



Staging the Self: Teaching Identity through Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*, Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, and Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*

David Overton, Ph.D. Farmingdale State College, NY, USA.

 <https://orcid.org/0009-0003-8365-0163>

Research Article

Abstract

This article proposes a pedagogical framework for teaching identity through a comparative study of four canonical dramatic works: Oedipus Rex, Hamlet, A Doll's House, and Waiting for Godot. Tracing a chronological progression from classical antiquity to modern drama, the study examines how each play stages a distinct conception of identity: as fated and ultimately revealed, as internally contested and uncertain, as socially constructed and consciously redefined, and finally as fragmented and existentially unstable. Drawing on psychological, existential, and post-structural theories, the article argues that identity in dramatic literature is not a fixed essence but a dynamic and evolving problem, enacted through performance, language, and action. Through close readings of key moments in each text, the study demonstrates how the respective characters engage with questions of selfhood in ways that reflect broader shifts in philosophical thought. Further, it emphasizes the pedagogical value of teaching these works in sequence, enabling students to move from assumptions of stable identity toward an understanding of self as contingent, constructed, and potentially unknowable. By situating literary analysis within a classroom context, the article highlights how drama serves as a powerful medium for exploring identity as both an intellectual and experiential inquiry. Ultimately, it suggests that teaching identity through these plays does not resolve the question "Who am I?" but rather deepens it, encouraging students to recognize identity as something enacted, embodied, and continually reimagined.

Keywords: Identity, Dramatic literature, Pedagogy, Selfhood, Existentialism, Social construction, Performance, Canonical drama.

INTRODUCTION: TEACHING IDENTITY THROUGH DRAMA

At once deeply personal and shaped by external forces, identity has long occupied a central place in philosophical inquiry and literary expression. From classical antiquity to the modern era, dramatists have repeatedly returned to the question of what it means to "know oneself," often revealing such knowledge to be unstable, contingent, and, at times, unattainable. In the classroom, this enduring concern offers a powerful point of entry for students, who encounter in dramatic literature not only representations of identity but also invitations to interrogate their own assumptions about selfhood, agency, and social role.

Recent research in developmental psychology underscores the urgency of this work. Identity formation is widely recognized as "the ongoing developmental task of defining who you are" (Raemen et al. n/p), characterized by processes of exploration and revision rather than the attainment of a fixed self. At the same time, identity development involves both continuity and change, encompassing "systematic maturation and substantial stability" (Branje et al., 908). Crucially, the quality of this development is closely tied to psychological well-being, with difficulties in identity formation associated with increased vulnerability to mental health



challenges. Identity thus emerges not merely as an abstract concern, but as a critical dimension of student development. Within this context, the literature classroom becomes a valuable site for identity exploration. Dramatic texts, in staging the self through action, dialogue, and performance, allow students to engage identity not only as a concept but as an experience; something enacted, contested, and embodied. By guiding students through plays that progressively complicate the nature of the self, instructors can foster a deeper understanding of identity as dynamic, relational, and uncertain.

This article examines the teaching of identity through four canonical works: *Oedipus Rex* by Sophocles, *Hamlet* by William Shakespeare, *A Doll's House* by Henrik Ibsen, and *Waiting for Godot* by Samuel Beckett. Spanning over two millennia, these plays trace a progression in the representation of identity: from a condition governed by fate, to an inward psychological struggle, to a socially constructed role, and finally to a fragmented or absent sense of self. In *Oedipus Rex*, identity is something to be discovered, determined by forces beyond human control. *Hamlet* shifts identity inward, shaped by introspection and doubt. In *A Doll's House*, identity becomes entangled with social expectations and performative roles, while *Waiting for Godot* presents a world in which stable identity dissolves into repetition and uncertainty. Taught in sequence, these works offer a framework through which students can explore how identity is formed, challenged, and destabilized. By placing these works in chronological dialogue, this study argues that teaching identity through drama enables students to perceive both continuities and shifts in the concept of the self. More importantly, it demonstrates that a pedagogical focus on identity encourages active engagement, as students move from recognizing externally imposed definitions of the self to grappling with its psychological, social, and existential dimensions. In this way, the classroom becomes a space where identity is not merely analyzed, but actively examined, questioned, and reimagined.

