

~ The **Teachings** ~ Reflection Statement

It is inherent in human beings to question the nature of their existence. *The Teachings*, at its conceptual core, aims to respond to these queries by depicting the power of choices, and the role they play in characterising and predicating the existence of an individual. Through six short narratives, *The Teachings* forces a personal evaluation by exploring how even the smallest of past actions are paramount in establishing an inevitable scaffold for the future.

The conceptual evolution of *The Teachings* transpired as I made progress in my independent research and classroom studies. The idea of fate being the responsibility of the individual was a notion introduced to me through the Extension 1 Module: ‘After the Bomb’. My study of existential theories evoked by Cold War anxieties highlighted the necessity of decision in the development of an individual’s ‘essence’. As explored in the Module text, *Waiting for Godot*¹, the absence of such action condemns individuals to a directionless existence. Wishing to advance my understanding of the theory of definitive action and inaction, I uncovered “*Being and Nothingness*”², by existential philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre. His Bad Faith theory claims man to be “*bound to his safe choices*” and thus “*more akin to an object than a conscious human being*”³. These ideas formed my conceptual framework, with the characters rendered puppets by the fatalistic repercussions of their choice of tea.

¹ S. Beckett, *Waitin fo Godot*, Grove Press, 1953

² J.P Sartre *Bein an Nothingness*, Washington Square Press, 1943

³ N. Burton, “*Sartre o Ba Faith*”, Psychology Today, 2012

My decision to explore a dense philosophical theory forced me to employ narrative devices to ensure that audiences would engage on a conceptual level. My own passion inspired the contemplation of a Tea motif, but it was the readings of *'Tea: The Drink that Changed the World'*⁴ that gave me the confidence to have it as the narrative foundation of *The Teachings*. My characters, dictated by their chosen brew, have their *"lives brought out on trays"*⁵. Though one's choice of tea seems trivial, my readings of Arthur Conan Doyle's *A Study in Scarlet*⁶ reminded me that every habit, every choice, can provide an insight into the nature of an individual. In the words of Sherlock Holmes, *'to a great mind, nothing is little'*⁷. The use of tea to define my structure, plot and characterisations in *The Teachings* complimented my existential framework by *"achieving a heightened perceptiveness in the reader to the habits of people, and how these define them"*⁸. In addition to the evident pun, it is this underlying didacticism that justifies *"The Teachings"* as my title.

My choice of form in *The Teachings* came with consideration of my purpose. Writing with a flash fiction length meant I could work within the permitted word limit to explore a wide-range of characters and scenarios. These briefer insights allowed for a holistic exploration of fate, rather than the concentrated insight forced by Short Story format. Close study of exceptional flash fiction works, including Kurt Vonnegut's "The Good Explainer" story within his *'Look at the Birdie'* collection,⁹ showed me how a smaller word count, containing the appropriate techniques, allowed for a blunt approach to narrative developments. Vonnegut's ability to *"start as close to the end*

⁴ L Martin *"Tea The Drink that Changed the World"*, Turtle Publishing, 2007

⁵ Ow Majo Wor (The Tea Room – Opening)

⁶ A Conan-Doyle *" A Study in Scarlet"*, Ward Lock & Co, 1887

⁷ A Conan-Doyle *" A Study in Scarlet"*, Ward Lock & Co, 1887

⁸ Ow Statemen o Intention

⁹ K. Vonnegut, 'Look at the Birdie', Delacorte Press, 2009

as possible”,¹⁰ helped me to refine my sentences and ensure that they either ‘*revealed character or advanced action*’¹¹. My ability to work with the Flash Fiction genre was also advanced by my readings of the Bristol Short Story Anthologies¹², which contained a mixture of both “*tradition well-crafted and well-told*”¹³ stories, and stories that were “*more experimental in style and structure*”¹⁴. Analysing this divergence was beneficial in the formation of my own unique narrative style and voice, which slowly manifested over the duration of my independent investigation process.

