events of protest, and the few who have been active tell stories to those who have not, stories which begin "One night at the Scranton Y ..." or "Recently when we were sitting at the A.E.C. ..." and "We had this eleven-year-old on the Canada-to-Cuba march who was at the time corresponding with a Ghandian, and he ..." They talk about Allen Ginsberg, "the only one, the only beautiful voice, the only one talking." Ginsberg had suggested that the V.D.C. send women carrying babies and flowers to the Oakland Army Terminal.

"Babies and flowers," a pretty little girl breathes. "But that's so *beautiful*, that's the whole *point*."

"Ginsberg was down here one weekend," recalls a dreamy boy with curly golden hair. "He brought a copy of the *Fuck Songbag*," but we burned it." He giggles. He is holding a clear violet marble up to the window, turning it in the sunlight. "Joan gave it to me," he says. "One night at her house, when we all had a party and gave each other presents. It was like Christmas but it wasn't."

The school itself is an old whitewashed adobe house quite far out among the yellow hills and dusty scrub oaks of the Upper Carmel Valley. Oleanders support a torn wire fence around the school, and there is no sign, no identification at all. The adobe was a one-room school until 1950; after that it was occupied in turn by the So Help Me Hannah Poison Oak Remedy Laboratory and by a small shotgun-shell manufacturing business, two enterprises which apparently did not present the threat to property values that Miss Baez does. She bought the place in the fall of 1965, after the County Planning Commission told her that zoning prohibited her from running the school in her house, which is on a ten-acre piece a few miles away. Miss Baez is the vice president of the Institute, and its sponsor; the \$120 fee paid by each student for each six-week session includes lodging, at an apartment house in Pacific Grove, and does not meet the school's expenses. Miss Baez not only has a \$40,000 investment in the school property but is



responsible as well for the salary of Ira Sandperl, who is the president of the Institute, the leader of the discussions, and in fact the *eminence gris* of the entire project. "You might think we're starting in a very small way," Ira Sandperl says. "Sometimes the smallest things can change the course of history. Look at the Benedictine order."

In a way it is impossible to talk about Joan Baez without talking about Ira Sandperl. "One of the men on the Planning Commission said I was being led down a primrose path by the lunatic fringe," Miss Baez giggles. "Ira said maybe he's the lunatic and his beard's the fringe." Ira Sandperl is a forty-two-year-old native of St. Louis who has, besides the beard, a shaved head, a large nuclear-disarmament emblem on his corduroy jacket, glittering and slightly messianic eyes, a high cracked laugh and the general look of a man who has, all his life, followed some imperceptibly but fatally askew rainbow. He spent a good deal of time in pacifist movements around San Francisco, Berkeley, and Palo Alto, and was, at the time he and Miss Baez hit upon the idea of the Institute, working in a Palo Alto bookstore.

Ira Sandperl first met Joan Baez when she was sixteen and was brought by her father to a Quaker meeting in Palo Alto. "There was something magic, something different about her even then," he recalls. "I remember once she was singing at a meeting where I was speaking. The audience was so responsive that night that I said 'Honey, when you grow up we'll have to be an evangelical team.'" He smiles, and spreads his hands.

The two became close, according to Ira Sandperl, after Miss Baez's father went to live in Paris as a UNESCO advisor. "I was the oldest friend around, so naturally she turned to me." He was with her at the time of the Berkeley demonstrations in the fall of 1964. "We were actually the outside agitators you heard so much about," he says. "Basically we wanted to turn an *unviolent* movement into a *nonviolent* one. Joan was *enormously* instrumental in pulling the movement out of its slump, although the boys may not admit it now.

A month or so after her appearance at Berkeley, Joan Baez talked to Ira Sandperl about the possibility of tutoring her for a year. "She found herself among politically knowledgeable people," he says, "and while she had strong feelings, she didn't know any of the socio-economic-political-historical terms of nonviolence."

"It was all vague," she interrupts, nervously brushing her hair back. "I want it to be less vague."

They decided to make it not a year's private tutorial but a school to go on indefinitely, and enrolled the first students late in the summer of 1965. The Institute aligns itself with no movements ("Some of the kids are just leading us into another long, big, violent mess," Miss Baez says), and there is in fact a marked distrust of most activist organizations. Ira Sandperl, for example, had little use for the V.D.C., because the V.D.C. believed in nonviolence only as a limited tactic, accepted conventional power blocs, and even ran one of its leaders for Congress, which is anathema to Sandperl. "Darling, let me put it this way. In civil rights, now, the President signs a bill, who does he call to witness it? Adam Powell? No. He calls Rustin, Farmer, King, *none* of them in the conventional power structure." He pauses, as if envisioning a day when he and Miss Baez will be called upon to witness the signing of a bill outlawing violence. "I'm not optimistic, darling, but I'm hopeful. There's a difference. I'm hopeful."

The gas heater sputters on and off and Miss Baez watches it, her duffel coat drawn up around her shoulders. "Everybody says I'm politically naïve, and I am," she says after a while. It is something she says frequently to people she does not know. "So are the people running politics, or we wouldn't be in wars, would we?"

The door opens and a short middle-aged man wearing handmade sandals walks in. He is Manuel Greenhill, Miss Baez's manager, and although he has been her manager for five years, he has never before visited the Institute, and he has never before met Ira Sandperl.

"At last!" Ira Sandperl cries, jumping up. "The disembodied voice on the telephone is here at last!" There *is* a Manny Greenhill! There *is* an Ira Sandperl! Here I am! Here's the villain."