CONSTRUCTING THE SELF: THEORETICAL APPROACHES TO IDENTITY

Any pedagogical examination of identity in dramatic literature must be grounded in a theoretical understanding of how the self is formed, perceived, and destabilized. The concept of identity has been shaped by multiple intellectual traditions, including developmental psychology, existential philosophy, and post-structural theory. Together, these frameworks illuminate the shifting representations of selfhood encountered in works such as *Oedipus Rex*, *Hamlet*, *A Doll's House*, and *Waiting for Godot*, while also offering a foundation for their effective teaching. From a psychological perspective, Erik Erikson's theory of identity formation provides a useful starting point. Erikson defines identity as "awareness of the fact that there is self-sameness and continuity to the ego's synthesizing methods, the style of one's individuality, and that this style coincides with the sameness and continuity of one's meaning for significant others in the immediate community" (Erikson 50). This formulation underscores the idea that identity is not fixed but develops over time through stages of conflict and resolution. In the classroom, this developmental model helps students recognize identity as something negotiated rather than given, a concept that resonates across the dramatic texts under consideration. While Erikson emphasizes continuity, existentialist philosophy complicates the notion of a stable self. Jean-Paul Sartre argues that human beings are fundamentally responsible for creating their own identities, asserting that "existence precedes essence" (Sartre 22). In this view, identity is not predetermined but emerges through choice and action. This framework is particularly relevant when teaching characters such as Hamlet, whose prolonged indecision foregrounds the difficulty of self-definition, and Nora in *A Doll's House*, whose ultimate act of departure signals an assertion of selfhood against prescribed roles.

At the same time, post-structuralist thought challenges the very coherence of identity.



Michel Foucault contends that the self is shaped by systems of power and discourse rather than existing as an autonomous essence. As he notes, “the individual is not to be conceived as a sort of elementary nucleus... [but] is an effect of power, and at the same time, or precisely to the extent to which it is that effect, it is the element of its articulation” (Foucault 98). This perspective is especially productive in examining how identity operates within social structures, as in *A Doll’s House*, where Nora’s identity is constructed through patriarchal expectations, and in *Waiting for Godot*, where the absence of stable structures contributes to the dissolution of coherent selfhood. Taken together, these theoretical perspectives reveal identity as a dynamic and often unstable construct variously shaped by internal development, individual agency, and external systems of power. Pedagogically, introducing students to these frameworks enables them to move beyond surface-level character analysis toward a more nuanced understanding of how identity functions within and across dramatic texts. By situating literary study within these broader theoretical conversations, the classroom becomes a space in which students can critically engage with the evolving concept of the self, recognizing both its historical specificity and its enduring philosophical complexity.

IDENTITY AS FATE AND DISCOVERY IN SOPHOCLES’ *OEDIPUS REX*

From the outset, Oedipus presents himself as a figure defined by knowledge and public responsibility. His declaration that he suffers not only for himself but for the entire city, “my soul mourns the city, myself, and you,” frames identity as inseparable from civic duty rather than as a private construct (350). This reflects a premodern conception of the self as embedded within larger structures such as family, polis, and divine order, rather than autonomously formed, and offers a useful point of contrast with more modern, individual frameworks. Within this framework, *Oedipus Rex* presents identity as both fixed and unstable: determined by forces beyond human control, yet experienced as coherent and self-evident. This tension between identity as fate and identity as lived perspective becomes central to the play’s pedagogical value, inviting students to confront the possibility that identity may never be fully knowable, but only partially understood through shifting perspectives.

Oedipus initially embodies this subjective certainty. Recounting his origins, he asserts, “My father was Polybus of Corinth, my mother the Dorian Merope, and I was held the foremost man in all that town” (365). From his perspective, this identity is stable and socially affirmed. Yet the audience, aware of the dramatic irony, recognizes that this certainty rests on incomplete knowledge, underscoring the play’s central insight: identity, though deeply felt, may be contingent and provisional. Oedipus knows who he is, and yet that knowledge is ultimately revealed to be false. At the same time, the play foregrounds the limits of human knowledge. Jocasta’s attempt to calm Oedipus introduces a striking claim: “Listen to me, and learn to your comfort that nothing born of woman can know what is to come” (363). This challenges the premise of Oedipus’ investigation. If the future, and by extension the truth of one’s identity, cannot be known, then his search is fundamentally misguided. At the same time, this claim anticipates later philosophical concerns with uncertainty and indeterminacy. Yet Oedipus refuses to abandon the search. Even when confronted with mounting evidence, he insists, “What, with a clue like that in my hands and fail to find out my birth?” (372). Here, identity becomes something actively pursued, aligning partially with Erikson’s notion of identity as a process of becoming. However, Sophocles complicates this model. Rather than leading to integration, Oedipus’ search leads to fragmentation. The more he uncovers, the less stable his sense of self becomes.