Though a work of Flash Fiction, *The Teachings* holds elements of structural innovation that are critical to the clarity of my concept. The use of literal text imagery in Irvine Welsh’s ‘Acid House’¹⁵ compilation influenced my choice to use teacup shapes at the start of each story. While of aesthetic value, they serve a purpose in increasing audience engagement with the conceptual significance of the tea. My inversion of structural convention was again evident in my choices regarding language and technical features. The sagely tone possessed by the characterisation of the Tea Room was inspired by my readings of the Teatism tradition contained within Kakuzo Okakura’s *The Book of Tea*¹⁶. The Tea Room, described by Okakura as “*a sanctuary from the vexations of the outside world*”¹⁷, is an omniscient instructor, teaching the audience of the way its customers were “*all predictable, all predicated,*

¹⁰ K. Vonnegut, ‘Eight Rules for Writing Fiction’, *Uncollected Short Fiction*, 1999

¹¹ K. Vonnegut, ‘Eight Rules for Writing Fiction’, *Uncollected Short Fiction*, 1999

¹² Bristol Short Story Anthologies Volume 1 and Volume 5

¹³ Bristol Short Story Anthologies Volume 1 Introduction

¹⁴ Bristol Short Story Anthologies Volume 1 Introduction

¹⁵ Irvine Welsh ‘Acid House’ Vintage Press 1995

¹⁶ K. Okakura, ‘The Book of Tea’, *Traditional Text*, 1906

¹⁷ K. Okakura, ‘The Book of Tea’, (Chapter I – The Tea Room) *Traditional Text* 1906

*by the swirling leaves and chipped china they spoke over.*¹⁸ Threading the italicised tea descriptions through each story both suggested the innate traits of my characters, and foreshadowed plot developments. I employed these sagacious warnings, like Jasmine Green's "*Surprises with nutty flavours...*" to reinforce my concept by teaching the reader of the influence of choices in shaping an inescapable fate.

David Sedaris's semi-biographical anthology, '*Naked*'¹⁹, played a significant role in the shaping of my narrative style. Despite my deeper conceptual purpose, a large part of my work was the development of engaging characters with which my audience could empathise. Much of the inspiration for my characterisations came from the people around me, and my observations of their habits and vocabularies. Nonetheless, Sedaris' ability to satirise himself and distinctly human qualities aided my caricatures of the '*new-age middle-age*'²⁰ women in *Lemongrass and Ginger*, and the '*bored and artless*'²¹ Frances in *Masala Chai*.

Author Dexter Palmer's claim, "*There are no new stories in the world anymore*"²², was a view that made my pursuit of originality in *The Teachings* seem problematic. Advanced English Module C, however, showed me how the same narratives could be made unique through innovative representations. In a way, Palmer's quotation served as a catalyst for my drive to evoke these unique characterisations that established *The Teachings* as an original and engaging piece of work. My editing process involved the removal of cliché and the creation of my own similes, exemplified in 'English

¹⁸ Own Major Work

¹⁹ D Sedaris '*Naked*' Little Brown Company Marc 1997

²⁰ M Ow Majo Wor (*Lemongrass an Ginger*)

²¹ My Own Major Work (*Masala Chai*)

²² D Palmer '*The Drea o Perpetua Motion*', Picador, 2011

Breakfast’ when Diane “*looked at Judith quite like one might look at an email sent from Nigeria.*”²³ I also used form to further the evocative images of my characters for the audience. In ‘Jasmine Green’, structural convention is inverted with the addition of Melvin’s lists of “*optimistic waiters*”²⁴. This ensured Melvin’s innate diligence was now evident visually as well as literally.

At the fruition of the English Extension 2 course, *The Teachings* had developed into a complimentary amalgamation of divergent themes, styles and concepts. Initially, I had only identified a “Young Adult” audience to be suited to my work, in accordance with the mature themes present in each character’s fate. The development of my concept and purpose, however, branched *The Teachings* into audience markets I had not yet considered. Tea enthusiasts, like the publicists of ‘*Tea A Magazine*’,²⁵ would find my work easy to engage with, while philosophers and academics would resonate with the implicit exploration of Existential concepts. Adopting the flash fiction form additionally opened my work up to appreciators of that genre. My investigation revealed that publications like “*The Collagist*”²⁶ and “*Flash Magazine*”²⁷ accept online submissions, and could publish my work to their subscribers.

The creation of *The Teachings* was only possible through the combination of investigative research, and the development of writing skills forced by the English Extension 2 Course. Without these elements, my work would be a lesser literary product. Dedication to my ‘Action Plan’ and ‘Statements of Intention’ provided me

²³ My Own Work (English Breakfast)

²⁴ M Ow Wor (Jasmin Green)

²⁵ Teamag.com

²⁶ The Collagist™, Onlin literatur from Dzan Books

²⁷ Flash™, The International Short Story Magazine

with the direction and conceptual clarity needed when embarking on a major work process. Thus, I was able to submit a work that both fulfilled my developed intentions and enlightened me to the aspects of human existence. The presence of tea in this journey was comforting, both conceptually and personally, in my otherwise unfamiliar exploration of the inextricable link between ones choices, and their fate.