It is difficult to arrange to see Joan Baez, at least for anyone not tuned to the underground circuits of the protest movement. The New York company for which she records, Vanguard, will give only Manny Greenhill's number, in Boston. "Try Area Code 415, prefix DA 4, number 4321," Manny Greenhill will rasp. Area Code 415, DA 4-4321 will connect the caller with Keppler's Bookstore in Palo Alto, which is where Ira Sandperl used to work. Someone at the bookstore will take a number, and, after checking with Carmel to see if anyone there cares to hear from the caller, will call back, disclosing a Carmel number. The Carmel number is not, as one might think by now, for Miss Baez, but for an answering service. The service will take a number, and, after some days or weeks, a call may or may not be received



from Judy Flynn, Miss Baez's secretary. Miss Flynn says that she will "try to contact" Miss Baez. "I don't see people," says the heart of this curiously improvised web of wrong numbers, disconnected telephones, and unreturned calls. "I lock the gate and hope nobody comes, but they come anyway. Somebody's been telling them."

She lives quietly. She reads, and she talks to the people who have been told where she lives, and occasionally she and Ira Sandperl go to San Francisco, to see friends, to talk about the peace movement. She sees her two sisters and she sees Ira Sandperl. She believes that her days at the Institute talking and listening to Ira Sandperl are bringing her closer to contentment than anything she has done so far. "Certainly than the singing. I used to stand up there and think I'm getting so many thousand dollars, and for what?" She is defensive about her income ("Oh, I have some money from somewhere"), vague about her plans. "There are some things I want to do. I want to try some rock 'n' roll and some classical music. But I'm not going to start worrying about the charts and the sales because then where are you?"

Exactly where it is she wants to be seems to be an open question, bewildering to her and even more so to her manager. If he is asked what his most celebrated client is doing now and plans to do in the future, Manny Greenhill talks about "lots of plans," "other areas," and "her own choice." Finally he hits upon something: "Listen, she just did a documentary for Canadian television, *Variety* gave it a great review, let me read you."

Manny Greenhill reads. "Let's see. Here *Variety* says 'planned only a twenty-minute interview but when CBC officials in Toronto saw the film they decided to go with a special—'" He interrupts himself. "That's pretty newsworthy right there. Let's see now. Here they quote her ideas on peace ... you know those ... here she says 'every time I go to Hollywood I want to throw up' ... let's not get into that ... here now, 'her impersonations of Ringo Starr and George Harrison were dead-on,' get that, that's good."

Manny Greenhill is hoping to get Miss Baez to write a book, to be in a movie, and to get around to recording the rock 'n' roll songs. He will not discuss her income, although he will say, at once jaunty and bleak, "but it won't be much *this year*." Miss Baez let him schedule only one concert for 1966 (down from an average of thirty a year), has accepted only one regular club booking in her entire career, and is virtually never on television. What's she going to do on Andy Williams?" Manny Greenhill shrugs. "One time she sang one of Pat Boone's songs with him," he adds, "which proves she can get along, but still. We don't want her up there with some dance routine behind her." Greenhill keeps an eye on her political appearances, and tries to prevent the use of her name. "We say, if they use her name it's a concert. The point is, if they haven't used her name, then if she doesn't like the looks of it she can get out." He is resigned to the school's cutting into her schedule. "Listen," he says. "I've always encouraged her to be political. I may not be active, but let's say I'm concerned." He squints into the sun. "Let's say maybe I'm just too old."

To encourage Joan Baez to be "political" is really only to encourage Joan Baez to continue "feeling" things, for her politics are still, as she herself said, "all vague." Her approach is instinctive, pragmatic, not too far from that of any League of Women Voters member. "Frankly, I'm down on Communism," is her latest word on that subject. On recent events in the pacifist movement, she has this to say: "Burning draft cards doesn't make sense, and burning themselves makes even less." When she was at Palo Alto High School and refused to leave the building during a bomb drill, she was not motivated by theory; she did it because "it was the practical thing to do, I mean it seemed to me this drill was impractical, all these people thinking they could get into some kind of little shelter and be saved with canned water." She has made appearances for Democratic administrations, and is frequently quoted as saying: "There's never been a good Republican folksinger"; it is scarcely the diction of the new radicalism. Her concert program includes some of her thoughts about "waiting on the eve of destruction," and her thoughts are these:

*My life is a crystal teardrop. There are snowflakes falling in the teardrop and little figures trudging around in slow motion. If I were to look into the teardrop for the next million years, I might never find out who the people are, and what they are doing.*

*Sometimes I get lonesome for a storm. A full-blown storm where everything changes. The sky goes through four days in an hour, the trees wail, little animals skitter in the mud and everything gets dark and goes completely wild. But it's really God—playing music in his favorite cathedral in heaven—shattering stained glass—playing a gigantic organ—thundering on the keys—perfect harmony—perfect joy.*



Although Miss Baez does not actually talk this way when she is kept from the typewriter, she does try, perhaps unconsciously, to hang on to the innocence and turbulence and capacity for wonder, however ersatz or shallow, of her own or of anyone's adolescence. This openness, this vulnerability, is of course precisely the reason why she is so able to "come through" to all the young and lonely and inarticulate, to all those who suspect that no one else in the world might understand about beauty and hurt and love and brotherhood. Perhaps because she is older now, Miss Baez is sometimes troubled that she means, to a great many of her admirers, everything that is beautiful and true.

"I'm not very happy with my thinking about it," she says. "Sometimes I tell myself, 'Come on, Baez, you're just like everybody else,' but then I'm not happy with that either."

"Not everybody else has the voice," Ira Sandperl interrupts dotingly.

"Oh, it's all right to have the voice, the voice is all right ..."

She breaks off and concentrates for a long while on the buckle of her shoe.

So now the girl whose life is a crystal teardrop has her own place, a place where the sun shines and the ambiguities can be set aside a little while longer, a place where everyone can be warm and loving and share confidences. "One day we went around the room and told a little about ourselves," she confides, "and I discovered that boy, I'd had it pretty easy." The late afternoon sun streaks the clean wooden floor and the birds sing in the scrub oaks and the beautiful children sit in their coats on the floor and listen to Ira Sandperl.

"Are you a vegetarian, Ira?" someone asks idly.

"Yes. Yes, I am."

"Tell them, Ira," Joan Baez says. "It's nice."

