

Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute 1980 Volume III: Drama

Character Analysis: The Search for Self

Curriculum Unit 80.03.08 by James Ramadei

When adults look back upon their teenage years it is not unusual for them to have a mixed reaction of pleasant and painful recollections. For the most part many adults are glad that their adolescence is over and few would ever want to repeat it. The reason that so many people react in this way is because of the total unsettledness in this period of their lives. Adolescence is the human metamorphosis from child to adult. It involves a variety of changes. Our bodies change. Our social status changes as we accept more responsibility. Most importantly, our attitudes change. In less than two years we become very different people. In this complex period of development, our identity is challenged in crisis proportions. As a person changes, his identity reflects these changes. Your identity consolidates your values, personality, sense of the physical self, and other characteristics which make you an individual. For the adolescent who has previously had fewer challenges presented to his identity, this is a period of great instability, which manifests itself in what is generally referred to as the adolescent identity crisis. An adolescent who cannot adapt himself quickly enough to the many changes in this period of his life will often behave erratically, with moods ranging from depression to rebellion, There isn't much that we as adult instructors can do to change this fact of life. As much as we might like to place some of our students in a state of suspended animation until their twenties, we know that when they awoke they would still lack the experience needed to complete this rite of passage. So since we cannot stop or delay this growing process we might as well involve ourselves in it to helps often its blow.

What the adolescent needs at this time is guidance from those who have been there before him. But this guidance should not interrupt the natural process of self-discovery, which is so important to the uniqueness of the individual At this time the adolescent needs guidance that is simply supportive, and encouraging, and will lead him toward a self-definition.

My curriculum unit is designed to assist the teacher in providing such guidance. The theme of my unit is character analysis as a method of self-discovery. When I speak of character I am referring to the composite elements of the person. These include physical, psychological, and, social characteristics which interact and shape us as human beings. In the adolescent these characteristics, are in a state of rapid flux. Because of these changes it might benefit the student to examine or analyze his character and also to compare it with that of others.

During problem periods of our lives our perceptions often tend to become very subjective. We hold in many emotions, repress responses to certain situations, and generally become confused because this type of sublimation makes us lose our sense of proportion concerning our problems. This high level of subjectivity is

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acute in the adolescent. The exercises in my unit are designed to help the adolescent to develop a sense of objectivity about these larger issues concerning his self-image. Some exercises are designed for group participation so that each person involved will have a peer group for comparison. Peer support is very important in removing the feeling of singularity and alienation. Adolescents often feel that they are alone or that they are the only ones going through a particular crisis. Through my unit the class will have a chance to compare notes in hope that the feeling of being odd will diminish. In short, these exercises are designed to raise self awareness of character through objectivity and develop a sense of community for the adolescent.

Another stress in my unit is on roles and role playing. Just as it would benefit the student to become aware of his community it would also help him if he became conscious of the various roles he as an individual plays in life. It has been demonstrated that people who have a high level of success are more flexible in the roles that they must present in their daily life. My exercises include activities to help define role, and encourage role flexibility.

The idea of character analysis is relevant then to the adolescent, and drama as compared to straight psychology is a particularly successful mode of teaching it. Drama is immensely popular in the classroom primarily because it is an active process. Our students love to be entertained as well as enjoy the sense of "play" that drama presents. The very word "play" along with "scene", "role", etc., shows us how the language of drama permeates our everyday vocabulary. Students also accept drama easily, because Man is a natural imitator. His mimetic instincts have been important to his survival.

The activities in this unit are a series of open-ended exercises based on a self-discovery approach. They place the student in a variety of situations, some familiar, some not. The activities involve a high level of imagination. They often ask for abstract thinking, emotional detachment, or fantasy. This approach is designed to help the student remove himself from his immediate circumstance. This removal from the self tests limits within the students as well as initiates a sense of objectivity.

The exercises are not designed to probe too deeply. They work on a surface level to expose only the most common conflicts and problems. The activities are not a panacea; they are merely an initial process to discovering how our own characters function and what they look like.

