

“Beyond the Script: Artaudian Principles and Their Embodiment in Samuel Beckett’s Absurdist Performance

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Abstract

This study examines the nuanced impact of Antonin Artaud’s Theatre of Cruelty on Samuel Beckett’s Theatre of the Absurd. It asserts that Artaud’s influence on Beckett is more profound in spirit and underlying aims than in direct stylistic imitation. While Artaud advocated for a ritualistic assault on the senses to bypass rational thought, Beckett meticulously crafted existential despair through linguistic breakdown and repetitive actions. Employing a qualitative research paradigm with an interpretivist approach, this study moves beyond general theoretical connections. It offers a detailed, performance-oriented analysis of how Artaudian principles are concretely “embodied” and enacted “beyond the script” in Beckett’s plays.

Through textual analysis of Catastrophe, Act Without Words I, and Footfalls, this research systematically examines stage directions, character movement, sound, silence, and visual elements. The study is guided by key Artaudian concepts, including the de-emphasis on the word, the focus on the body and profound experience, challenging audience complacency, and the use of ritualistic elements. Ultimately, it explores how Beckett’s non-textual choices contribute to the profound impact of his absurdist performances. This approach aims to synthesize how Beckett’s minimalist aesthetic subtly manifests Artaud’s ‘cruelty,’ revealing a deeper symbiotic relationship between these two pivotal figures in 20th century theatre.

Keywords: *Antonin Artaud, Samuel Beckett, Theatre of Cruelty, Absurdist Performance, Non-textual Elements, Beyond the Script.*

Introduction

The main principles of Antonin Artaud are highlighted in his famous the ‘Theatre of Cruelty’ which is outlined in his famous book *The Theatre and its Double*. This study will focus mainly on the impact and influence that Artaud had on Samuel Beckett and his works. Beckett who is also an advocate of the ‘Theatre of the Absurd’ can be seen to have also been influenced by Artaud’s ‘Theatre of Cruelty’. These two stalwarts represent two distinct yet profoundly interconnected movements that radically reshaped 20th century theatre (Poggioli 40). Chambers noted that while Artaud’s theoretical writings advocated a deep, ritualistic assault on the senses, Beckett’s

plays meticulously constructed a world of existential despair through linguistic breakdown and repetitive, meaningless action (77). This analysis will delve into the core tenets of each theatrical philosophy and then explore the nuanced impact Artaud's revolutionary vision had on Beckett's iconic works. This study will employ a qualitative research paradigm with an interpretivist approach, focusing on understanding how meaning is constructed through non-textual elements in Beckett's plays, viewed through the lens of Artaudian principles.

The paper's title signals a critical analysis of how Antonin Artaud's theatrical theory, specifically the 'Theatre of Cruelty' is manifested and explored in the plays of Samuel Beckett. The phrase "beyond the script" implies an examination that goes beyond a purely literary or textual analysis. It signifies a departure from traditional literary analysis that primarily focuses on the written text of a play. Instead, it emphasizes the ephemeral, dynamic and the non-verbal elements that emerge during a live performance. Focusing instead on the live, physical and sensory aspects of the theatrical experience. In this context, "embodiment" refers to the tangible and concrete manifestation of Artaudian principles within Beckett's plays when they are brought to life on stage.

The core method used in this study will be textual analysis of selected plays of Beckett viz *Catastrophe*, *Act without Words I* and *Footfalls*. This involves a close, systematic reading of stage directions, character movement, sound and silence, and visual elements (props, set) to identify their 'beyond the script' performative significance. The analysis will be guided by key concepts from Artaud's Theatre of Cruelty (e.g., rejection of mimetic representation, emphasis on senses, the body as meaning) and contextualized within theories of Absurdist Theatre. Purposeful sampling will select plays rich in non-textual manifestations. Data will primarily come from the play scripts, supplemented by secondary literature on Artaud, Beckett, and performance studies.