He leans back and looks toward the ceiling. "I was in the Sierra once." He pauses, and Joan Baez smiles approvingly. "I saw this magnificent tree growing out of bare rock, *thrusting* itself ... and I thought *all right, tree*, if you want to live that much, *all right!* All *right!* O.K.! I won't chop you! I won't eat you! The one thing we all have in common is that we all want to live!"

"But what about vegetables," a girl murmurs.

"Well, I realized, of course, that as long as I was in *this flesh* and *this blood* I couldn't be perfectly nonviolent."

It is getting late. Fifty cents apiece is collected for the next day's lunch, and someone reads a request from the Monterey County Board of Supervisors that citizens fly American flags to show that "Kooks, Commies, and Cowards do not represent our County," and someone else brings up the Vietnam Day Committee, and a dissident member who had visited Carmel.

"Marv's an honest-to-God nonviolenter," Ira Sandperl declares. "A man of honesty and love."

"He says he's an anarchist," someone interjects doubtfully.

"Right," Ira Sandperl agrees. "Absolutely."

"Would the V.D.C. call Gandhi bourgeois?"

"Oh, they must know better, but they lead such bourgeois lives themselves ..."

"That's so true," says the dreamy blond boy with the violet marble. "You walk into their office, their so unfriendly, so unfriendly and cold ..."

Everyone smiles lovingly at him. By now the sky outside is the color of his marble, but they are all reluctant about gathering up their books and magazines and records, about finding their car keys and ending the day, and by the time they are ready to leave Joan Baez is eating potato salad with her fingers from a bowl in the refrigerator, and everyone stays to share it, just a while longer where it is warm.

1966



## **“WHERE THE KISSING NEVER STOPS”: ANALYSIS**

The reader of this essay who hopes for never ending kissing will be disappointed. Perhaps the title Didion gives the essay is meant to be a reflection of the expectations of the people of Monterey County about what it is that went on at the Institute for the Study of Nonviolence, housed on a property owned by Joan Baez. The essay is about several things: conflicting attitudes about the counterculture, the pedagogy involved in this institute that Baez supports, and the business aspect of the music business. But the primary figure in the essay is Joan Baez, a folksinger, who by the time of the essay’s publication had released five albums, three of which went gold; had been on the cover of *Time* magazine; had had a hand in introducing Bob Dylan to a larger audience in the folk music world; and was a constant musical presence in civil rights and anti-war protests across the country. Her rich soprano, her melancholy stylings of traditional songs, and her understated beauty would be instantly recognizable to most Americans of her day.

Part one of the essay indicates how polarized American society was in the 1960s. Set in a Monterey County courthouse, where the Board of Supervisors were called on to judge the potential danger to the community of the Institute for the Study of Nonviolence, the essay sets up the most virulent opponents of Baez’s group, the veterinary doctor Gerald Petkuss and his wife. They serve as near-parodies of those who fear the left. In speculating about what kind of people would go to such a school, Mrs. Petkuss wonders “[W]hy they aren’t out working and making money,” and observes that “one gentleman I remember had a beard.” It is important for the reader to keep in mind that the hearing extends for hours, and so clearly Didion is presenting a select few excerpts of dialogue that fulfil the purposes of her essay. Didion’s tone in these selected quotes is generally quite humorous, poking fun at the local residents’ concerns. As staged by Didion, the hearing pits those who felt the suppression of the Institute was “turning our country into Nazi Germany” against those who feared “‘Berkeley-type’ demonstrations” and the paralysis of Army convoys dependent on the local roads. The ace in the hole for the opponents of the Institute was the fear of plummeting property values.

The climactic moment—after “hissing” and “keening” moments from the opponents of the Institute and the hurling of epithets at Baez (Baez is called both “scum” and “spaniel”)—comes in a statement at the hearing by Baez, who is described as utterly composed and unflappable. She testifies that she has much more money invested in her

Monterey County holdings than do her detractors, and “[I’m] interested in protecting my property too.”<sup>164</sup> It’s not clear from the essay whether this is the last word in the more than five-hour-long meeting of the Supervisors, but it is the last word given by Didion about the meeting.

The courtroom drama gives Didion an opening for her essay and a way to demonstrate the gap between the people who gravitate toward Baez and the traditionalists who are her neighbors. The real attraction for *The New York Times Magazine* was most likely Joan Baez herself. Nearly two decades into the twenty-first century, the introduction to Baez seems dated, as Didion begins: “she’s an interesting girl, a girl who might have interested Henry James. . . ,” and later, “she was the right girl at the right time.”<sup>165</sup> The brief sketch of Baez’s life illustrates the kind of whirlwind that she was caught up in that found her at the age of twenty-two with the kind of celebrity that warrants a major magazine profile. According to Didion’s profile, the significant event that launched Baez into the public eye, was her appearance at the 1959 Newport Folk Festival, when as an eighteen-year-old college dropout she “arrived in Newport in a Cadillac hearse with ‘JOAN BAEZ’ painted on the side, sang a few songs to 13,000 people, and there it was, the new life.”<sup>166</sup> Listeners drawn to her music appreciated the way she used her pure soprano to add beauty to the traditional folk songs in her repertoire.

The folk revival in the late fifties and early sixties was, to some extent, a protest against the over-produced top forty songs of the day—at least until folk music itself became a victim of its own success and began to be packaged and produced to make money. As a noncommercialized movement, it was in part a reaction against the escapist music of Elvis Presley and early rock-and-roll. For many folk music was inherently political, with union organizing songs and Dust Bowl ballads written from the point of view of migrant workers. Even story-ballads that seemed far from the political fray came to be seen as authentic pieces of the American quilt. Baez sang from an established songbook of ballads in a way that was valued by traditionalists, but with a pleasing tone that drew many new adherents to folk music. There was also her striking appearance. “She is extraordinary looking,” writes Didion, “far more than her photographs suggest, since the camera . . . fails to record either the startling fineness and clarity of her bones and eyes or her most striking characteristic, her absolute directness, her absence of guile.”<sup>167</sup>

The subtext of Didion’s profile is the character and content of Baez’s politics. A question lurks under the surface of the





Folksinger Joan Baez, performing at the March on Washington in 1963.

essay about whether Baez is simply a political naïf, led toward the barricades and to the March on Washington as a pawn, or whether she has an identifiable, intellectually supportable political view. Parts of the depiction of Baez indicate her firm commitment to taking a stance. As a high schooler, she made the news when she refused to leave school during a bomb drill. As a public figure, she declared to the IRS that she would not pay the sixty percent of her taxes that she calculated would go to military purposes, and she lent her voice to political causes throughout the country.

