

**Human Dignity:  
Determining One's  
Own Destiny**

**By Angela Raffel**

**Part I**

In reconstructionist philosophy, Theodore Brameld proposes that the role of the teacher, rather than being that of purveyor of knowledge, should be one of the critic—analytical and discriminating in judgment. The student, too, should be actively involved in her or his education, thus developing abilities for decision making. Through democratic educational practices, both teacher and student free themselves from fear of authority and change, creating an atmosphere conducive to natural development.

The curriculum itself should have specifiable goals shared by teacher and student, since a sound rationale gives assurance of worthwhile content and important direction. Thus, they ask, “Where do we want to go?” Insisting upon clearly expressed goals will lead to their fulfillment. Reconstructionism confirms the necessity for such framework: “Both the ways and fruits of knowing—both how men (sic) think and the knowledge gained by that thinking—are definitely, if sometimes indirectly governed by the search for fundamental goals—goals that are important in the world of our time” (Brameld, 1971, pp. 385-89).

We are a culture in crisis, as Brameld(1971) has

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observed, and as the cataclysmic events of the 20th century demonstrate. Nuclear discoveries, moon landings, a computer revolution, the Civil Rights Movement, and breakthroughs in psychology have altered significantly the political, economic, moral, and social character of our world. We have lost balance and are “infected by chronic instability, confusion, bifurcations, and uncertainties,” (Brameld, 1971, p. 25), conditions exacerbated by terrorist attacks, hostage takeovers, and oil spills. The threat of nuclear obliteration hovers ominously. In these abnormal times, the fundamental goal, Brameld(1965) affirmed, is “a world civilization and an educational system which in all ways supports human dignity for all races, castes, and classes” (1965, p. 26). In my teacher education courses, I emphasize this awesome responsibility. In so precarious an era, the teacher must acknowledge the supreme importance lying in the dignity of the individual who seeks to become what he or she potentially is. What is taught should touch a person’s life.

The educational aim of self-realization is inestimable. It includes the inquiring mind, aesthetic interests, productive human relationships, civic responsibility, economic efficiency, tolerance for others, and critical judgment. Self-actualization represents the ultimate goal of education. The individual becomes competent to deal thoughtfully with the critical conditions engendered by a world gone awry. We too, live in times that try our souls!

The teacher enters the classroom where expectant students await some confirmation of their personal needs and where the teacher’s unwavering focus is upon the fundamental goal of human dignity. Students seek in their studies a pertinent meaning to life.

My aim in this article is to provide the teacher educator with a particular unit enabling students to approach the “search for self.” The Socratic dictum is the foundation: “Know thyself. An unexamined life is not worth living.” Plagued by the maladies of our time, students welcome exploration of their position in the universe. Who am I? The question continues to resonate in the soul of every person. Consciousness of identity awakens to the many expressions of humankind wherein are lodged the great ideas shaping one’s existence.

### **Part II**

In my teacher education courses at the University of Bridgeport, I stress the importance of a rationale for any curriculum design, pointing out that the fundamental, compelling goal of education is to promote self-development, social-self-realization, to allow everyone the right to be treated with respect, with appreciation and acceptance of differences. I encourage a humanities approach since the reconstructionist philosophy of Brameld(1971) sees art as the center of all learning: “Art is the unifying of all areas. Art deals with the unities symbolized in poetry, painting, music, sculpture, dance, architecture”(1971, p. 421). Thus, students embrace the whole of a concept with its many facets.

In teacher education, the professor often provides examples of viable curriculum units. Having taught high school students, I bring to my university classes years of experience and share with others samples of effective courses, one of which I offered last year—in part—to junior students at Scarsdale High School, Scarsdale, New York. Student responses were positive since they were able to relate their studies to questions raised about their own lives. Self-actualization! The overarching objective of existence itself!

At Scarsdale High School, “Perspectives I” offers a course, framed by the classics, in which teacher and students create a design. In my class, we agreed to explore the changing concept of tragedy with emphasis upon the consistency of the search for self from classical times to the present. Concepts about the world change, but the quest for identity remains constant. We agreed to examine philosophical concepts about human destiny:

- 1) Fatalism.
- 2) Determinism, Indeterminism (Happenstance).
- 3) Determinism (Heredity and Environment).
- 4) Existentialism (Freedom of Choice).

As I unfold this course design to my university students, I emphasize the significance of classical Greek drama since tragedy probes reasons why man suffers and how one faces misfortunes. The high school students have selected *Oedipus Rex* (Sophocles, 417 B.C.), and through it they learn that tragedy helps to define what the individual is, what each one of them can be. At this point, I sketch for my university class the structure of this highly successful unit and carry it through with running commentary on the reactions of the eleventh graders.

