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A Theatre of bare sensation: An Artaudian reading of the dramatic landscape in Beckett's *Footfalls*

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Abstract: This paper critically analyses Samuel Beckett's 1975 play *Footfalls*, examining its profound alignment with Antonin Artaud's Theatre of Cruelty. The analysis of certain dramatic elements in the play highlights how Artaudian techniques can help to better understand and view Beckett's play from an Artaudian perspective. The study particularly investigates Beckett's masterful use of lighting, sound (especially the rhythmic footfalls and unseen bell), May's meticulously choreographed movements and symbolic costume, and the ritualistic, incantatory language, emphasizing how this language functions as a sonic, rather than semantic, element contributing to the play's raw sensation. Furthermore, the paper explores the significance of the "strip" as a symbolic décor, representing May's confinement and existential struggle. By dissecting these elements, this study reveals how *Footfalls* cultivates a 'theatre of bare sensation' that transcends traditional dramatic conventions to create a unique form of Artaudian "cruelty" - a psychological and existential attrition achieved through the precise orchestration of maximal sensory inputs. This analysis demonstrates that Beckett's stark dramatic landscape, through its non-verbal power, directly impacts the audience's emotional and psychological states, compelling a profound confrontation with the fundamental truths of human existence in a manner distinct from, yet profoundly aligned with, Artaud's visionary theatre.

Keywords: Theatre of Cruelty, Artaudian techniques, sensation, techniques.

Introduction

Samuel Beckett's *Footfalls* presents a compelling subject for critical analysis when examined through the theoretical lens of Antonin Artaud's Theatre of Cruelty. This approach illuminates significant thematic and aesthetic commonalities between the two dramatists, revealing how Beckett's minimalist evolution in *Footfalls* – prioritizing sensory and deep experience over traditional narrative – strikingly aligns with Artaud's

revolutionary principles. Artaud sought to liberate theatre from its subservience to text and psychological realism, aiming instead to provoke a raw, immediate engagement from the audience. *Footfalls*, with its sole visible character, May, rhythmically pacing a dimly lit room, and the haunting, disembodied voice of her unseen mother, exemplifies this alignment. Through fragmented recollections and repetitive actions, the play delves into the profound complexities of grief, the inherent unreliability of memory, and the enduring yet fractured bond between a mother and child, inviting an analysis that underscores the ‘cruelty’ of existence as presented through Beckett’s stark, sensory-rich dramatic world.

This study acknowledges the existing scholarship on both Beckett and Artaud by proposing to connect them. The act of applying Artaudian techniques to Beckett suggests a gap in the current understanding that the paper aims to fill. James Little’s application of Andrew Sofer’s “dark matter” concept illuminates *Footfalls*. This theatrical “dark matter” refers to anything unseen yet experientially significant, like offstage actions or absent characters. In the play, the invisible mother (V) and May’s ambiguous presence, especially her final disappearance, exemplify this. The “gravitational pull” of the invisible on the visible is a core dramatic force, fostering mystery and highlighting the limits of perception and the unsettling power of absence (24). Kimberly Han highlights how Beckett and Feldman deliberately use minimal dramatic techniques like setting or characterization. This scarcity isn’t a deficiency but a strategy to amplify sound and absence (67). In *Footfalls*, May’s rhythmic steps, sparse dialogue, and pervasive silence become primary dramatic forces. This compels the audience to actively construct meaning, transforming the stage into a “fluid, reverberating chamber of interpretation,” forcing them to confront the void and mirror the characters’ struggles. O. V. Koliada’s analysis, reiterated across the provided snippets, emphasizes Beckett’s meticulous focus on sound, rhythm, and linguistic structure as fundamental, not decorative, elements (18).

The purpose of this paper is to explore the profound alignment between Samuel Beckett’s *Footfalls* and Antonin Artaud’s Theatre of Cruelty, offering an Artaudian perspective on the play. This study aims to bridge a critical gap in existing scholarship by providing a novel interpretation of *Footfalls* through the theoretical framework of Artaud’s techniques. Specifically, it analyses dramatic elements within the play to demonstrate how Beckett’s deliberate dramatic choices, characterized by their non-verbal power and sensory impact, directly resonate with Artaudian principles of ‘cruelty’. The significance of this analysis lies in its

demonstration that Beckett's stark theatrical landscape directly impacts the audience's emotional and psychological states, compelling a profound confrontation with the fundamental truths of human existence. This alignment, while distinct, reveals a profound connection to Artaud's visionary theatre, thereby offering broader implications for understanding both Beckett's oeuvre and the inherent power of theatrical impact.