I was heavily influenced by the method of Transactional Analysis when I was designing my activities. While the activities themselves are not TA programs, they will allude to the method of TA. The important concept from TA which I would like to stress is the idea of personality components. Eric Berne, who fathered the TA method, saw the personality divided into three components: The Parent, The Adult, and The Child. According to Berne, what we call the personality is really the interaction of these three components. 1 believe this concept to be valuable to the adolescent in that many teenagers try to fix their personalities into a single unit. They believe that the emerging adult within them is one solid character. This tends to make the changes and instabilities within them more threatening. I have therefore stressed in these activities the fact that the personality is more fluid than solid; that who we are is the product of Many elements interacting. Bernes' model is especially clear to understand, and it would behoove the instructor to become familiar with it and make his students familiar with it.

One might think that this would be an exercise more befitting psychotherapy than an English classroom; but the vehicle I am using for my unit is drama, and character analysis and drama obviously go hand in hand. One automatically pictures the actor preparing for a role. But, if we can extend that idea of the actor and the role to our real life situation we can easily see ourselves playing many roles in our everyday lives. This concept of the living theater has provided many themes in literature as well as many theatrical modes. The

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environmental theater, psycho-drama, living scripts, open theater all recognize the connection of people as characters in a living play.

The emphasis on communicative skills in the activities makes it appropriate for presenting this type of unit in an English class. Most of the activities at some point require reading, writing, and speaking. While the activities are primarily experimental in their teaching method, students must be directed to express their experiences clearly. A sizable portion of adolescent identity problems stem from the lack of verbalizing these problems. Verbalization of common experiences or problems brings these situations to a surface level and helps reduce the sense of isolation that many of our students feel.

The language skills required for my unit are basic and reinforce language exercises that have been taught previously. The activities are general enough in design to be used with almost every ability level in a secondary school. They would be difficult to execute in extreme low-level classes. The writing skills include, descriptive writing, script writing, and creative writing. The speaking skills focus on extemporaneous speech. The reading skills emphasize interpretive reading (oral), and reading directions.

Another more subtle aspect in the language component of this unit is raising the student's awareness of language as a mode of behavior. Through the exercises the student will have an opportunity to observe how his own language behaves. He may note certain catch phrases or certain words he uses with great frequency. He may be forced to check the accuracy of his word choice in describing himself or a situation. The student will also have the opportunity to imitate the language of other people. By doing this he may observe how much influence some people have had on his own language behavior. The student will also be able to observe how a person's language can distinguish him in certain social contexts (i. e. the difference between talking to an employer and talking to a friend, or the language differences in various economic classes and ethnic groups.)

How much stress language skills will have in the unit is up to the instructor. Emphasis on language skills must be gauged carefully so that the flow of the activities is not disturbed. A balance in the activities content and language skills must also be maintained. While it is important that the student be able to accurately describe his experience, he shouldn't be intimidated by any inadequacy in his language to do that. This calls for a tactful approach by the instructor with the emphasis on suggestion rather than prescription of usage.

There are ten activities altogether. I have placed them in a suggested sequence, however, they are modular and may be rearranged as the instructor desires. Within my sequence they build from the necessary terminology to observation, then to abstraction, and finally to imitation and role playing. The activities are designed for a regular classroom. They have no time limits or prescribed results. The unit is a foundation for the classroom teacher to build on and he should feel free to add more exercises or apply these exercises in any way he wants. Those exercises do not have to be incorporated into a formal drama unit. If the instructor wants just to build classroom rapport or sees any other function for them he should use them. For the most part, these exercises are extremely personal. They ask for information concerning the student's past and family life, to name two sensitive areas. It is important that the instructor maintain a high level of sensitivity throughout the activities. The instructor should preface the unit with a pep talk to the class concerning respect. He should mention that there will be critical feedback from the students and discuss the nature of constructive criticism. Most importantly, the instructor should stress the idea of equality in the classroom by noting that we all are or have been in similar circumstances. If some students do not participate in an activity or the instructor feels a student has given a half-hearted or dishonest response, he should not force the issue. Those students who do so are making a statement to the rest of the class. If this occurs, the instructor can

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excuse the student or find a part of the activity that he can participate in. Refusal to participate should not go unchallenged. The instructor should feel free to explore the student's reasoning for not taking part.

The activities are outlined for easy implementation. I do not recommend that the objective be revealed to the class as that may bias their performance. In implementing the activities it is important for the instructor to take an active role. If he is not participating in the activity directly, he should focus his attention on maintaining the energy level in the room.

The most important attitude which must be maintained by everyone concerned is a genuine sense of play. Both the instructor and the students must realize that play can be silly and serious if some of these exercises are to be successful.