Jocasta’s subsequent warnings deepen this tension between knowledge and destruction. Her plea, “May you never come to know who you are, unhappy man!” marks a pivotal shift,



while her lament, “Alas, alas, miserable man! Miserable! That is all that I can call you now or for ever,” suggests that identity, once revealed, becomes fixed in suffering (372). These moments invite students to consider the unsettling possibility that self-knowledge is not inherently liberating, but may instead impose a permanent and devastating definition of the self.

The climactic recognition scene confirms the collapse of Oedipus’ constructed identity. His cry, “O! O! All brought to pass! All truth!” suggests a moment of total revelation (376). Yet what he attains is not stable self-knowledge, but a catastrophic reconfiguration of identity that exposes the limits of his earlier certainty. Identity remains mediated by perspective, circumstance, and limitation.

The play’s conclusion further resists resolution. The Chorus declares, “Call no man fortunate that is not dead. The dead are free from pain” (382). This stark pronouncement suggests that identity can only be judged at the end of life, yet even then it is defined by suffering rather than clarity. In this sense, *Oedipus Rex* offers no stable model of identity, but presents the self as shaped by forces beyond comprehension and resistant to full understanding. In this way, the play can be read through Erikson’s conception of identity as emerging through crisis. Oedipus’ pursuit of truth initiates a developmental process, yet it culminates not in integration but in rupture. His discovery does not stabilize identity but shatters it, challenging the assumption that coherence can be achieved through knowledge alone.

In the classroom, *Oedipus Rex* becomes foundational for tracing the evolution of identity across dramatic literature. Students begin with a model in which identity appears fixed and discoverable, only to find that such certainty dissolves under scrutiny, preparing them for increasingly unstable representations of the self in later works.

IDENTITY AS QUESTION, PERFORMANCE, AND EXISTENTIAL UNCERTAINTY IN SHAKESPEARE’S *HAMLET*

In *Hamlet*, the question of identity emerges immediately and insistently. The play opens not with action, but with a question: “Who’s there?” (1.1.1). This seemingly simple inquiry establishes a pattern that reverberates throughout Act I and beyond. Characters repeatedly ask one another to identify themselves: “Stand and unfold yourself” (1.1.2). Hamlet himself presses others with variations of the same question, asking Horatio why he has come and later confronting Rosencrantz and Guildenstern: “What make you at Elsinore?” (2.2.270). These questions extend beyond the immediate dramatic situation; they become philosophical. Beneath “Who’s there?” lies a deeper and more unsettling inquiry targeted not just at the characters but to the viewer/reader their self: *Who am I?* and *Why am I here?*

Like Oedipus, Hamlet is driven by a relentless pursuit of truth, yet the method of that pursuit differs significantly. Where Oedipus seeks knowledge through direct questioning and public inquiry, Hamlet turns inward and adopts indirect strategies including feigned madness, surveillance, and theatrical performance. Identity in *Hamlet* is therefore not simply discovered but constructed, tested, and performed. This shift marks a crucial development in the evolution of identity across dramatic literature: the movement from external revelation to internal uncertainty.

Hamlet’s reflections on human nature further destabilize any fixed conception of identity. In one of the play’s most famous passages, he declares: “What a piece of work is a man, how noble in reason... and yet, to me, what is this quintessence of dust?” (2.2.303-8). Here, identity is framed as paradoxical: humanity is at once exalted and insignificant, rational and reduced to dust. This duality reflects a growing skepticism toward stable definitions of the self. From a pedagogical perspective, this moment allows students to interrogate competing views of human identity which could include Renaissance humanism’s celebration of human potential alongside a more pessimistic recognition of existential fragility.



Hamlet's sense of dislocation within the world further complicates his identity. Questioning his place in existence, he asks: "What should such fellows as I do crawling between earth and heaven?" (3.1.126-8). Unlike Oedipus, whose identity is bound to a divine and social order, Hamlet experiences himself as suspended between realms; neither fully grounded nor fully transcendent. This image anticipates later existential concerns, particularly the idea that human beings occupy an uncertain and often absurd position within the universe.