The Stage as a Sensory Arena: Light and Darkness as Language

One of the most compelling aspects of the analysis is its detailed examination of lighting in Samuel Beckett's *Footfalls*. The essay effectively argues that Beckett's precise stage directions – “dim, strongest at floor level, less on body, least on head” (Beckett 399) – are not merely aesthetic choices but function as a “unique language of light,” a concept articulated by Artaud (Morris 89). This strategic manipulation of light captivates the audience's sensibility, directly impacting their emotional state and deepening their engagement, aligning perfectly with Artaud's desire to use light to “illuminate emotional states and deepen audience engagement” (Morris 87).

The interpretation of the fading light as a profound metaphor is particularly insightful. It effectively conveys May's emotional turmoil, the haunting presence of her mother, the erosion of memory, and the encroaching darkness of mortality. The progressive reduction in light intensity from “dim” to “a little less” (Beckett 400) to “a little less still” (Beckett 402) and finally “even a little less” (Beckett 403) meticulously charts a visual descent into psychological and existential obscurity, mirroring May's internal journey. This deployment of darkness and light, or the lighting system, plays a pivotal role in shaping the atmosphere and emotional stance of the play.

The performance opens with the curtain rising on a stage bathed in complete darkness. Slowly, a light “fade[s] up to dim on strip,” illuminating the playing area (Beckett 399). This initial burst of light draws the audience's attention and sets the stage for the first segment. As the segment concludes, the light fades back to darkness, plunging the stage into obscurity once more. This pattern repeats throughout the play: each subsequent segment begins with a ‘fade up’ of light, highlighting the specific stage space in use. However, the intensity of the light gradually diminishes in each segment, creating a sense of descending darkness as the play progresses. The second part, for instance, sees the light “fade up to a little less on strip” (Beckett 400), while the third further reduces it to “a little less still on strip” (Beckett 402). The final segment, with its light

“fade up to even a little less till on strip” (Beckett 403), is unique in its lack of accompanying performance, allowing the lingering light to resonate for a brief ten seconds before complete darkness envelops the stage. This concluding silence and darkness powerfully evoke the play’s lingering questions and emotions.

The contrast between light and darkness powerfully portrays the characters’ inner turmoil and psychological landscape (Hayman 33). The gradual dimming of the light underscores the play’s minimalist aesthetic, drawing attention to the subtleties of gesture, expression, and dialogue. By highlighting certain elements of the stage, especially the ‘strip,’ while shrouding others in shadow, the lighting system accentuates key moments, emotions, and thematic motifs, enriching the audience’s engagement with the narrative. Artaud’s assertion that light “assumes the qualities of an actual language” (119) and “is not created merely to add colour or to brighten, and which brings power, influence, suggestions with it” (81) is fully realized in *Play*. This deliberate use of fading light, therefore, embodies Artaud’s vision, functioning as a distinct language that speaks directly to the audience, amplifying and capturing their sensibility with rigour.

Character Dynamics and Unseen Presences

Beckett’s *Footfalls* is structured into four distinct segments, each exploring the complex psychological landscape of its sole visible character, May (M). A woman of resilient character, May navigates the physical space while continually confronted by the unseen yet haunting voice (V) of her mother. This disembodied presence sparks crucial interpretations: is the mother a spectral guide, haunting May beyond the grave, or is the voice a manifestation of May’s internal struggles and memories? Regardless of the interpretation, the play masterfully portrays a profound psychological interaction between May and her internal world. Throughout the segments, May’s journey is marked by moments of introspection, revelation, and emotional turmoil, offering glimpses into the complexities of her psyche through interactions with this unseen presence and reflections on past experiences (Knowlson 268).