TITLE: The Vocabulary of Character

OBJECTIVE: In order to communicate more effectively the concept of character, it will be necessary for the students to become familiar with certain terms. This exercise lists several important terms in the language of Characterization. These terms are in the instructions of the activities which follow. They also should be used in follow -up discussions and writing.

PROCEDURE: The instructor should carefully review the meaning and usage of the following terms. These words may be presented in any manner the instructor feels comfortable with.

Abstraction Individual
Act Inhibition
Actor Interpretation
Ad-lib Manipulation
Archetype Object

Attitude Objective

Authoritarianism Pantomime/Mime

Character/Characterization Persona
Conflict Personality
Detachment Physical
Dialogue Psychology
Ego Projection
Energy Relationship

Environment Role

Feeling Role-Playing

Game Self

IdentitySelf-IdentityImageSelf-ImageImitationStereotypeImprovisationSubjective

TITLE: Who Am I?

OBJECTIVE: This exercise will provide a basic sketch of observable personality traits and personal history. It is a written exercise designed to initiate the student's thinking about himself. Answers should be carefully

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considered and seriously answered. Information gathered in this sketch may be shared and also used for reference in the other activities.

NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS: Individual

Date

PROCEDURE: Have students fill out the biographical sketch on the next page. Students may fill in the blanks with as much information as they need to provide a complete response.

FOLLOW-UP: The instructor may wish to fill out the form as well. From the completed sketches, discussion may involve comparisons and contrasts of the information that has been given. The instructor should shy away from any judgmental comments about any responses and he should steer the class from that direction as well. There is plenty of opportunity for value statements in the other exercises. What should be encouraged in any follow up in this case is a drive toward more exact details in description and honesty.

Name Age Birthdate Zodiac Sign
I was born in—— Now I live at———.
I am tall and weigh pounds.
My eyes are and my hair is—————
I am handed. I have brother(s) and sister(s).
People often say that I look
I think I look
My most common facial expression .
My Favorite My Least Favorite
Color Saying Book Magazine Movie T.V. Show—— Piece of Music—— Painting—— Food—— Drink—— My lucky number is . The closest Person to me is
The person I admire most is because
I would like to be (a) when I am older.

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My biggest fear is
My strongest belief is
My favorite habit is
My worst habit is
I am a person because I
If I were a I would
I used to now I
People say that I am because I
I am always happy whenever 1 see
————upsets me a great deal.
I find it easy to talk about but difficult to discuss
If I wrote a story about my life it would be
TITLE: Making Observations

OBJECTIVE: This activity is designed to sharpen the student's skill objective observation. In some of the other activities in this unit, students will be called upon to make clear observations. This activity focuses on that process.

NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS: Individual

PROCEDURE: In this exercise students will write a series of three descriptions that range in graduated difficulty. The specifications outlined by the instructor must include the following:

- 1. All description must be in written complete sentences.
- 2. All description must be exact and objective, free of any value judgements.

For the second specification an example of writing which is colored with value judgement would be as follows:

The man's mouth looked mean. A more exact description might read:

The man's mouth had thin lips held tightly together. There should be a great deal of emphasis on detail. The descriptions should be finished when the student feels that they are complete. At this point the instructor should produce an object of simple shape and composition (eg., a block or a baseball) and have students write a description. The instructor may want to time this first writing, but that is up to him. Discussion should follow this, comparing different passages for detail, completeness, and objective accuracy. Follow with two more

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written descriptions:

- 1. The student's hand
- 2. A photograph (color if possible) of a face

FOLLOW-UP: Again discussion should follow after each writing, comparing different versions of the same items' descriptions as in the first one. The instructor should point out the different ways people describe the same things. Students should be encouraged to comment on each others' work. A supplementary assignment might be to have students write a description of themselves.

TITLE: Situational Abstractions

OBJECTIVE: This activity is a good warm-up exercise to get students to begin to interact in a theatrical mode. Its main purpose is to abstract personality elements, but its greatest value is in breaking down inhibitions in our students. This activity will also familiarize students with the process of improvisation.

NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS: Group or Individual

WARM-UP: Any basic body movement exercise will do.

PROCEDURE: To preface the procedure it is important for the instructor to remember that this particular exercise should be kept light and fun. A good start is to open a discussion along the line of asking students to imagine that they are things (not people). For example:

"If you could be an animal what would you be?"