At the same time, Hamlet recognizes (earlier than Oedipus) the burden of his role. Confronted with the ghost's revelation, he laments: "O cursed spite, that ever I was born to set it right!" (1.5.188-9). Here, identity is experienced not as discovery but as obligation. Hamlet's sense of self is defined by a task imposed upon him, yet one he resists and delays. Pedagogically, this moment offers a point of comparison with *Oedipus Rex*: both protagonists are bound to a fate they did not choose, but whereas Oedipus moves decisively toward revelation, Hamlet hesitates, reflecting the increasing inwardness and psychological complexity of early modern drama.

This hesitation is resolved only after Hamlet's return from England, a turning point that can be read symbolically as a form of death and rebirth. Having escaped execution and endured a journey across the sea—a space often associated with transformation—Hamlet re-enters the play with a new philosophical clarity. His declaration to Horatio marks this shift: "...we defy augury. There is special providence in the fall of a sparrow. If it be now, 'tis not to come; if it be not to come, it will be now; if it be not now, yet it will come—the readiness is all" (5.2.219-22).

In this moment, Hamlet relinquishes the need to control or fully understand his fate. Identity is no longer something to be solved or constructed through action, but something to be accepted within a larger, incomprehensible order. This shift contrasts sharply with Oedipus' relentless pursuit of knowledge and aligns more closely with an emerging existential awareness: that certainty is unattainable, and that meaning lies not in knowing, but in readiness. Importantly, *Hamlet* resists any final or stable definition of identity. Unlike *Oedipus Rex*, which culminates in a moment of tragic recognition, Shakespeare's play leaves identity unresolved, dispersed across performance, language, and philosophical reflection.

If *Oedipus* enacts the crisis of discovering identity, *Hamlet* embodies the burden of creating it. Sartre's assertion that "existence precedes essence" resonates throughout the play, as Hamlet confronts the necessity of defining himself through action while simultaneously recoiling from that responsibility. His hesitation reveals the paradox at the heart of existential freedom: the capacity to choose is inseparable from the anxiety of choice. Unlike Oedipus, who moves inexorably toward revelation, Hamlet remains suspended in the space between thought and action, where identity is neither given nor fully realized. For students, this tension becomes central: identity is no longer something one uncovers, but something one must enact; and yet the very act of choosing may produce paralysis rather than clarity. In this sense, *Hamlet* dramatizes not the resolution of identity, but its perpetual deferral. Given the scope of this study, it is impossible to fully account for the complexities of identity in *Hamlet*. However, this very resistance to closure is itself instructive. In the classroom, students encounter a model of identity that is no longer fixed or discoverable, but fragmented, performative, and ultimately unknowable.

In tracing the movement from Oedipus to Hamlet, students begin to see a clear evolution: identity shifts from something externally determined and ultimately revealed, to something internally contested and perpetually in question. This transition prepares them for the even more radical destabilizations of identity that will emerge in modern drama.

IDENTITY AS SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION AND SELF-ASSERTION IN IBSEN'S *A DOLL'S HOUSE*



If *Oedipus Rex* presents identity as something fated yet unknowable, and *Hamlet* renders it as something internally contested and perpetually deferred, then *A Doll's House* marks a decisive shift: identity becomes socially constructed, performed, and ultimately subject to conscious reinvention. In Ibsen's play, the question is no longer simply *Who am I?* but rather *Who have I been made to be?* and *Who might I become if I refuse that role?* From the outset, Nora Helmer appears to inhabit a stable identity as wife and mother, yet this stability is immediately revealed to be theatrical. Her interactions with Torvald establish her as a performed figure (playful, childlike, and dependent) an identity reinforced through diminutive language and ritualized behavior. When Torvald greets her with pet names and mild reproach, Nora responds in kind, participating in a dynamic that reduces her to what she later recognizes as a constructed role. As she ultimately reflects: "It's your fault that I've never made anything of my life" and "I have been your doll wife, just as at home I was Daddy's doll child" (580).

These lines crystallize Nora's realization that her identity has never been her own, but rather something imposed and maintained through performance. Unlike Oedipus, who is tragically ignorant of his true identity, and Hamlet, who cannot resolve his internal uncertainty, Nora arrives at a different kind of knowledge: that her sense of self has been shaped entirely by external expectations.

Throughout the play, Nora navigates a series of roles, adjusting her behavior depending on her audience. With Torvald, she performs the obedient and charming wife; with Dr. Rank, she adopts a more intimate and suggestive tone; with Krogstad, she becomes calculating and desperate; and with Mrs. Linde, she reveals fragments of a more authentic self. This multiplicity suggests that Nora does not possess a singular, stable identity, but rather a network of situational selves, each shaped by social context. In this way, Ibsen extends the performative dimension of identity seen in *Hamlet*, but relocates it from the realm of philosophical inquiry to that of social necessity.