Students first have an opportunity to examine the religious system imbedded in the great myths. (A successful method is to list beforehand the complete mythological references in *Oedipus*, and to have students master them before coming to the text.) The teacher education class keeps in mind that this is a 20th century classroom. Students are independent-minded, critical thinkers to whom the idea of personal choice is a way of life. They struggle with the dilemma of Oedipus, who is destined to do what the gods decree, and rejoice in their own liberation as agents of choice. Although the power of the gods is unremitting, they champion Oedipus, who dares to defy that omnipotence. Disobedience, in itself, is a choice, even though the oracle of the gods will be fulfilled. Even within the taut framework of fate, Oedipus makes decisions to discover himself. His is the search for truth, for identity. (Who am I?) Even when he suspects the worst, he pursues. “I can’t stop now,” he argues with wife Jocasta, who implores him to cease the search—“And I must hear it. But hear it I will!”—as he stands before the shepherd who delivers the final blow.

Students praise the hero’s greatness of stature—of what he can be—dignified, accepting of consequences, enduring, tormented. Students recognize the innocence of Oedipus, whom the gods have chosen as an example to all that one must suffer

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because to suffer is what it means to be human.

There are supportive documents for tragedy: *The Poetics* of Aristotle (Barnet *et al*, 1963, p. 405-14); *Of Tragedy*, by David Hume (pp. 416-21); *The Tragic* by Ralph Waldo Emerson (p. 422-27). Through *The Poetics*, students learn the elements of tragedy, analyze the characteristics of the tragic hero or heroine, examine the important functions of the chorus which create a dramatic whole. Hume helps students understand the sorrow, terror, anxiety, and other passions they experience through a well-written tragedy—their uneasiness as they experience vicariously Oedipus' unrelenting pursuit of himself. Emerson insists that we must look unflinchingly into the "House of Pain;" otherwise, we have seen but half the universe. Of special note is *The Tragic Fallacy* by Joseph Wood Krutch (pp. 433-36), who reveals the optimism to be found in tragedy. Oedipus discovers who he is: he is committed to ferreting out the truth; he is intelligent in his search. One can not help but rejoice in the discovery of a personal truth, despite the awful pain!

After reading the drama and studying these reinforcing viewpoints on tragedy, students are prepared to view the film of *Oedipus* and to see first-hand the functions of the chorus. Some students, especially engrossed by the story of Oedipus, choose to view the superb film of *Oedipus at Colonus*, followed by *Antigone* (441 B.C.), often writing lengthy papers on the complete trilogy.

There are studies of the Greek Theatre, with slides of the famous theatre at Epidaurus. We follow up with an analysis of Greek Architecture—The Parthenon at Athens, the Oracle at Delphi, the game fields at Olympia, the workshop of Phidias. The student distinguishes the capital designs of the Greek columns—Doric, Ionic, Corinthian. There is a study of Greek sculpture—of Praxiteles, of Skopos. Throughout, students are imbued with the Greek ideal. Many express their appreciation of the Greek concept, so simple and so pure.

Students also listen to selected recitatives from the Carl Orff Opera of *Oedipus*. The human voice conveys the ranges of emotions felt by the characters—Jocasta's exquisite suffering as she exhorts Oedipus to seek no more; the blinded Oedipus, tortured and anguished, as he expresses his shame to the chorus; the chorus itself, outraged and fearful as it listens. The opera provides an intimate expression of how cries of the inner soul emerge.

The analysis of the characteristics of the Aristotelian tragic hero is an ideal point of entry for a study of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, the "Renaissance Man" who parallels the dimensions of the classical Oedipus. What kind of person is Hamlet, my students are asked? He, too, is involved in the quest for truth, in a desire to separate illusion from reality. "I know not seems," says Hamlet (Shakespeare, 1602, Act I Sc ii). He, too, is framed by a series of circumstances outside his control. "The time is out of joint:—O cursed spite that ever I was born to set it right!" (Act I, Sc v). Hamlet internalizes, and his soliloquies express the underlying questions of Who am I?—What is man? There is the complexity of living with the realization that evil does indeed exist.