"Can you show me what your favorite car looks like?"

At this point you may get some resistance. If this occurs the instructor can take the lead and do an abstract imitation. My favorites in the classroom are a light-bulb and a chocolate covered cherry with a hole in it. The next step would be to arrange the group in a large space and have the whole group do the same abstractions. Some suggestions are: a pumpKin, a clock, a couple of colors (red, blue, etc.) a skyscraper, a mouse, a chair, and a toaster. The next step is to build roles from the abstractions. This is achieved by placing two to four players in a situation and giving each of them separate abstractions. An example would be—a gorilla and an electric fan at a movie, or a radio and an egg beater on a shopping trip. The instructor may feel free to keep loose limitations in this exercise and assign as many imaginative combinations as he wishes. He may also want to solicit suggestions from the class.

FOLLOW-UP: The instructor should start a general discussion on what the students actually did. A relevant question at this point is: Did the students feel silly? Have them explain why or why not. The instructor should also explore the creation of the abstractions with the students by asking them how and why they chose to represent the abstracted item in a particular manner. The instructor should eventually return to his original questions about favorite animals and cars and discuss projecting and relating personality elements to objects. If the discussion goes on strongly the instructor may want to introduce or expand the notion of anthropomorphic projection.

TITLE: Fantasy Me

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OBJECTIVE: This exercise will allow the student to step out of his own character and become either someone he greatly admires or something he has dreamed of being. In effect this process explores goals of the student and initiates imitation of a particular person rather than an abstraction.

NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS: Group then individual

WARM-UP: Have students sit in a circle and imagine themselves as either someone or something they would like to be (e.g. Hello, I'm Jim the Symphonic Conductor or Hello, I'm Pablo Picasso). The students should also accompany their introduction with a small gesture appropriate to the character they have chosen to be.

PROCEDURE: After the round introduction students are then to stand and one at a time tell the group something about them selves in character. A good extemporaneous speech in character of 30 seconds to one minute will suffice.

FOLLOW-UP: Students should then return to their normal characters and discuss how well they assumed their character. They should also discuss why they chose that particular character and compare themselves to their fantasy to see how far away they are from that character. The instructor may often find that they are projecting goals through their fantasy that they might not be aware of or feel that they could never obtain. Through the fantasy presentations the instructor may uncover an important aspect of the student's character that should be dealt with on a more conscious level.

TITLE: Me and My Shadow

OBJECTIVE: This exercise is to help raise the student's awareness of how he appears to other people.

NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS: Two

WARM-UP: A good warm-up for this exercise would be "Mirror Exercise #1 (see Spolin, p. 60)

PROCEDURE: Students will divide into pairs; one student as Player A and the other as Player B. In the first phase of this exercise Player B will simply initiate Player A. First, Player B should follow A imitating his walk and gestures. Following this, Player B should stand or sit next to Player A and copy his movements. All of this must be done silently. In the next part, Player A will coach Player B into what he sees as a more accurate imitation of him. This is accomplished by placing Player B into simple situations such as walking down the street carrying a package or sitting in a classroom in a particular fame of mind (i. e. bored, interested, distracted, etc.). Player B's imitation should be an active one so that Player A can direct him in that process. The second part of the exercise should be timed 2-3 minutes. At the end of the exercise the roles should be reversed so that Player B directs Player A to act like him.

FOLLOW-UP: Partners A and B should critique each other as to the accuracy of the imitations. The instructor should be going to each set of partners in the class offering constructive feedback to the pairs. Discussion following could focus on how aware any individual is of his self-presentation. The instructor could also point out body movements that have special qualities such as imitative movements, very loose or very constrained movements and probe the origin of these movements with the student.

TITLE: The Me I Used to Know

OBJECTIVE: We all realize that in growth we lose parts of our identity or change them radically. Many times we feel a certain remorse for a quality or characteristic we no longer identify with. This exercise will give the

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student an opportunity to go back and attempt to recapture (temporarily at least) a lost part of himself.

NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS: Group or Individual

WARM-UP: Any basic body and vocal warm-up will suffice

PROCEDURE: Students should break into small groups of no more than four. They should then be asked to write down an incident from the past which they can clearly remember reacting to in a way which they would not act today. This should be a brief piece of descriptive writing no more than a paragraph or two. Then within each group the students should decide on which childhood incident they would like to re-enact. The criteria for choosing may vary from the most interesting incident to the most commonly shared within the group. The student whose incident was chosen now becomes the director of the group. One of the group members will be chosen to represent the director whose story is being told. All the group members then will design a scenario to present to the other groups. This may be in the form of an improvisation or a short script of the incident recalled by the director. The director must then coach his group to recreate that incident accurately. Time should be given for adequate preparation and performance.

FOLLOW -UP: Discussion after each performance should concern what characteristic was being portrayed and how that behavior has changed in the director. The director of each group should be a main participant of the discussion with the instructor. Students should compare the exhibited behaviors for similarity and differences among themselves. If time allows, more than one scene per group could easily be done.

TITLE: Object-Conflict

OBJECTIVE: The basis for Transactional Analysis is the idea that everyone's personality is divided into three components; The Parent, who is the authoritative, traditional part, the adult, who is the rational part and the child who is the spontaneous, untrained or unsocialized aspect. According to transactional analysis, our personalities are the product of the interaction of these components. In this exercise the students will have to isolate each of these three components and react to the same object as each component. This process will demonstrate to the student the nature of the personality as a multi-faceted process as well as show him how time can change a person's values.

NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS: Individual

WARM-UP: Basic body movement and vocal warm-up

PROCEDURE: There are two main parts to this exercise which the instructor may arrange in order as he wishes:

1. an improvisation

2. a three part written scenario

The instructor should choose a common object that everyone is familiar with, e.g., a doll, toy boat or even a pan, etc. He then is going to ask each student to react to the object in writing in three different ways. First, the student is to write his impressions of the object as if he were a child. Secondly, the student should write his impressions as if he were his most influential parent. Finally, the student should write his impressions as he would imagine they will be when he is an adult. The instructor may then wish to briefly discuss some of the recorded impressions. The instructor may then call on a student to present an improvisation in one or each of

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his three stages. If this is uncomfortable, the instructor may use a group of three students each taking one role of either parent adult or child, each interacting over the object, To add variety the instructor may cue the students to change roles.

FOLLOW-UP: Discussion may follow directed towards the students explaining the change in their reactions to the object with each role.

TITLE: Guess Who's Coming to Dinner

OBJECTIVE: This exercise gives the student an opportunity to re-create a familiar domestic scene, namely the family dinner. In re-creating a family scene, the student is forced to objectify certain behavioral patterns of influential people in his immediate environment. He must identify roles and analyze the interaction of these roles within his family. The student hopefully will be able to observe similarities, differences, and influences on his own behavior as well as assess how well he knows his family and how much they have influenced his character.

NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS: Groups of varying size

WARM-UP: A good warm-up for this exercise would be to mime a dinner in small groups. This will place students into the theme of the exercise to follow.

Preparation:

As a homework assignment have students observe and take notes of a typical family dinner at home. From their notes they should then write a short script (with an estimated performance time of 3-5 minutes) recreating dinner at their home. The script should include: dialogue, suggested blocking and movement, and clear directions so that the student actors playing the family members will have a clear definition of the character as well as the role that that character has within the family. The instructor may wish to review sample scripts with the students so that the format is clearly understood. The instructor will have to provide copies for the written scripts as well as choose the best examples from the class as a whole if time does not permit every student to make a presentation.

PROCEDURE: After a brief rehearsal period the students should then perform their dinner skits to the other groups with the author of the skit playing himself at the dinner table. The instructor may allow props and scripts to be used during the performance as they can easily be kept on the table. The students in the audience should take notes on their observations of the performance, noting similarities and differences to their own experience, as well as making general comments to the performance.

FOLLOW-UP: Family dinners usually expose the rank and order of a family. Discussion should lead into the direction of noting the roles within the family and how the student functions within that order. An example of such discussion might surround commonalities among all the students who are either the oldest or youngest in their family and how that position affects them. Discussion might also note the differences between single and double parented families. The instructor might also explore any rituals surrounding the family diner such as particular manners, or prayer etc.

TITLE: What Do They Really Mean?