Beyond the mother’s voice, Hayman notes that the play deepens its mystery and psychological complexity by introducing other unseen figures through May’s recollections (35). In the third segment, May mentions a mysterious female who walks around “at nightfall” and incredibly enters a church through a locked door. This eerie occurrence evokes a sense of shock and suspense, contributing significantly to the play’s unsettling ambiance. Furthermore, May references Old Mrs. Winter and her daughter Amy in the same

segment. Mrs. Winter recounts a strange event during “evensong”, a detail Amy denies having noticed. Amy’s denial not only leaves Mrs. Winter in the dark but also subtly implicates the audience, inviting them to question the reliability of memory and perception within the play’s ambiguous reality.

The Sonic Tapestry: Sound, Silence, and the Uncanny Reality

The analysis of sound and movement in *Footfalls* is exceptionally strong, effectively demonstrating how these elements are not incidental but central to the play’s profound Artaudian quality. Beckett masterfully crafts a “sonic tapestry” (Morris 90) that, in line with Artaud’s vision, aims to “immerse the audience in a sensory experience that transcends conventional boundaries” by disrupting conventional perceptions of reality. This is achieved through the strategic manipulation of sound effects, vocalization, ambient noises, and the deliberate juxtaposition of disparate sounds and sudden shifts in volume and intensity, which contribute to the “disquieting atmosphere” Artaud envisioned.

The recurring chiming of the unseen bell serves as a crucial symbolic motif throughout the play, marking the beginning of each segment and signalling narrative transitions. The gradual alteration in the bell’s intensity, from a “faint single chime” (Beckett 399) to an increasingly fainter resonance, reflects the author’s meticulous control over the audience’s senses. This aligns perfectly with Artaud’s intention to sway the mental and emotional state of the audience and draw them into the very action of the play. The overlapping use of light, sound, and movement in *Footfalls* collectively captivates the audience’s sensibility, a technique central to Artaud’s theatre, which he envisioned as a metaphysical realm where speech, gesture, and expression converge to create a transcendent experience, free from the constraints of psychology and human interest (Artaud 90). The pervasive presence of these elements in Beckett’s play strongly reflects Artaud’s deep influence.

The play’s title, *Footfalls*, immediately announces the centrality of the sound of footsteps. Further emphasizing this importance, the stage directions specify a designated ‘strip’ for May’s meticulous pacing: “Downstage, parallel with front, length nine steps, width one meter, a little off-centre audience right” (Beckett 399). The instructions for her “Pacing: Starting with right foot (r), from right (R) to left (L), with left foot (l) from L to R” (Beckett 399), alongside the directive for a “Clearly audible rhythmic tread” (Beckett 399), transform May’s movements into a ritualistic dance. This precisely choreographed physicality, synchronized

with internal counting (“One two three four five six seven eight nine wheels”), elevates mere walking into a profound “code” of expression, as Artaud would describe such calculated movements (Artaud 98).

The essay rightly connects this meticulous pacing to Artaud’s emphasis on “gesticulation, physiognomy, and costume” radiating like “individual rays of light” (Artaud 98) and his belief in the “culture of gestures” holding greater significance than words (Morris 130). From the very outset of the play, May’s movements set the tone for the narrative, conveying a sense of rhythm and purpose. Each step she takes is choreographed with precision: “M discovered pacing towards L. Turns at L. paces three more lengths, halts, facing front at R.” (Beckett 399). This methodical movement, synchronized with the rhythmic soundscape, creates an ‘uncanny reality’ that disrupts conventional perceptions and draws the audience into May’s confined, repetitive existence.

Her distinctive pacing, punctuated by pauses and resumptions - often in response to her mother’s voice, as seen in “V: There is no sleep so deep I would not hear you there. [Pause. M resumes pacing. Four lengths...]” (Beckett 400) - highlights her singular role as the protagonist and emphasizes her continuous internal dialogue and emotional journey. Artaud emphasized the importance of carefully orchestrating a multitude of movements and images within a given timeframe, a holistic approach encompassing physical actions, gestures, silence, rhythm, and even the palpable vibrations generated on stage (Artaud 124). By meticulously arranging these components, Artaud sought to create a deeply engaging sensory experience, where each movement, gesture, and moment of stillness contributes to the overall impact, transporting audiences into a realm of heightened sensory awareness and emotional resonance. Beckett’s *Footfalls* fully embodies this vision, making sound and movement not merely theatrical devices, but integral components of the play’s meaning and its powerful effect on the audience.