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The soliloquies isolate him as he meditates: “Now I am alone—a dull and muddy-mettled rascal” (Act IV, Sc iv). He asks if he is a coward, pigeon-livered, and lacking all. He contemplates what Albert Camus claims to be the only philosophical question humans ask: Do I want “to be or not to be?” Yet, if one chooses to live, what of life itself? Hamlet’s greatest soliloquy concerning the human condition states: “What is a man if his chief good and market of his time be but to sleep and feed? a beast, no more. Sure he that made us with such large discourse, looking before and after, gave us not that capability and godlike reason to fust in us unused.” (Act IV, Sc iv). To live means to examine one’s existence!

The many interpretations of the role tell the enigma of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, and the several films available prove his multifaceted nature. The teacher should take time to have students listen to various recordings of the first soliloquy which signals how the actor or director views the protagonist: melancholic, or angry, or neurotic, or puzzled, or romantic, or accepting. His role has been thrust upon him by an imploring but commanding ghost who insists upon the filial duty of revenge. Hamlet’s response is truthful, regardless of his feelings.

Students are apprised of the influence of the Greek drama. Shakespeare shapes the tragic hero along Aristotelian lines: hubris, hamartia, discovery, pity, and fear. In *Hamlet*, the court becomes the chorus.

### **Part III**

Greek drama has also influenced the novelist Thomas Hardy (1925), who offers his creation of the tragic hero with commoners as the chorus. Before reading *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, students learn about Hardy “happenstance,” and analyze his sonnet, “Hap.”

If but some vengeful god would call to me  
From up the sky, and laugh: “Thou suffering thing,  
Know that thy sorrow is my ecstasy,  
That thy love’s loss is my hate’s profiting!”

Then would I bear it, clench myself, and die,  
Steeled by the sense of ire unmerited;  
Half-eased in that a Powerfuller than I  
Had willed and meted me the tears I shed.

But not so. How arrives it joy lies slain,  
And why unblooms the best hope ever sown?  
—Crass Casualty obstructs the sun and rain,  
And dicing Time for gladness casts a moan...  
These purblind Doomsters had as readily strown  
Blisses about my pilgrimage as pain.

In this brief poem, the student interprets the changing concept of human

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destiny. The gods no longer determine one's fate. "Crass casualty" and "dicing time" replace the mythological gods. They are the impediment to human happiness. Here, we take time to reflect upon William James' "The Dilemma of Determinism" (1884, pp. 145-185), the principle of casualty. We grope with the words "freedom and chance," "determinism and indeterminism," in an effort to discover how human volition operates under such circumstances.

Hardy sheds light, for he subtitles *The Mayor of Casterbridge* as a "Man of Character." It is Michael Henchard's nature which brings on his suffering as he "plays" into the hands of chance and gambling time. When he irascibly and drunkenly auctions off his wife Susan, the sailor, Richard Newson, arrives just at that climactic moment and buys Michael's wife who, disgusted with her husband, accepts the sale as legal. When, as mayor, Michael is responsible for the "bad bread," Farfrae, a stranger, appears just in time to "save" the hero, and thus commences the downfall of the elected official. In Michael's character one also discerns admission of guilt and the desire to atone. He can be compassionate. Somehow, chance and timing contrive. He is about to marry Lucetta, but Susan appears, and—out of a sense of duty—he "remarries" her. He is willing to return Lucetta's love letters, but she misses the rendez-vous because of the death of her aunt. The human will is thwarted.

Students sense something of the metaphysical. There seems to be some malign force operating in the universe. Michael, like Oedipus, is blind to his major flaw. It is only when he realizes his fault and the ensuing devastation that he, like Oedipus, emerges humbled, banished, unflinching, accepting.

Students view critically the contrivances of Hardy coincidences, but are awed by his masterminding the concept of happenstance which demonstrates how the individual can be chastised or rewarded. The Hardy world is bleak and pessimistic for the most part, but one's character is solidly formed as the individual finds himself enmeshed in the toils of casualty and time. Behavior forges destiny in the final analysis. It is the choice of the person to act in a certain way. Character determines fate—fate determines character. Students delight in the challenge of this concept!

The poetry of Hardy expresses well his philosophy. "Neutral Tones" (1867) is reminiscent of the interrelationships in *The Mayor of Casterbridge* and the brooding influence of the ominous universe:

We stood by a pond that winter day,  
And the sun was white, as though chidden of God,  
And a few leaves lay on the starving sod;  
—They had fallen from ash, and were gray.

Your eyes on me were as eyes that rove  
Over tedious riddles of years ago;  
And some words played between us to and fro  
On which lost the more by our love.

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The smile on your mouth was the dearest thing  
Alive enough to have strength to die;  
And a grin of bitterness swept thereby  
Like an ominous bird a-wing...