There is something, though, that seems to provoke a distrust in Didion about the weight of Baez's thoughts on political matters. She calls Baez into question at the tail end of the "profile" section, then in the depiction of one of the more air-headed students at the Institute, and in a section on some liner notes—self-profiles—Baez has written. Didion implies that Ira Sandperl, the head of the Institute, is not the most sound of political theorists and that he dominates Baez's thoughts on nonviolent resistance. "Joan Baez was a personality before she was entirely a person," says Didion, and goes on to write that, "she is in a sense the hapless victim of what others have seen in her, written about her, wanted her to be and not to be."<sup>168</sup>

While it is unclear how much of a "hapless victim" the seemingly assured and formidable Baez is, it is clear that she was readily labeled and the subject of expectations by a demanding public that may not have suited her. Her friend, one-time protégé (it is Baez who opened several doors for him to become a star), and former lover Bob Dylan complains of a similar labeling, which he found to

be constricting. Dylan, after a similarly youthful ascent, lamented that he "had been anointed as the Big Bubba of Rebellion, High Priest of Protest, the Czar of Dissent" and even the "Prophet, Messiah, Savior."<sup>169</sup> Baez, as reported in Didion, "is the Madonna of the disaffected. She is the pawn of the protest movement. She is the unhappy analysand."<sup>170</sup> She is a number of other things in Didion's list, including, "the girl ever wounded, ever young."<sup>171</sup>

At the time of the interviews that Didion conducted for "Where the Kissing Never Stops," Baez was the owner of an adobe house in the Carmel Valley that once housed a laboratory dedicated to a remedy for poison oak and later a small shotgun shell factory. It is now the home of the school. Baez is the vice president of the Institute for the Study of Nonviolence and pays the salary of its president, Ira Sandperl. Baez was motivated to become more politically informed about nonviolence: "I want it to be less vague," she says, of the socio-historical elements of non-violence.

It is an unconventional school, to put it mildly. Admission is granted to the first fifteen applicants who write and ask to come and are over the age of eighteen. They meet for a week, discussing a series of serious texts—including works by Mahatma Gandhi, Henry David Thoreau, Aldous Huxley, and Marshall McLuhan. On the fifth day, the afternoon is given over to total silence, where there is no speaking, reading, or writing. Sandperl and Baez are serious about their project ("We wanted to turn an *unviolent* movement into a *nonviolent* one," asserts Sandperl), but the sessions as reported by Didion tend "to drift perilously into the never-never,"<sup>172</sup> as seen in the discussion about the "beautiful" strategy of using babies and flowers to confront American soldiers. It is clear that Didion is questioning the degree to which these students are forming a substantive and cohesive philosophy. Serious students and activists aren't mentioned in the article, but there is the "dreamy boy with curly golden hair" who giggles as he holds a clear violet marble—a present from Baez—up to the sunlight.

Sandperl, the president of the Institute, is a longtime associate of Baez, a family friend from when she was in high school. He gained local fame as a clerk in a Palo Alto, California, bookstore that specialized in political books, and from that base he became a constant presence in the anti-war movement in California. He is described by Baez as having "glittering and messianic eyes, a high cracked laugh, and the general look of a man who has, all his life, followed some imperceptibly but fatally askew rainbow."<sup>173</sup> Didion's subjective view becomes imprinted on readers of





*From l-r: Jesse Jackson, Joan Baez, Ira Sandperl, and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr, photographed in 1964.*

the essay, as she calls into question the soundness of the Institute's leader. Later in the essay, Sandperl recounts the origin of his vegetarianism: a tree that he encountered in the Sierra mountain range so heroically thrust itself out of bare rock that he promised he would not chop it down. It is a story that seems beside the point that he is trying to make and serves to extend Didion's bemused portrait of a radical peace monger whose intellectual rigor is suspect.

Didion's skepticism toward these activists grows apparent again, later in the essay, when she quotes some notes printed on a concert program. Two such program notes are reproduced in the essay; one begins with "my life is a crystal teardrop," and the other involves a dream of an imagined earth-changing storm: "it's really God—playing music in his favorite cathedral in heaven—shattering stained glass—playing a gigantic organ—thundering on the keys—perfect harmony—perfect joy."<sup>174</sup> With some relief, Didion admits that Baez does not actually talk this way "when she is kept from the typewriter," but Didion seems to see this kind of prose as an attempt by Baez to "hang on to the innocence and turbulence and capacity for wonder, however ersatz or shallow, of her own or of anyone's adolescence."<sup>175</sup> In another diminishment of Baez, Didion credits the openness of Baez as "precisely the reason why she is so able to 'come through': to all the young and lonely and inarticulate, all those in the world who suspect that no one else in the world understands about beauty and hurt and love and brotherhood."<sup>176</sup> Didion, by projecting an

audience of naïve and self-absorbed youth upon Baez, directly demeans the appeal of Baez, her music, and her message as an activist.

It is difficult to read articles about celebrities, heroes, and public figures with an objective eye. What's more, Didion's "Where the Kissing Never Stops" is not written from a wholly objective vantage point. Those who view Baez as a clarion voice for justice and peace and the rights of the oppressed will likely see Didion's treatment of her as negatively biased and over-intellectualized, an account that features details in a highly selective way. Fans of Baez might contend that Didion's essay doesn't do justice to the noble and thoughtful ways that Baez used her art and celebrity. However, those who see the anti-war movement as unpatriotic and the inclination toward non-Western and leftist thought as intellectually unrigorous and unrealistic, may have a shared smirk at the airheaded associates and fans of Baez. Of course, with this and any other viewpoint, there is, to use a more contemporary figure of speech, the [danger of a single story](#).<sup>177</sup> Human beings are multifaceted, and a collection or collage of differing perspectives is more likely to present the "truth" of a person than the impressions of a single writer.