Qualitative content and thematic analysis will be used to interpret the data. This involves coding script segments against Artaudian principles (deductive) and identifying emergent themes (inductive). The goal is to synthesize how Beckett's non-textual choices embody Artaud's ideas, contributing to the profound, deep impact of his absurdist performance. Academic integrity and a balanced analysis will be maintained throughout (Sellin 67).

The paper aims to bridge a gap in the existing scholarship by moving beyond a general theoretical link between Artaud and Beckett. Instead, it will offer a gist of performance-oriented analysis of how Artaudian principles are concretely embodied and enacted "beyond the script" in specific productions of Beckett's absurdist plays. This approach will likely focus on less explored aspects of Artaud's theories or the subtle, rather than overt, manifestations of 'cruelty' within Beckett's minimalist aesthetic.

This paper employs a performance-oriented analysis to systematically evaluate how effectively Samuel Beckett's plays actualize Artaudian principles, particularly those of the 'Theatre of Cruelty,' when staged. Rather than a purely textual interpretation, this approach examines how directorial choices, acting techniques, and overall staging embody Artaud's ideas. Performance is a genre of contemporary art, an actionism rooted in performative practices, distinct from theatrical productions, and centered on the artist's body and energy, with audience presence being essential.

Key theoretical perspectives on performance inform this analysis. RoseLee Goldberg characterizes performance as the "avant-garde of the avant-garde," underscoring its radical, uncommodifiable, and ephemeral qualities. Marvin Carlson distinguishes between performance

as a microcosm (art on stage) and a macrocosm (influencing broader sociocultural contexts). Klaus Biesenbach defines performance as live art that cannot be confined, emphasizing the artist's liberation of the creative process from a final product. Noël Carroll views performance as a dual phenomenon, while Eric Mazur highlights its ritualistic nature, connection to symbolic actions, and often elements of "brutality and expressive tension" (Ustymenko 188).

Antonin Artaud's Theatre of Cruelty: A Radical Awakening

Antonin Artaud profoundly challenged the conventions of Western theatre. He contended that the stage had become sterile, overly intellectualized, and disconnected from its primal, ritualistic origins. In his groundbreaking treatise, *The Theatre and Its Double* (1938), Artaud passionately articulated his vision for a 'Theatre of Cruelty', a concept often misunderstood as advocating for overt violence. He terms it as a '...profoundly difficult and cruel experience. Its cruelty isn't the physical kind, like dismemberment or grotesque acts of violence. Rather, it's the more terrifying and essential cruelty that circumstances inflict upon people...' (79).

Artaud redefined 'cruelty', extending it far beyond its common, physically violent interpretation. He claimed the right to break with standard language, to dismantle its very structure, and to free it from its limitations. For Artaud, this meant returning to the etymological roots of speech, where even abstract concepts retain a concrete essence. He argued that a form of cruelty could exist entirely without physical harm. Philosophically, he saw cruelty as rigor, an unyielding intention and decision, and an absolute, irreversible determination (101). It is rigor and necessity: a relentless, uncompromising assault on the audience's intellectual complacency and rational defences. Its aim was to expose the raw, often uncomfortable, truths of human existence, revealing the subconscious drives and hidden forces shaping behaviour (Barber 34). A cornerstone of his philosophy was the rejection of psychological realism and textual dominance. Artaud vehemently opposed theatre that merely mirrored individual psychological dramas or served as a literal vehicle for literary texts (Hayman 21). He sought to liberate the stage from its perceived subservience to language, asserting that words alone were inadequate to convey the profound anxieties and spiritual crises of the modern era.