Nora's awareness of this performance gradually develops. Early in the play, she takes pride in her secret act of financial independence—borrowing money by means of forgery to save her husband—suggesting a latent desire for agency. Yet even this act must be concealed within the confines of her prescribed role. As she explains to Mrs. Linde, she has lived by "other sources of income [including] copying" and that it was "almost like being a man," yet this labor cannot be acknowledged openly (558). Identity, here, is constrained not only by expectation but by what can be publicly recognized.

The turning point of the play occurs when Nora fully confronts the gap between her performed identity and her lived reality. In her final conversation with Torvald, she rejects the roles that have defined her, asserting: "I believe that first and foremost I am an individual, just as you are—or at least I'm going to try to be" (580). This moment represents a profound shift in the evolution of identity across the texts examined in this study. For the first time, identity is not something discovered (*Oedipus*) or endlessly questioned (*Hamlet*), but something actively chosen and pursued. Nora does not claim to know who she is; rather, she asserts her right to find out.

Importantly, Nora's departure does not resolve the question of identity but instead opens it. When she leaves, she does so not with a fully formed sense of self, but with the recognition that such a self has yet to be constructed. This distinguishes her from both Oedipus and Hamlet: where Oedipus arrives at a devastating truth and Hamlet at a philosophical acceptance, Nora arrives at a beginning. Her famous exit, marked by the slamming of the door, signals not the completion of identity, but its possibility.

Pedagogically, this moment is especially powerful. Students are often struck by the realization that Nora's most authentic act is not a declaration of identity, but a rejection of



imposed roles. This invites critical discussion: Is identity something that can be discovered within existing social structures, or must those structures be abandoned? Does Nora know who she is when she leaves, or only who she is not? Such questions encourage students to move beyond static conceptions of identity and toward an understanding of the self as dynamic, contingent, and shaped by both constraint and choice.

At the same time, *A Doll's House* retains a degree of uncertainty that anticipates the more radical destabilization of identity in *Waiting for Godot*. Nora's assertion that she must "try and become" herself suggests that identity is always in process, never fully achieved. In this sense, Ibsen's play occupies a transitional space: it affirms the possibility of self-creation while acknowledging the difficulty (and perhaps impossibility) of ever arriving at a complete and stable understanding of the self.

Nora's awakening in *A Doll's House* reflects a shift from existential uncertainty to social critique, aligning closely with Foucault's understanding of identity as produced through systems of power and discourse. Her realization that she has been "a doll-wife" exposes the extent to which her identity has been constructed within—and constrained by—patriarchal structures. Unlike Oedipus, who is undone by truths beyond his control, or Hamlet, who struggles to define himself internally, Nora recognizes that the self she inhabits is not her own, but the product of external forces. Her departure, then, is not simply an act of personal liberation, but a rejection of the discursive structures that have defined her. For students, this moment reframes identity as something imposed before it is chosen, revealing that selfhood must first be disentangled from systems of power before it can be meaningfully constructed.

In tracing the progression from Oedipus to Hamlet to Nora, students encounter a clear evolution: identity moves from fate, to question, to performance, and finally to conscious reinvention. Yet even here, the question remains open, preparing the ground for Beckett's world, where the very notion of a stable or attainable identity is called into question.

IDENTITY AS ABSENCE, REPETITION, AND EXISTENTIAL INDETERMINACY IN BECKETT'S *WAITING FOR GODOT*

If *Oedipus Rex* presents identity as fated and ultimately revealed, *Hamlet* renders it as internally fractured and endlessly questioned, and *A Doll's House* imagines it as socially constructed and consciously redefined, then *Waiting for Godot* marks a final and radical departure: identity is no longer stable, discoverable, or even constructible: it is fragmented, repetitive, and possibly nonexistent. From its opening moments, the play resists the very structures that earlier dramas used to define identity. Estragon's first line, "Nothing to be done" establishes a world in which action, purpose, and by extension identity, are suspended (Beckett 7). Unlike Oedipus, who acts decisively in pursuit of truth, or Hamlet, who wrestles with the burden of action, Vladimir and Estragon exist in a state of perpetual inaction. Identity is no longer something to be discovered or created, but something that fails to cohere in the absence of meaningful progress.