Whatever inchoate state her politics and identity were in the early to mid-sixties, Baez went on to a distinguished career as a musical interpreter and as a social activist. She was instrumental in initiating an American chapter of



Amnesty International and has worked on behalf of civil rights, anti-war movements, the LGBT rights movement, the environmental movement, and more. What Didion captures is a moment in the life of Joan Baez, a moment in which Didion perceives Baez as a girl who was lucky to be in the right place at the right time.

## TIM O'BRIEN: "AMBUSH"

### TIM O'BRIEN: LIFE AND WORK

Tim O'Brien (b.1946) is an American novelist who is best known for his works on the Vietnam War. Though an author of fiction, O'Brien writes from personal experience—he was drafted and served in the U.S. military as an infantryman in Vietnam from February 1969 through March 1970. Upon his return to the U.S., O'Brien took graduate courses in government at Harvard University and also pursued journalism as an intern and a reporter at *The Washington Post* in the 1970s. While not all of O'Brien's fiction deals with the Vietnam War and the aftereffects of the war on its participants, much of it does, including *Northern Lights* (1975), *Going After Cacciato* (1978), *The Things They Carried* (1990), and *In the Lake of the Woods* (1994). O'Brien's short fiction has been published in several editions of *The Best American Short Stories* as well as in *The New Yorker* and *The Atlantic*, and his work has received much critical acclaim.



The author Tim O'Brien, photographed at the 2012 Texas Book Festival, Austin, Texas.

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## SELECTED WORK: "AMBUSH" FROM THE THINGS THEY CARRIED BY TIM O'BRIEN

"Ambush" from *THE THINGS THEY CARRIED* by Tim O'Brien. Copyright © 1990 by Tim O'Brien. Reprinted by permission of Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company. All rights reserved.

When she was nine, my daughter Kathleen asked if I had ever killed anyone. She knew about the war; she knew I'd been a soldier. "You keep writing these war stories," she said, "so I guess you must've killed somebody." It was a difficult moment, but I did what seemed right, which was to say, "Of course not," and then to take her onto my lap and hold her for a while. Someday, I hope, she'll ask again. But here I want to pretend she's a grown-up. I want to tell her exactly what happened, or what I remember happening, and then I want to say to her that as a little girl she was absolutely right. This is why I keep writing war stories:

He was a short, slender young man of about twenty. I was afraid of him—afraid of something—and as he passed me on the trail I threw a grenade that exploded at his feet and killed him.

Or to go back:

Shortly after midnight we moved into the ambush site outside My Khe. The whole platoon was there, spread out in the dense brush along the trail, and for five hours nothing at all happened. We were working in two-man teams—





one man on guard while the other slept, switching off every two hours—and I remember it was still dark when Kiowa shook me awake for the final watch. The night was foggy and hot. For the first few moments I felt lost, not sure about directions, groping for my helmet and weapon. I reached out and found three grenades and lined them up in front of me; the pins had already been straightened for quick throwing. And then for maybe half an hour I kneeled there and waited. Very gradually, in tiny slivers, dawn began to break through the fog, and from my position in the brush I could see ten or fifteen meters up the trail. The mosquitoes were fierce. I remember slapping at them, wondering if I should wake up Kiowa and ask for some repellent, then thinking it was a bad idea, then looking up and seeing the young man come out of the fog. He wore black clothing and rubber sandals and a gray ammunition belt. His shoulders were slightly stooped, his head cocked to the side as if listening for something. He seemed at ease. He carried his weapon in one hand, muzzle down, moving without any hurry up the center of the trail. There was no sound at all—none that I can remember. In a way, it seemed, he was part of the morning fog, or my own imagination, but there was also the reality of what was happening in my stomach. I had already pulled the pin on a grenade. I had come up to a crouch. It was entirely automatic. I did not hate the young man; I did not see him as the enemy; I did not ponder issues of morality or politics or military duty. I crouched and kept my head low. I tried to swallow whatever was rising from my stomach, which tasted like lemonade, something fruity and sour. I was terrified. There were no thoughts about killing. The grenade was to make him go away—just evaporate—and I leaned back and felt my mind go empty and then felt it fill up again. I had already thrown the grenade before telling myself to throw it. The brush was thick and I had to lob it high, not aiming, and I remember the grenade seeming to freeze above me for an instant, as if a camera had clicked, and I remember ducking down and holding my breath and seeing little wisps of fog rise from the earth. The grenade bounced once and rolled across the trail. I did not hear it, but there must've been a sound, because the young man dropped his weapon and began to run, just two or three quick steps, then he hesitated, swiveling to his right, and he glanced down at the grenade and tried to cover his head but never did. It occurred to me then that he was about to die. I wanted to warn him. The grenade made a popping noise—not soft but not loud either—not what I'd expected—and there was a puff of dust and smoke—a small white puff—and the young man seemed to jerk upward as if pulled by invisible wires. He fell on his back. His rubber sandals had been blown off. There was no wind. He lay at the center of the trail, his right leg bent beneath him, his one eye shut, his other eye a huge star-shaped hole.

For me, it was not a matter of live or die. There was no real peril. Almost certainly the young man would have passed by. And it will always be that way.

Later, I remember, Kiowa tried to tell me that the man would've died anyway. He told me that it was a good kill, that I was a soldier and this was a war, that I should shape up and stop staring and ask myself what the dead man would've done if things were reversed.

None of it mattered. The words seemed far too complicated. All I could do was gape at the fact of the young man's body.