Consequently, Artaud placed immense emphasis on spectacle and sensorial engagement. He envisioned a theatre as a total, immersive experience that transcended the purely intellectual by directly impacting all senses (Greene 67). His concept of a 'violent and condensed images' demanded a theatrical vocabulary where light, sound, gesture, movement, and primal vocalizations (even screams) converged to create a powerful, hallucinatory effect. Scenery, when used, was to be minimal and symbolic, serving to amplify emotional resonance rather than to realistically depict setting. In his theory of performance, Don Elger emphasized "immersion" as one of the axioms crucial for improving performance. In other words, he championed an environment designed to deeply engage and envelope the audience within the performance itself (14). This concept of deep audience engagement resonates with Artaud's 'Theatre of Cruelty', which likewise aimed for the total involvement of spectators, often by assaulting their sense and challenging traditional theatrical boundaries.

Furthermore, Artaud advocated for the breaking of the fourth wall and audience immersion. He called for the abolition of the proscenium arch, proposing adaptable performance spaces that would envelop the audience, transforming them from passive observers into active participants. This radical spatial rearrangement aimed to dismantle the artificial barrier between performer

and spectator, allowing the ‘plague’ of the theatrical experience to deeply infect and transform the collective consciousness (Chambers 45). He shares a fundamental understanding with Peggy Phelan: for performance to achieve its full impact and seize the complete attention of spectators, it must profoundly affect them. This requires a well-executed, inherently live presentation. Phelan asserts that “performance’s only life is in the present,” arguing that once it “attempts to enter the economy of reproduction, it betrays and lessens the promise of its own ontology (146). Echoing Artaud’s view of the spectator’s role, Phelan also emphasizes that the ‘audience-subject’ must fully engage with and “consume” the performance. This is because, in her strict ontological sense, performance is non-reproductive (148), meaning its essence and impact exist only in the fleeting moment of its live presentation. While Artaud’s practical staging of his theories remained limited, his manifestos laid foundational groundwork for subsequent avant-garde movements. They demonstrably influenced figures like Jerzy Grotowski and Peter Brook, forever altering the discourse around modern performance (Stoppelman 56).

Samuel Beckett’s Theatre of the Absurd: The Meaningless Wait

The post-World War II disillusionment gave rise to the Theatre of the Absurd, a term by Martin Esslin, which questioned traditional value, reason, and human existence itself. In a world scarred by devastation and existential angst, the movement posited that life was inherently devoid of inherent purpose or ultimate meaning. Samuel Beckett, stands as arguably its most influential and emblematic figure, masterfully translating these philosophical anxieties into groundbreaking dramatic forms (Schechner 33).

Esslin argued that a central principle of Beckett’s Absurdist theatre is the profound sense of existential meaninglessness. His characters often find themselves in inexplicable situations, endlessly waiting for a salvation that never comes, or performing repetitive, futile actions that emphasize the inherent pointlessness of their struggles (45). This futility is often exacerbated by a profound breakdown of language and communication. Beckett’s dialogue is notoriously circular, nonsensical, repetitive, and replete with clichés, showcasing the characters’ utter inability to genuinely connect or articulate their deepest thoughts, mirroring the disintegration of societal discourse.

The structural innovations of the Absurd also mark a radical departure from conventional drama. Beckett’s plays are characterized by cyclical and non-linear plot structures, eschewing clear beginnings, middles, and ends (Stoppelman 59). Events often repeat, character memory can be fluid or absent, and time itself becomes a mutable, often irrelevant, construct. This formal disruption directly reflects the perceived chaos and illogic of the human condition.

Furthermore, Beckett’s dramatic worlds are defined by minimalist settings and vague characterization. His stages are typically stark, barren, and symbolically evocative of a desolate existence, such as the iconic country road with a single tree in *Waiting for Godot*. Characters are frequently archetypal or stripped of conventional psychological depth, serving less as individuals and more as stark embodiments of humanity grappling with an absurd universe.

Despite these bleak thematic preoccupations, Absurdist plays, particularly Beckett’s, paradoxically integrate black humor, slapstick, and ironic wit (Schechner 33). This tragicomic approach not only engages the audience but also serves to highlight the inherent absurdity of suffering and the persistent human struggle for meaning in a meaningless void. Beckett’s masterpieces - including *Waiting for Godot*, *Endgame*, and *Happy Days* - epitomize these

characteristics, offering a stark yet often darkly humorous testament to human endurance in the face of profound futility.