This instability is further reinforced through the play's treatment of memory. Vladimir and Estragon repeatedly fail to recall past events, undermining any sense of continuity that might ground identity. As Vladimir accuses, "You forget everything," while Estragon struggles to piece together fragments of shared experience (32). Without memory, identity cannot accumulate or stabilize; it dissolves into a series of disconnected moments. In contrast to Nora, who leaves in order to begin constructing a self, Vladimir and Estragon cannot even sustain the narrative coherence necessary for such a project.

Language itself becomes unreliable as a tool for establishing identity. Their conversations circle, repeat, and collapse into contradiction, suggesting that meaning (and by extension selfhood) is perpetually deferred. At one point, Estragon asks, "What exactly did we ask him



for?” only for Vladimir to respond uncertainly, “Were you not there?” (13). The inability to confirm even shared experiences further destabilizes the notion of a coherent self.

Most significantly, identity in *Waiting for Godot* is relational and dependent, yet even this dependence fails to provide stability. Vladimir and Estragon rely on one another to affirm their existence, yet their connection is fragile and inconsistent. Estragon’s plea, “Don’t touch me! Don’t question me! Don’t speak to me! Stay with me!” reveals both the necessity and insufficiency of companionship (37). Unlike Nora, who ultimately asserts independence, these characters cannot exist meaningfully either together or apart. Their identities are suspended in a state of mutual dependence that never resolves into coherence.

The figure of Godot further complicates this dynamic. As an absent-presence, Godot represents the possibility of meaning, purpose, or identity that never arrives. The repeated refrain, “We’re waiting for Godot,” defines the characters not by who they are, but by what they are waiting for (10). Identity becomes deferred expectation, contingent upon an event that perpetually recedes into the future. In this sense, Beckett extends Jocasta’s earlier claim in *Oedipus Rex* that “nothing born of woman can know what is to come” to its logical extreme: not only can the future not be known, it may never arrive in any meaningful way (Sophocles 363).

The play’s cyclical structure reinforces this existential indeterminacy. Each day repeats the last, with only minor variations, suggesting that identity cannot develop over time. At the end of each act, the characters resolve to leave, yet remain motionless:

ESTRAGON. Well, shall we go?

VLADIMIR. Yes, let’s go.

They do not move. (Beckett 35)

This moment encapsulates the central paradox of the play: the intention to act exists, but action itself does not follow. Without action, there can be no transformation, and without transformation, identity remains static; or, more precisely, nonexistent.

Pedagogically, *Waiting for Godot* represents the culmination of the trajectory established across the earlier texts. Students who began with *Oedipus*—where identity, though hidden, ultimately exists—now confront a world in which identity may be an illusion altogether. The progression is stark: from certainty, to doubt, to agency, to absence. This shift challenges students to reconsider their assumptions about the self, particularly the expectation that identity is something stable, coherent, or attainable.

At the same time, the play resists total nihilism. The very act of waiting, of speaking, of remaining together suggests a minimal form of existence, if not identity. Language, however fragmented, becomes a means of sustaining presence: as Vladimir urges, “Say anything at all!” (41). Speech functions not to produce meaning, but to defer silence; to create, however fleetingly, the conditions under which existence can be felt. This tenuous performance becomes the closest approximation of identity available within Beckett’s world. Unlike Nora, who seeks to become herself, Vladimir and Estragon can only simulate the conditions of being, caught in an endless cycle of repetition without development.

In *Waiting for Godot*, the frameworks that once structured identity—developmental, existential, and social—begin to collapse. Erikson’s model of identity formation through crisis finds no resolution here, as Vladimir and Estragon remain suspended in a perpetual state of uncertainty without progression or synthesis. Sartre’s emphasis on choice and self-creation is equally destabilized; although the characters speak, decide, and resolve to act, their choices fail to produce meaningful transformation, rendering agency itself ineffective. Even Foucault’s notion of identity as socially constructed loses its grounding, as the absence of stable structures leaves no system through which identity might be formed. What remains is a world in which identity is



neither discovered, nor created, nor imposed, but endlessly deferred. For students, this final stage is perhaps the most unsettling: identity is no longer a problem to be solved, but a condition to be endured; one in which the self persists only as a fragile and fleeting performance in the absence of certainty, coherence, or resolution.