Even now I haven't finished sorting it out. Sometimes I forgive myself, other times I don't. In the ordinary hours of life I try not to dwell on it, but now and then, when I'm reading a newspaper or just sitting alone in a room, I'll look up and see the young man coming out of the morning fog. I'll watch him walk toward me, his shoulders slightly stooped, his head cocked to the side, and he'll pass within a few yards of me and suddenly smile at some secret thought and then continue up the trail to where it bends back into the fog.

## TIM O'BRIEN'S THE THINGS THEY CARRIED

The war in Vietnam was a defining event of the 1960s—as a target of fierce protests against government military policies, in the effect it had on the approximately 2.7 million military personnel who served in Vietnam during the war years of 1965–73, and on the country of Vietnam itself, which was devastated as a result of the armed conflict. The

experience of U.S. soldiers on the ground in Vietnam was often forgotten amidst the furor of events in America during the anti-war protests. One work of literature that captures aspects of a soldier's experience, and that is recognized as an American literary masterpiece, is Tim O'Brien's book of linked short stories *The Things They Carried*.

In *The Things They Carried*, each story employs a distinctive structural feature that allows O'Brien to describe the lives



of his characters from a variety of perspectives. The title story, for instance, allows the reader insight into the day-to-day grind of the soldiers via the objects they are made to carry across the forbidding terrain of Vietnam and also by the emotional weight they carry. An impossible burden of rations, munitions, and protective armor is “humped” through the jungle, along with a single photograph of a girl the lieutenant of the unit left behind. The story “How to Tell a True War Story” examines the title subject with a kind of perverse set of terms, insisting that if a war story resounds with bravery or nobility, it is not true. Truths are contradictory in O’Brien’s war experience, including the truth that war can sometimes produce beauty. O’Brien makes the reader see this ironic beauty as he describes the soldier’s point of view on war:

*You hate it, yes, but your eyes do not.  
Like a killer forest fire, like cancer under a  
microscope, any battle or bombing raid or  
artillery barrage has the aesthetic beauty  
of absolute moral indifference—a powerful,  
implacable beauty—and a true war story  
will tell the truth about this, though the truth is  
ugly.*<sup>178</sup>

O’Brien’s stories are filled with surprising, contradictory, and shocking details; the more unbelievable they are, the more the reader understands that he/she is to credit them as true. By this logic, a soldier’s shocking slow dismantling of a village ox by rifle in reaction to the death of a friend should be seen as true. The relentless bombing of an empty mountainside ordered by men on patrol who had hallucinated the sounds of a cocktail party should be considered true.

“The Man I Killed,” which appears in the collection, is a companion story to “Ambush.” As O’Brien’s work often does, this story blurs the line between what is fact and what is fiction as the narrator’s name is Tim O’Brien. The narrator looks upon the Viet Cong soldier he has killed while on early morning watch. He is in shock, which we know because the soldier cannot stop looking at the dead man. He cannot cease describing the wounds caused by his own grenade. As his friend Kiowa implores the narrator to “stop staring,” the narrator cycles through the description of the position of the body and the “star-shaped hole” that took the place of one of the victim’s eyes.<sup>179</sup> As he continues to examine the corpse, the narrator reflects that the Viet Cong soldier looks new to combat and speculates on his civilian life, creating in his imagination a Vietnamese student of mathematics ill-suited to the rigors and the mindset of war. This mental operation contradicts a civilian expectation that

a soldier must dehumanize the enemy in order to kill him. At least for this enemy, posthumously, the narrator does just the opposite and provides him with details of an imagined civilian life.

### **TIM O’BRIEN’S “AMBUSH”: ANALYSIS**

The next story in the collection is “Ambush,” which shows that years later O’Brien is not done replaying this incident—the killing of a Viet Cong soldier via grenade—in his mind. While “The Man I Killed” is the story of the immediate aftermath of the killing—the inner turbulence of a man who is in shock over an irrevocable act—“Ambush” takes place many years later. As “Ambush” opens, O’Brien writes about the “difficult moment” when his nine-year-old daughter asks him if he killed anyone in the war. A protective father, he “did what seemed right, which was to say ‘Of course not,’ and then to take her into my lap and hold her for a while.”<sup>180</sup>

The character/narrator O’Brien feels that there will be a day when he will tell his daughter the truth of what happened, or what he remembers about what happened. It is a cathartic endeavor for O’Brien to revisit this event, a way to both clarify and purge the feelings that followed the act of killing a man. The primary difference in the way the early morning scene is rehearsed in this story versus in “The Man I Killed” is that this telling is of the moments leading up to the explosion that took the Viet Cong soldier’s life; the description is of the living man crossing O’Brien’s field of vision rather than his body in deathly repose. The clothing and sandals of the soldier are described, as well as his body posture and unsuspecting demeanor, with the kind of detail that stays in the mind at rare moments of crisis. The moment from which death proceeds, the throwing of the grenade, is described clinically, without the justification of self-protection that Kiowa provides O’Brien in the preceding story. Here the action is unpremeditated:

*I had already pulled the pin of a grenade.  
I had come to a crouch. It was entirely  
automatic. I did not hate the young man; I did  
not see him as the enemy; I did not ponder  
issues of morality or politics or military duty.*<sup>181</sup>

O’Brien feels that if he had done nothing, the young soldier would simply have passed him by, without putting him or his fellow soldiers at any risk. Told without any claim to bravery or of fulfilling a higher purpose, “Ambush” adheres to O’Brien’s notion of a true war story in its emphasis on the senselessness of the death of the man he killed.

“Ambush” has echoes of Wilfred Owen’s famous poem “[Dulce et Decorum Est](#),” a poem that challenges the



patriotic notion that it is sweet and proper to die for your country and the complementary idea that it is also proper to kill for your country. There is nothing in "Ambush" that is sweet, proper, noble, or patriotic; the act seems to simply have happened. In the end, the narrator is not yet finished with his endless recapitulation of the event although when the memory captures him unaware, he envisions an alternate reality. In those moments, when the Vietnamese man he killed revisits the narrator in his imagination, "he'll pass within a few yards of me and suddenly smile some secret thought and then continue up the trail to where it bends back into the fog."<sup>182</sup> This imagined occurrence is another war story that, unfortunately for both the narrator and the man he killed, is only true as a fantasy of the mind. Together with the other stories collected in *The Things They Carried*, "Ambush" creates for the reader a difficult entry into the mind of a soldier who has served in a brutal war, with a stark honesty that reveals a kind of truth.