The Paradoxical Power of Language: Incantation and Voice in *Footfalls*

The essay adeptly navigates the seemingly paradoxical role of language within an Artaudian context, particularly as it manifests in Beckett’s *Footfalls*. While Artaud generally critiqued the “subjugation of the theatre to the text” (Artaud 89), he did not deny the power of words when used in a “ritual way,” as an “incantation-like speech” (Artaud 125). This aligns with his broader vision for a holistic theatrical experience that transcends mere verbal communication, where language functions as just “one instrument in a grand

orchestra of expression,” alongside movement, sounds, objects, costumes, and lights. Asmus highlights the analysis’ skilful identification of ‘incantational language’ within May and her mother’s repetitive, ritualistic exchanges (257). These lines transcend mere dialogue; they become potent tools to “evoke emotions, sensations and deeper meanings that resonate on a primal level with the spectators”. A striking example occurs towards the conclusion of the first segment, in an exchange marked by a rhythmic and mystical quality: “V: Will you never have done? [Pause] Will you never have done...revolving it all? M: [Halting] It? V: It all. [Pause] In your poor mind. [Pause] it all. [Pause] it all” (Beckett 400).

This pattern solidifies into a ritualistic verbal chant. As the second segment unfolds, the mother’s voice emanates from the unseen depths, not as a cry but as a low, rhythmic murmur -persistent and repetitive like an ancient ritual: “V: Tries to tell how it was. [Pause]. It all. [Pause] it all” (Beckett 401). By the end of the third segment, the oppressive weight of this incantation continues, with May herself becoming a chilling conduit for the haunting phrase: “M: [Pause] Will you never have done...revolving it all? [Pause] It? [Pause] It all. [Pause] In your poor mind. [Pause] It all. [Pause} it all” (Beckett 403). The relentless repetition in these exchanges transcends the boundaries of conventional language, functioning less as conversation and more as a hypnotic chant that bypasses intellectual comprehension to directly impact the audience’s sensibility.

Furthermore, the mother’s voice itself is an important element in the Theatre of Cruelty. Artaud elevates the voice beyond a mere tool for conveying information, envisioning it as a multilayered instrument, an “objectified prop” like set design or gesture. This approach is evident in his statement: “I perceive of the diapason of voices and the degree of intonation as constituting stages or levels and, in any case, as a concrete element having the same importance as the décor or the luminous diapason” (Sellin 13). By emphasizing the voice’s sonic and physical qualities, Artaud sought to directly impact the audience’s senses, creating an intuitive experience that transcends traditional meaning-making and dives into the realm of raw human emotion. This aligns with Artaud’s core belief that theatre should transcend conventional language to reach the spectators through primal, sensory impact. In *Footfalls*, the disembodied, incantatory voice of the mother embodies this principle, becoming a direct conduit for the play’s unsettling psychological and existential themes.

The Body and Costume as Poetic Language in *Footfalls*

The discussion of costume and the body as expressive elements in *Footfalls* offers insightful analysis, effectively linking Beckett's meticulous stage directions to Artaud's theatrical principles. May's costume, described as "dishevelled grey hair, worn grey wrap hiding feet, trailing" (Beckett 399), transcends mere clothing. It evokes a sense of timelessness and ritualistic significance, moving far from "modern dress" towards "age old costumes" with a "ritual intent," as Artaud envisioned in his *First Manifesto of The Theatre of Cruelty* (Artaud 96). He emphasized the metamorphic power of costumes, prescribing attires that transcend aesthetic appeal to evoke primal emotions and archetypal symbols. May's shapeless attire thus becomes a potent visual metaphor for the blurring of identities and the erosion of individuality within the repetitive cycle of existence, embodying Artaud's intention that costumes must evoke the "disjointed logic of a dream" (Morris 92). Every detail, from fabric texture to colour, contributes to the symbolic portrayal of May's unique character, externalizing her internal world and enhancing the audience's understanding of her predicament.