OBJECTIVE: Part of understanding what anyone means when he talks is inferring the subtext of his speech. When we speak we pick cues in subtext by vocal tone and inflection. But, when we read dialogue we must first

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interpret the subtext on our own without cues. Instead of cues we project our interpretation into the dialogue. What influences our interpretation in this situation can tell us a great deal about how we perceive people. In this exercise students will be asked to compare each other's subtexts of the same dialogue. The instructor along with the class will analyze the compared subtexts to illustrate certain patterns about how we perceive people.

NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS: Individual then Group

PROCEDURE: The instructor should make available to the entire class copies of a short scene from the script of a published play (15-20 lines of dialogue). The scene may be from a play that the class has worked on or a short scene that the instructor feels comfortable with. Once each student has his copy the instructor should explain the method of writing subtext to dialogue. He should start explaining the underlying meaning of dialogue by first using general response dialogue as an example.

E. g., The instructor should write the word "Really" on the blackboard and then ask: "If you came upon that word in a play how many ways could you read it?" Students will respond in a variety of vocal inflections, each one implying a particular meaning for the word "really".

The instructor should then pick up on the various interpretations and write them under the word "really" on the blackboard.

Instructor: "From the way you are saying the word "really" it could mean, "I don't believe it", "I hope not" or "who cares". "You can see then that for almost everything we say we have another meaning behind it—this other meaning is the subtext."

The instructor should then take a more specific line of dialogue and explore the possible subtext.

E. g., "Frankly Scarlet, I don't give a damn." (possible subtexts: "I've had it with you lady" or "I still care, I just can't take anymore.")

The instructor should then explain that how we analyze the subtext of a character's dialogue tells us a lot about how we perceive that character. He should then have the students individually write subtexts under each line of dialogue on the script that he handed out.

FOLLOW-UP: The Instructor should then compare the various interpretations of the subtexts that the students have written. He may or may not see certain patterns in the class (e. g., boys leaning toward one interpretation different from the girls). The instructor should question the lines and their subtexts very specifically, challenging each student or group of agreeing students as to why they chose to interpret the lines the way they did. If possible, the discussion should go in the direction of not so much as what the line said, but what the student's subtext says about how they have perceived that character.

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* Dezseran, Louis john, The Student Actor's Handbook, Palo Alto, Ca,: Mayfield Publishing Co., 1975

An extremely useful book for the student and instructor, this book contains many varied exercises on all aspects of novice theatrical production.

* Moore, Sonia. *The Stanislavski System*. New York: Viking Press, 1965 A handy condensed version of Konstantin Stanislavski's classical training for the actor.

Theater Games and Exercises

Chaikin, Joseph. *The Presence of the Actor*. New York: Atheneum, 1972 This book centered around the Open Theater presents a variety of exercises relating the theatrical experience to everyday life.

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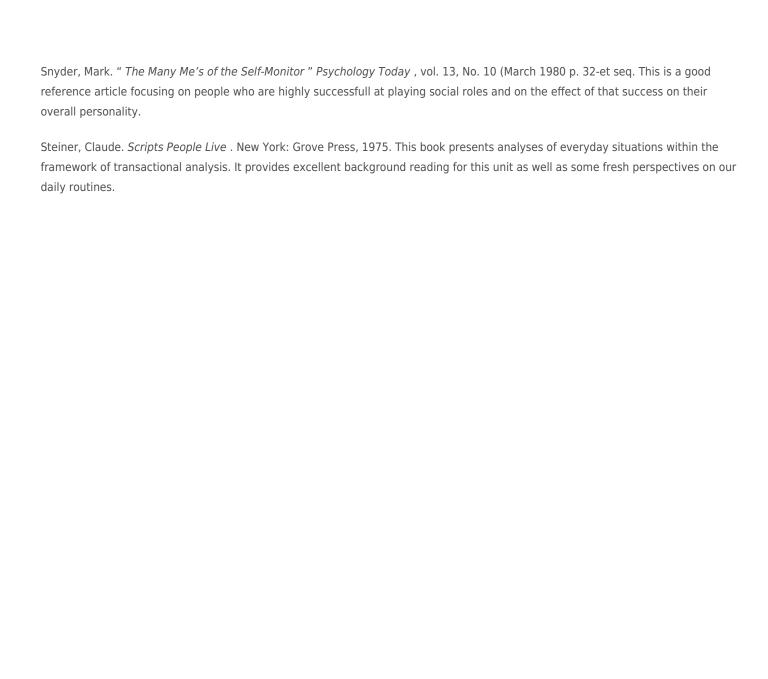
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