*Tim O'Brien, serving in the U.S. Army during the Vietnam War.*

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# Notes

1. Quoted in Paul Delaney, "Exit Tomas Strausler, Enter Tom Stoppard." In *The Cambridge Companion to Tom Stoppard*, Katherine Kelly, editor, (Cambridge U. Pr., 2001) 27.
2. Delaney 29.
3. *Ibid.*
4. William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*. Susanne L. Wofford, editor. Bedford/ St. Martin's; 1994, 61.
5. Tom Stoppard, *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead*, 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Edition (New York: Grove Press, 2017) 30.
6. *Ibid.* 31.
7. *Ibid.* 32.
8. *Ibid.* 33.
9. *Ibid.* 33.
10. *Ibid.* 34.
11. T. S. Eliot, "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," in *The Wasteland and Other Writings* (New York: The Modern Library; 2002), 6.
12. *Ibid.* 7.
13. *Ibid.* 6.
14. Virginia Woolf, "Modern Fiction," in *The Essays of Virginia Woolf, Vol. IV* (New York: Harvest Harcourt, 1994) 160–61.
15. James Joyce, *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (Penguin Classics Edition, 2003 (1916)) 384.
16. John Barth, "The Literature of Exhaustion," from *The Friday Book: Essays and Other Non-Fiction* (London: The John Hopkins University Press, 1984) 73.
17. In the story, the king—whose first wife was unfaithful—resolved to marry a new woman each day and then behead his previous day's wife before she, too, could prove unfaithful. Scheherazade told tales to preserve herself; the king became so enthralled in her storytelling, wanting to hear yet another tale, that he couldn't bring himself to kill her.
18. Taken from a google dictionary with no source citation on September 5, 2017.
19. Tom Stoppard, *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead* 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Edition (New York: Grove Press, 2017) 73.
20. *Ibid.* 54
21. *Ibid.* 54.
22. *Ibid.* 108.
23. Victor L. Cahn, *Beyond Absurdity: The Plays of Tom Stoppard* (Cranbury, N.J.: Associated University Presses, 1979).
24. Martin Esslin, *The Theater of the Absurd* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1968) 6–7.
25. Ryan Diller, "Decayed Drama, Increased Inclusivity: Beckett's Theater in the 1960's" (2016) Expositor: *A Journal of Undergraduate Research in the Humanities*, 3.
26. June Schlueter, "The American Theater since *Waiting for Godot*."
27. William Demastes, "Portrait of an Artist as a Proto-Chaotician: Tom Stoppard Working his way toward *Arcadia*," *Narrative*, Vol. 19, No 2 (May 2011) 229–240).
28. Richard Gilman, *The Making of Modern Drama* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1974) 174. Quoted in Cahn.
29. Luigi Pirandello, *Six Characters in Search of an Author* in *The Norton Anthology of World Literature*, Vol. F, edited by Martin Puchner (W.W. Norton and Co.: 2012) 296.
30. Stoppard 8.
31. *Ibid.* 8.
32. *Ibid.* 11.
33. *Ibid.* 11.
34. *Ibid.* 13.
35. *Ibid.* 13.
36. *Ibid.* 13.
37. *Ibid.* 14.
38. *Ibid.* 14.
39. *Ibid.* 34.
40. *Ibid.* 17.
41. *Ibid.* 17–18.
42. *Ibid.* 19.
43. *Ibid.* 22.
44. *Ibid.* 28.
45. *Ibid.* 34.
46. *Ibid.* 34.
47. *Ibid.* 34.
48. *Ibid.* 40.
49. *Ibid.* 34.
50. *Ibid.* 35.
51. *Ibid.* 35.
52. *Ibid.* 35.
53. *Ibid.* 36.
54. *Ibid.* 38.
55. *Ibid.* 39.
56. *Ibid.* 39.