Furthermore, the character's body itself serves as a powerful sign or language on the stage, embodying principles advocated by Artaud in his manifesto (94). Knapp pointed out that Artaud posited the body as a significant form of communication, asserting its capacity to convey meaning transcending verbal dialogue (78). May's "shabby appearance" coupled with her aimless, repetitive movement up and down the strip, becomes a poignant symbol of disorientation and existential uncertainty. Artaud's concept of the body as a medium for expressing inner states is vividly realized through May's physical portrayal. According to Artaud, the "culture of gestures" holds greater significance than the "culture of words" (108), considering gesture as the "material and wits" as well as the "alpha and omega" of a new theatrical language (Artaud 110). May's meticulously orchestrated movements and gestures speak volumes about her internal state, conveying a sense of confinement and ceaseless mental anguish.

Adding another intriguing layer of complexity, May's disconnection from her own age highlights a profound dissonance between her perceived self-image and reality. Her surprise upon learning her age – "M: What age am I now? V: In your forties. M: So little? V: I'm afraid so' (Beckett 400) - mirrors the spectators' own potential reaction to her fragmented reality. She expected herself to be older, revealing her profound disconnection from her own perception of time and identity. This moment further immerses the audience in

May's fragmented consciousness, making her body not just a visual element, but a key conduit for understanding her existential uncertainty (Knowlson 270).

The Confined Stage: The 'Strip' as a Symbol of Existence

The analysis of the "strip" as part of the décor in Beckett's *Footfalls* transcends its physical description to become a multi-layered symbol, integral to both the spectator's engagement and the protagonist's expression. As precisely detailed in the stage directions: "Strip: downstage, parallel with front, length nine steps, width one metre, a little off-centre audience right" (Beckett 399). This seemingly mundane 'strip' transforms into a captivating symbol of May's existence. The strip's narrowness, beyond its physical limitations on the stage, becomes a potent symbol for May's restricted existence and profound sense of isolation. Asmus states that the strip's confined dimensions directly parallel May's internal landscape, a mental space where memories, anxieties, and the relentless passage of time continuously unfold (260). May's repetitive pacing on this confined space is interpreted as a desperate attempt to quantify time, affirm her presence, or desperately search for meaning in an increasingly opaque reality. Each measured step becomes a deliberate act, a means to grapple with the complexities of her inner world. The rhythmic sound of her footsteps further emphasizes this, echoing the relentless passage of time, the beat of a searching heart, or even a desperate attempt to connect with something beyond the immediate, isolating environment.

The play's lighting scheme, with its gradual dimming on the strip across each subsequent part, adds another crucial layer of thematic weight, reinforcing the strip's symbolic function. The initial "Fade up to dim on strip" (Beckett 399) sets the stage for a visual descent. As the light progressively diminishes - from "a little less on strip" (Beckett 400) to "a little less still on strip" (Beckett 402) and finally "even a little less still on strip" (Beckett 403) - it intensifies the erosion of memory and the encroaching darkness of mortality. This fading light mirrors the fading presence of May's mother, further accentuating the play's central themes of loss and the inevitability of death.

The precise measurement of the strip (one meter) and the diminishing light on it reinforces the minimalist aesthetic and the feeling of confinement and repetitiveness, thereby capturing the audience's sensibility through these Artaudian techniques (Knapp 87). Artaud's concept of repetitive actions and his technique of harnessing the power of the lighting system to capture the sensibility of the spectators are clearly

evident in this Beckettian play. The ‘strip’ thus functions not merely as a stage element, but as a microcosm of May’s existence, a visual and auditory representation of her psychological and existential obscurity.

Conclusion

This study has thoroughly demonstrated the profound alignment between Samuel Beckett’s *Footfalls* and Antonin Artaud’s Theatre of Cruelty, offering a novel interpretation that bridges a critical gap in existing scholarship. By applying an Artaudian lens, we have illuminated how Beckett’s seemingly minimalist play, far from being a mere narrative, functions as a highly sensorial and deeply impactful theatrical experience, resonating directly with Artaud’s revolutionary principles.

In essence, *Footfalls* is not merely a play to be observed, but a crucible of sensory experience. Through its deliberate manipulation of light, sound, movement, costume, and the incantatory rhythm of its sparse language, Beckett compels the audience into a raw, immediate engagement with the “cruelty” of existence – the unreliability of memory, the profound loneliness of being, and the inexorable march towards oblivion. This pervasive influence of Artaud’s principles on Beckett’s stark theatrical landscape compels a profound confrontation with the fundamental truths of human existence, solidifying *Footfalls* as a powerful testament to the inherent, non-verbal impact of theatre.

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