In tracing the evolution from Oedipus to Hamlet to Nora to Estragon/Vladimir, students encounter a profound transformation: identity moves from something divinely structured, to psychologically contested, to socially constructed, and finally to existentially unstable. *Waiting for Godot* does not answer the question “Who am I?” Instead, it dissolves it entirely, leaving only the echo of the question itself, repeated endlessly in a world where no definitive answer can ever arrive. This dissolution is already present in the play’s opening line: “Nothing to be done” (7). What appears at first to signal inactivity or despair is immediately undercut by the action that follows. The characters speak, move, wait: they *do* despite the claim that nothing can be done. The irony, and the quiet comedy, lies in this contradiction. Beckett thus reframes existence itself: not as meaningful action, nor even as the pursuit of identity, but as the persistence of activity in the absence of purpose. “Nothing to be done” becomes less a statement of resignation than a recognition that nothing one does will ultimately resolve or define the self.

CONCLUSION: STAGING THE SELF

To teach identity through dramatic literature is not to offer students a fixed definition of the self, but to invite them into an unfolding inquiry; one that is enacted, embodied, and repeatedly reimaged across time. From *Oedipus Rex* to *Hamlet*, *A Doll’s House*, and *Waiting for Godot*, identity does not emerge as a stable essence, but as a problem staged in different historical and philosophical forms. What begins as a question of fate becomes, over time, a question of consciousness, then of social construction, and finally of existential uncertainty.

In *Oedipus Rex*, identity is something already determined yet tragically unknown, revealed only through a process that the protagonist himself initiates. At the crossroads, “where three highways meet,” Oedipus makes a choice without knowledge, yet that choice is inseparable from the identity he will later come to recognize (Sophocles 363). The image of the crossroads becomes emblematic not only of fate, but of decision: identity is both inherited and enacted, even when the consequences of action remain obscured. In *Hamlet*, this tension shifts inward. Identity is no longer something to be uncovered through external inquiry, but something interrogated through thought, hesitation, and performance. Hamlet’s question—who he is and what he must do—remains unresolved, suspended between action and reflection.

With Nora in *A Doll’s House*, identity becomes explicitly social and, for the first time, consciously chosen. If Oedipus acts without knowing and Hamlet knows without acting, Nora acts in order to know. Her departure marks a decisive moment in the evolution traced in this study: identity is no longer revealed or deferred, but initiated. Yet even here, the self remains incomplete, defined less by what it is than by what it refuses to be. Finally, in *Waiting for Godot*, identity dissolves into repetition and uncertainty. No revelation occurs, no stable self emerges, and no decisive action alters the characters’ condition. Instead, existence persists as performance without resolution, as language without grounding, as waiting without fulfillment.

Pedagogically, this progression offers students more than a sequence of literary interpretations; it provides a framework for understanding identity as a dynamic and evolving concept. Students begin with the assumption that identity is something one can know, only to discover that such knowledge may be partial, constructed, or altogether unattainable. In this way, the classroom becomes a space not for defining the self, but for exploring its limits where each text complicates and redefines what has come before.



To return to the metaphor of the stage, identity in these works is not something one simply possesses, but something one performs, negotiates, and inhabits. It is shaped by forces both internal and external, revealed through action and constrained by circumstance. Like Oedipus at the crossroads, like Hamlet in his hesitation, like Nora at the threshold, and like Vladimir and Estragon in their endless waiting, the self is always in motion; caught between what is given and what is chosen.

Ultimately, drama does not resolve the question “Who am I?”; it sustains it. Each play stages the self differently, not to arrive at an answer, but to expose the complexity of the question itself. In guiding students through this progression, we do not lead them toward certainty, but toward a deeper awareness: that identity is not a destination to be reached, but a condition to be lived.

Enacted.

Embodied.

And continually reimagined.

SCOPE AND DELIMITATIONS

This study offers a focused, pedagogical examination of identity through four canonical dramatic works: *Oedipus Rex*, *Hamlet*, *A Doll's House*, and *Waiting for Godot*. These were selected for their historical range and their capacity to illustrate a conceptual progression in the representation of the self. The scope of the article is therefore deliberately limited: it does not attempt a comprehensive account of identity in dramatic literature, nor does it claim to exhaust the interpretive possibilities of the texts under consideration. Instead, it advances a specific pedagogical framework, using these plays as representative case studies through which students may trace an evolving understanding of identity across time.

Several limitations follow from this approach. First, the selection of texts, while canonical and widely taught, reflects a particular Western literary tradition. Other dramatic traditions, genres, and cultural perspectives (each of which might complicate or expand the concept of identity in different ways) fall outside the bounds of this study. Second, the analysis necessarily privileges thematic and pedagogical coherence over textual exhaustiveness. Each play, particularly *Hamlet* and *Waiting for Godot*, resists any singular or totalizing interpretation; the readings offered here are therefore selective, designed to support the article's central argument rather than to provide definitive accounts.