Since then, keen lessons that love deceives,  
And wrings with wrong, have shaped to me  
Your face, and the God-curst sun, and a tree,  
And a pond edged with grayish leaves. (p. 33)

The titles of the poems themselves unfold the “hap” position: “The Missed Train,” “A Broken Appointment,” “After the Fair.” The world of Hardy is one of mistiming and aborted circumstances.

Henrik Ibsen’s *Ghosts* (1881), on the other hand, reflects a new kind of tragedy; determinism takes on a different aspect. The Greek idea of the curse of the family remains, but it is heredity that becomes one’s fate. The sins of the fathers are visited upon the children. The consequences of human action without moral responsibility create suffering and anguish, destroy lives. Essentially, the play is about the unnatural stifling of “joie de vivre,” the well-spring of human happiness that allows for a suitably free life. To students, “joie de vivre” represents liberation of the spirit—all that is wholesome and meaningful to true happiness.

We pause here to discuss shallow conventional judgment, the superficialities of society that inhibit. We consider the idea of permissive behavior and distinguish it from freedom which Brameld (1971) defines as “...the positive ideal of providing concrete opportunities for human development” (1971, p. 249). He cautions that, “We must invariably remember that the self-discovering, self-expressing, self-fulfilling individual is not an isolated self; he is integral with others—a ‘group mind as ends and means.’ In the last analysis, indeed, the realizing, actualizing, organic culture, which is made up of individuals but yet is far greater than the sum of its parts, is the ultimate value” (p. 421).

A careful reading of Ibsen exposes his sensitivity to the intricate power of society and how it imposes its values. Thus, his characters suffer internal struggles between the essential self and the social self. Habit, social custom, conventional behavior condemn the hero.

In Ibsen’s work, Brameld’s ideal of freedom is thwarted by stifling, rectitudinal, unexamined custom. Students ponder the social self.

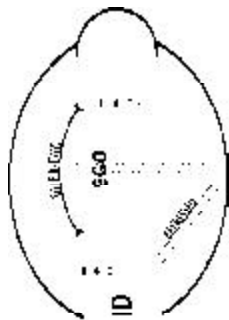
**Part IV**

The 20th century has arrived! The background provided by these literary works prepares students for Sigmund Freud, the founder of psychoanalysis. His influence on this century has made him one of the most revolutionary thinkers in the history of the western world. Through Freud’s lecture on “The Anatomy of the Mental Personality” (Nickerson, pp. 226-45), the student becomes conversant with the

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subconscious, the differentiation between the superego, ego (preconscious, unconscious), and the id. The simple diagram sketched by Freud explains the structural relations. He warns that there are no sharp dividing lines in the regions of the mind. The id is bottomless, without boundary. It lodges the life force, the creative urge, all of the Dionysian spirit. In anticipating our study of Expressionism, in connection with Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*, we also discuss the Apollonian, to show how other powers of the mind shape what springs from the creative source.



Freud helps us to understand the complexities of the mind of Willy Loman in *Death of a Salesman*. So much action occurs in Willy's subconscious. As critic Parker (1983) observes, "Miller uses the technique of nonlogical, subjective memory structure. He uses the expressionistic technique solely as a means of revealing the character of Loman, the values he holds, and particularly the way his mind works. The set is expressionistically lit—angry orange, dappled green, lurid red; music is similarly manipulated" (p.41).

Willy is blinded by what he considers to be important values. He will never discover who he is. He is without essence. Yet, he suffers because he is human. Not wanting his life to add up to a zero, he becomes a suicide in a final attempt to show his worth through the insurance legacy left his family.

At this point, we read Miller's essay on "Tragedy and the Common Man." Miller (1949) argues that "the commonest of men may take on that (tragic) structure to the extent of his willingness to throw all he has into the contest, the battle to secure his rightful place in the world." Argument ensues as to whether Willy is a tragic hero or merely a pathetic character.

There is analysis of self-portraits in which artists seek their inner selves—among them Van Gogh, Kokoschka, Ensor, Gauguin, Kirchner, and Nolde. The scope of this article limits art explication, except to point out in this series common themes of fear and apprehension, hopes and aspirations, potentiality and actuality.

In 20th century thought the fates have no control; determinism cannot shape present conduct; nor can indeterminism. We are on the threshold of existential philosophy where existence comes before essence. The individual becomes the



sum-total of all choices made; individuals create their own essence. In fear and trembling, in anguish, a person makes moral decisions. This philosophy “becomes a repudiation of the ruthless power of modern civilization conspiring to overwhelm individuality and personal integrity” (Brameld, 1971, p. 67).