The Impact of Artaud on Beckett: A Symbiotic Relationship

The relationship between Antonin Artaud's Theatre of Cruelty and Samuel Beckett's Theatre of the Absurd is not one of direct imitation, but a profound and often subtly manifested symbiosis. Artaud's radical theories, while primarily aspirational, cast a long shadow over Beckett's minimalist aesthetic, influencing the spirit and underlying aims of his work rather than explicit stylistic choices. This analysis explores the convergence of Artaud's revolutionary vision with Beckett's iconic plays - *Catastrophe*, *Act Without Words I*, and *Footfalls* - using a detailed, performance-oriented lens that goes 'beyond the script' (Sellin 70).

A critical analysis of the chosen Beckett plays requires moving from the abstract to the concrete. A primary point of convergence lies in the de-emphasis on rationalism and the word. Barber argued that even with their verbal components, Beckett's plays definitively expose language's fundamental inadequacy (32). His characters struggle to communicate, their words often devolving into nonsense, clichés, or silence. A question in the aspect is often asked - How does this 'failure of language' specifically manifest in *Catastrophe*, *Act Without Words I*, and *Footfalls*? In the play *Catastrophe*, the Director's precise, almost tyrannical linguistic control over Protagonist and Assistant contrasts with the ultimate non-verbal, defiant "look" of Protagonist. Here, language is not failing in its conveyance, but in its ability to truly dominate the human spirit, suggesting Artaud's idea of a 'body without organs' resisting verbal dictates. The silence after the 'look' is more potent than any dialogue. The play's setting, a rehearsal of a play-within-a-play, perfectly exemplifies Richard Schechner's concept of performance as "twice-behaved behaviours" or "restored behaviours". This framework emphasizes that the actions are not spontaneous but are instead trained, practised and meticulously rehearsed (22). The play *Act Without Words I* is the ultimate embodiment of Artaud's rejection of the word. The entire narrative unfolds through physical actions, frustrated gestures, and the manipulation of props. The tramp's silent suffering and futile attempts to reach water and shade directly enact Artaud's call for a theatre that precedes and transcends language, impacting the audience unreasoningly through pure visual and physical spectacle (Hayman 25).

He looks up, sees carafe, reflects, gets up, goes and stands under it, tries to reach it, renounces, turns aside, reflects. (Beckett 204)

The "scream" mentioned in the general discussion finds its echo in the silent, agonizing efforts and failures. In *Footfalls*, May's repetitive, almost chant-like dialogue, combined with her compulsive pacing, highlights language as a ritualistic drone rather than a tool for communication.

*M. Straighten your pillows? [Pause] Change your drawsheet?
[Pause] Pass you the bedpan? [Pause]. The warming pan?
[Pause] Dress your sores! [Pause] Sponge you down?
[Pause] Moisten your poor lips! [Pause] Pray with you?
[Pause] For you? ... (Beckett 400)*

The "word" becomes a sound, a rhythm, a part of the overall sensory experience, blurring the lines between speech and pure aural texture, consistent with Artaud's emphasis on incantation and non-verbal sound. Her mother's voice, disembodied, further reduces language to an ethereal, often nonsensical presence.

V. And I? [Pause. No louder.] And I?

V. It all. [Pause} it all. [Pause] it all. (Beckett 400)

Moving beyond linguistic critique, this study identifies a second major shared principle: the deliberate focus on the body and the generation of a profound, instinctive audience experience. Though Beckett's plays often depict characters in states of physical decay, confinement, or extreme suffering, this focus on the struggling, diminishing body, and the raw sounds (groans, sighs, silences) that emanate from it, resonates with Artaud's desire to confront the audience with primal human conditions. This is where the chosen plays truly shine in demonstrating Artaudian influence. *Catastrophe* mainly centres around the sculpting of the body.