In addition, the theoretical framework employed (drawing on psychological, existential, and post-structural perspectives) serves as a guiding lens rather than a comprehensive theoretical synthesis. Other frameworks, including psychoanalytic, feminist, postcolonial, or performance-based approaches, could yield alternative or more nuanced readings of identity in these texts. Similarly, while the article foregrounds pedagogical application, it does not present empirical classroom data; its claims are grounded instead in interpretive practice and instructional experience.

Finally, the chronological structure of the study, while useful for tracing a conceptual progression, risks implying a linear development in the understanding of identity. In practice, these modes (fated, psychological, social, and existential) often coexist and overlap within and across texts. The progression articulated here is therefore heuristic rather than definitive, intended to provide a coherent framework for teaching rather than a fixed historical trajectory.

Despite these limitations, the study demonstrates the value of approaching identity as a staged and evolving problem within dramatic literature. By narrowing its focus to a set of carefully selected texts and a clearly defined pedagogical aim, it offers a model that can be adapted, expanded, and reinterpreted in a variety of classroom and scholarly contexts.



References

- [1] Beckett, Samuel. *Waiting for Godot*. Grove Press, 1954.
- [2] Branje, Susan, et al. "Dynamics of Identity Development in Adolescence: A Decade in Review." *Journal of Research on Adolescence*, vol. 31, no. 4, 2021, pp. 908–927. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jora.12678>.
- [3] Erikson, Erik H. *Identity: Youth and Crisis*. W. W. Norton & Company, 1968.
- [4] Foucault, Michel. *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972–1977*. Edited by Colin Gordon, Pantheon Books, 1980.
- [5] Ibsen, Henrik. *A Doll's House. Types of Drama, 8th ed.*, edited by Sylvan Barnet, et al., Pearson, 2001, pp. 553 – 582.
- [6] Raemen, Laura, et al. "Identity Formation and Psychopathological Symptoms in Adolescence: Examining Developmental Trajectories and Co-Development." *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology*, vol. 83, 2022.
- [7] Sartre, Jean-Paul. *Existentialism Is a Humanism*. Translated by Carol Macomber, Yale University Press, 2007.
- [8] Shakespeare, William. *Hamlet. The Riverside Shakespeare, 2nd ed.*, edited by G. Blakemore Evans et al., Houghton Mifflin Company, 1997, pp. 1189 – 1234.
- [9] Sophocles. *Oedipus Rex*. Translated by William Butler Yeats. *The Collected Works of William Butler Yeats, vol. 2: The Plays*, edited by David R. Clark and Rosalind E. Clark, Scribner, 2001, pp. 349 – 382.

BIO: David Overton (MFA / PhD) is a professor, playwright, and the founder of Long Island Classics Stage Company in Centerport, NY, where he guides students in performing the works of Shakespeare while fostering transferable life skills such as confidence, collaboration, and creative thinking. He currently serves as Visiting Professor at Farmingdale State College and as an adjunct professor at Nassau Community College. His plays are published with Theatrical Rights Worldwide and Uproar Theatrics. As an entrepreneur, David has created "Bard Cards: The Authentic Shakespearean Quote Game" and its companion Apple App, "Bard Cards: Shakespeare Says." His career bridges scholarship, artistry, and innovation, inspiring students and audiences alike to experience the timeless power of theatre. His latest scholarly article, "Proposing the Ajax Complex: A New Framework for Analyzing Mass Shooters," was published in December 2025.

Author (s) Acknowledgement / Funding: Nil

Author (s) Contribution Statement: I / We have employed ethical writing methods to write this article.

Author (s) Declaration: I/We declare that there is no competing interest in the content and authorship of this scholarly work.



The content of the article is licensed under Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License.

OPEN ACCESS 

Article History

Received: April 10, 2026 **Accepted:** May 15, 2026 **Published:** July 31, 2026



Copyright: © 2026 To author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under CC BY 4.0 Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits all unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium by giving proper attribution to the original author and source.

Data Availability Statement: The study utilizes primary and secondary sources of data and can be available from the author if requested.

Citation: David Overton. "Staging the Self: Teaching Identity through Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*, Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, and Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*." *Literary Musings*, Volume 4, Issue 1, July 2026, pp. 14-25.