Gordon E. Bigelow’s “A Primer of Existentialism” (Nickerson, 1965) presents a simple and clear statement of a major intellectual movement of contemporary life. The portraits examined help us to understand the idea of non-reason, such as D.H. Lawrence’s assertion that “I am many men. It’s a queer thing is a man’s soul” (p. 442). Alienated from one’s self, from our fellowbeings, from God, from the universe, the individual is isolated. The quest for authenticity takes place in this barren landscape where freedom means human autonomy. Sartre insists that we are condemned to freedom since we are the only creatures who are self-surpassing, who can become something other than what we are. Authenticity is closely aligned to commitment to a cause in which he or she firmly believes and for which he or she takes open and affirmative action.

In Camus’ *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1955) the author demonstrates his ideal absurd hero in an irrational universe: “Myths are made for the imagination to breathe life into them” (p. 89). The importance of Sisyphus centers around the idea of the meaning of life. We must find our own meaning whether or not we believe in God. The rock is our “thing” and “the struggle toward the heights is enough to fill a man’s heart” (p. 90). Camus gives his affirmation of life, concluding “One must imagine Sisyphus happy” (p. 91).

Students have the choice of reading Camus’ *The Stranger* or *The Plague*, or they may read Sartre’s *The Age of Reason*. All novels deal with the absurd hero, isolated as the hero journeys into himself or herself. Self-deception, inauthenticity, authenticity, good faith, bad faith, commitment, non-commitment, essence, non-essence—these human conditions entice much internalization on the part of the individual.

In *The Stranger*, the author establishes a justification for life. Meursault, the protagonist, bears out the author’s true feelings on existence, for Camus is known to have said, “If I obstinately refuse all the ‘later on’ of this world, it is because I do not want to give up my present riches.” Meursault, the hedonist living an empty, sensual existence, awakens to the meaning of life only after he has been imprisoned and condemned to death. It is then that life becomes precious. He savors what is left of his time as, from his narrow cell, with its small skylight, he awakens to the beauty of the stars shining on his face and to the pleasant sounds of the countryside.

*The Plague*, too, is an affirmation of human experience and concerns humans under duress of a pestilence. Dr. Rieux is committed to administering to the fatally infected victims. What a person can do, a person must do to alleviate pain and suffering although we know that we can never completely destroy such human conditions. A towering presence, Dr. Rieux is like Sisyphus and defeats the gods although the forceful gods want him to despair, to hate. The rock is his thing as he

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struggles toward the heights. “What does that mean—‘plague’? Just life, no more than that.”(p. 285). On a metaphysical level, the novel is about the nature of good and evil.

Mathieu, the central figure of Sartre’s, *The Age of Reason* (1950), is an ineffectual lycee professor. In his early thirties, he comes to the realization that he has reached the age of reason. Still, he is self-serving and unable to engage himself in any important cause. Sartre says of Mathieu, “He has created his own situation and this situation is of consequence. He is bound hand and foot by his culture. He himself has forged his own links. He is much too clear-sighted for psychoanalysis to be of any usefulness to him: this is moreover true for all intellectuals. Mathieu is still waiting for God, I mean for something outside him to beckon to him”(p. ). If life has significance only in relation to the lives of others, Mathieu must “engage” himself, something he is too selfish and reluctant to do.

### **Part V**

This course is a natural for great classroom dynamics, since it touches the life of each student. The teacher has invited into the room the voices of many great masters who, along with all present, question, tease out meanings, pursue ideas, offer original and imaginative thought, analyze, challenge, clarify, probe, and urge. Interaction among these many voices is exciting, stimulating, meaningful. As Brameld (1971) put it, “The ideal in learning is, of course, to provide continuous interplay between **both** experiences—direct and indirect” (p. 459).

Concepts of the position of what it means to be human alter, but the students see firmly imbedded in these concepts ideas of choice and the consequences of human action. Thus, students draw upon outcomes revealed and consider possible consequences of their own behavior. Students reflect upon what has already been studied and reach forward to what is still to come. They learn that each person becomes morally responsible for choices made while striving for social-self-realization. The goal lies in a democratic value orientation in which the individual “believes in himself(sic), in his(sic) capacity to govern himself(sic) in relation to his(sic) fellowman(sic)” (Brameld, p. 49).). Human dignity is the right of all!

For those in the teacher education class, this course confirms the positive advantages of the reconstructionist approach to education. A philosophy of values, ends, and means, it leads toward a more humanistic and productive person and society, allowing the self-searching individual freedom to pursue and to fulfill personal aspirations.

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