57. Shakespeare, 68.
58. *Ibid.*
59. *Ibid.*
60. *Ibid.* 70.
61. *Ibid.* 49.
62. Taken from the notes in Shakespeare, 72.
63. Stoppard 51.
64. *Ibid.* 51.
65. *Ibid.* 51.
66. *Ibid.* 51.
67. *Ibid.* 51.
68. *Ibid.* 54.
69. *Ibid.* 54.
70. *Ibid.* 56.
71. *Ibid.* 56.
72. *Ibid.* 57.
73. *Ibid.* 58.
74. *Ibid.* 58.
75. *Ibid.* 58.
76. *Ibid.* 62.
77. *Ibid.* 59.
78. *Ibid.* 59.
79. *Ibid.* 60.
80. *Ibid.* 64.
81. *Ibid.* 66.
82. *Ibid.* 67.
83. *Ibid.* 70.
84. *Ibid.* 70.
85. *Ibid.* 71.
86. *Ibid.* 72.
87. *Ibid.* 73.
88. *Ibid.* 75.
89. *Ibid.* 77.
90. *Ibid.* 77.
91. *Ibid.* 78.
92. *Ibid.* 84.
93. *Ibid.* 87.
94. *Ibid.* 93.
95. *Ibid.* 93.
96. *Ibid.* 101.
97. *Ibid.* 102.
98. *Ibid.* 102.
99. *Ibid.* 105.
100. *Ibid.* 108.
101. *Ibid.* 109.
102. Shakespeare, 114.
103. Stoppard 111.
104. *Ibid.* 113.
105. *Ibid.* 114.
106. *Ibid.* 114.
107. *Ibid.* 114.
108. *Ibid.* 115.
109. *Ibid.* 115.
110. *Ibid.* 116.
111. *Ibid.* 117.
112. *Ibid.* 117.
113. *Ibid.* 117.
114. *Ibid.* 117.
115. David Benedict, "London Theater Review: Daniel Radcliffe in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*," March 8, 2017.
116. Susannah Clapp, "*Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* review: A Great Double Act," *The Observer*, March 7, 2017.
117. Helen Lewis, "Why *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* with Daniel Radcliffe Is an Unlikely Success," *The New Statesman*, March 16, 2017.
118. "Donald Barthelme Is Dead at 58; A Short-Story Writer and Novelist," *New York Times*, 24 July 1989, accessed February 15, 2018. <http://www.nytimes.com/1989/07/24/obituaries/donald-barthelme-is-dead-at-58-a-short-story-writer-and-novelist.html>.
119. Donald Barthelme, *Not-Knowing: The Essays and Interviews*, (Vintage International, 1997) 15
120. Donald Barthelme, "The Phantom of the Opera's Friend," in *Sixty Stories*, (Penguin Books, 2003) 134–35.
121. *Ibid.* 134.
122. *Ibid.*
123. *Ibid.* 136.
124. *Ibid.*
125. Barbara L. Coe, *Donald Barthelme: A Study of the Short Fiction* (Twayne Publishers, 1992) 26.
126. Barthelme, "Phantom," 132–33.
127. *Ibid.* 132.
128. "Don Juan Triumphant," cited in Wikipedia, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Don\\_Juan\\_Triumphant](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Don_Juan_Triumphant).
129. Martin Luther King, Jr., "Eulogy for the Martyred Children (1963)," In *I Have a Dream: Writings and Speeches that Changed the World*, Ed. James M. Washington (Harper San Francisco, 1986).
130. "A Call for Unity," text online at [http://www.massresistance.org/docs/gen/09a/mlk\\_day/statement.html](http://www.massresistance.org/docs/gen/09a/mlk_day/statement.html).
131. Martin Luther King Jr., "Letter from a Birmingham Jail," In *I Have a Dream: Writings and Speeches that Changed the World*, Ed. James M. Washington, (Harper San Francisco, 1986).
132. King, "Letter" 87.
133. *Ibid.* 88.
134. *Ibid.* 89.
135. *Ibid.*
136. Of course, *ethos* and *pathos* are inextricable from *logos*. For the purposes of this essay, some of the most extended discussions of issues that contribute to the logical appeal of King's "Letter" will be evaluated



- in the way they contribute to the overall effect of the essay.
137. *Ibid.* 87.
  138. *Ibid.* 89.
  139. *Ibid.* 90.
  140. "Aristotle's Rhetorical Situation." *The Purdue Online Writing Lab*. <https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/625/03/>.
  141. King, "Letter" 100.
  142. "Letter from a Birmingham Jail." *Wikipedia*. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Letter\\_from\\_Birmingham\\_Jail](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Letter_from_Birmingham_Jail).
  143. The linguistic features are not the primary focus of this analysis, although the story has been the focus of some analysis of dialect. See Katy M. Wright, "The Role of Dialect Representations in Speaking from the Margins: 'The Lesson' of Toni Cade Bambara," *Style*, No. 42, No. 1, Spring 2008; or Janet Ruth Heller, "Toni Cade Bambara's Use of African-American Vernacular in 'The Lesson,'" *Style*, No. 37, Vo. 3, Fall 2003.
  144. Toni Cade Bambara, "The Lesson," *Gorilla, My Love* (New York: Random House, 1972) 87–88.
  145. *Ibid.* 88.
  146. *Ibid.* 90.
  147. *Ibid.* 92.
  148. *Ibid.* 93.
  149. *Ibid.*
  150. *Ibid.* 94.
  151. C. Gerald Fraser, "Etheridge Knight is Dead: Began Writing Poetry in Prison," in *The New York Times*, March 22, 1991.
  152. Etheridge Knight, "The Idea of Ancestry," *The Essential Etheridge Knight* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 1986).
  153. *Ibid.* 459.
  154. *Ibid.*
  155. *Ibid.*
  156. *Ibid.*
  157. *Ibid.* 460.
  158. Luigi Pirandello, *Six Characters in Search of an Author*, in *The Norton Anthology of World Literature*, Vol F, Ed. Martin Puchner (W.W. Norton and Co., 2012) 277.
  159. All Bob Dylan lyrics quoted are from "The Official Bob Dylan Site," <https://www.bobdylan.com>.
  160. Arthur Rimbaud, "Barbarian," quoted in "Poemhunter," Translator uncredited. <https://www.poemhunter.com/poem/barbarian-3/>.
  161. Bob Dylan: *All the Songs—The Story Behind Every Track*, Eds. Phillippe Margotin and Jean-Michel Guesdon (Black Dog and Leventhal, 2015) 61.
  162. *Ibid.* 56.
  163. W. B. Yeats, "The Second Coming," *The Poetry Foundation*, accessed 16 February 2018, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/43290/the-second-coming>.
  164. Joan Didion, "Where the Kissing Never Stops," in *Slouching Towards Bethlehem* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1968) 45.
  165. *Ibid.* 45, 46.
  166. *Ibid.* 46.
  167. *Ibid.* 44.
  168. *Ibid.* 47.
  169. Bob Dylan, *Chronicles, Volume One* (Simon and Schuster, 2004) 120, 124.
  170. Didion, "Where the Kissing Never Stops" 45.
  171. *Ibid.* 46.
  172. *Ibid.* 49.
  173. *Ibid.* 51.
  174. *Ibid.* 57.
  175. *Ibid.* 58.
  176. *Ibid.*
  177. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, "The Danger of a Single Story," given as a Ted Talk in 2009, [https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda\\_adichie\\_the\\_danger\\_of\\_a\\_single\\_story/transcript?language=en](https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story/transcript?language=en).
  178. Tim O'Brien, *The Things They Carried* (Houghton Mifflin, 1990) 77.
  179. *Ibid.* 122, 124.
  180. *Ibid.* 125.
  181. *Ibid.* 126.
  182. *Ibid.* 128.



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