D. Needs whitening.

D. Higher. (Beckett 459)

As the sculpting intensifies

D. Down the head. Bare the neck. (Beckett 460)

Goodall argues that the protagonist's physical helplessness, coupled with the Director's precise manipulation of his limbs and head, directly aligns with Artaud's view of the body as a site of meaning. This manipulation even evokes Artaud's concept of 'cruelty' through the body's enforced stillness and vulnerability (67). The "look" at the end is a powerful, non-verbal, profound act of defiance that impacts the audience directly, bypassing rational interpretation. Given its inherent nature as a mime play, Beckett's *Act Without Words I* stands as the most direct and profound embodiment of Artaud's emphasis on the body as the primary theatrical medium. The tramp's physical struggle, his repeated falls, his desperate grasping, and his eventual resigned stillness are the play (Sellin 71).

Flung back on stage he falls...

Turns aside. (Beckett 203)

As he struggles with his surrounding, the also struggles to get what he desires

The rope is pulled up, lifts him off ground, he hangs on, succeeds in cutting rope,
falls back on ground, he hangs on. (Beckett 205)

The audience experiences his frustration and suffering purely through his physical predicament and reaction to the unseen forces tormenting him. This is "cruelty" enacted through physical futility and dehumanization. While in *Footfalls*, May's incessant pacing, the rhythmic shuffle of her feet, and her emaciated figure constitute the central visual and aural experience. Her body is a testament to decay and confinement, her movements a ritualized expression of inner torment. The 'raw sounds' (Beckett 399) are her footsteps, her whispers, and the palpable silence, all contributing to a deep sense of dread and entrapment. The disembodied voice of her mother further emphasizes the fragmentation of the self and the reliance on non-visual, non-verbal cues.

Another key shared objective is challenging audience complacency. The relentless repetition, the lack of narrative resolution, and the bleakness of the human condition in his plays can be deeply unsettling for audiences, this 'cruelty' in Beckett is often a psychological one, forcing self-reflection rather than sensory assault. How do these specific plays employ 'psychological cruelty' to challenge the audience? The audience in *Catastrophe* is made complicit in the Director's dehumanizing artistic process. The cold, mechanical arrangement of Protagonist's body can be unsettling, forcing the audience to confront their own potential for detachment or

manipulation.

*D. Down the head. A shade more
Could do with more nudity. (Beckett 460)*

The final defiant “look” is a direct challenge to the audience’s passive spectatorship, demanding an emotional response to existential oppression. The endless, futile repetition of the tramp’s efforts in *Act Without Words I*, combined with the unseen, cruel forces at play, is deeply frustrating and unsettling.

*Turns aside (repetitively)
Looks up (repetitively)
Reflects (repetitively). (Beckett 204)*

The audience is denied narrative resolution and a sense of justice, mirroring the absurdity of existence. This elicits a feeling of helplessness, a ‘cruelty’ of the spirit. The hypnotic repetition of May’s pacing and dialogue in *Footfalls*, combined with the fragmented narrative and the lack of external conflict, creates a sense of profound unease.

*M. Walk up and down, up and down...
Pace without pause, up and down, up and down...
Soon then after she was gone, began to walk, up and down, up and down, that poor man. (Beckett 402)*

The ambiguity surrounding May’s sanity and her mother’s presence forces the audience to confront the fragility of consciousness and the terrifying prospect of solitary decay. The ‘cruelty’ here is the uncomfortable intimacy with a mind unravelling.

Furthermore, both Artaud and Beckett utilize ritualistic and archetypal elements to imbue their theatre with deeper resonance. The repetitive actions, the cyclical nature of time, and the archetypal figures suggest a universal, timeless struggle (Greene 78). The plays feel less like naturalistic depictions of life and more like stripped-down rituals of human existence. The entire process of ‘staging’ Protagonist in *Catastrophe* is a ritual – a methodical, almost sacred act of creation and dehumanization. Protagonist himself becomes an archetypal figure of rebellion against oppression, his final ‘look’ a timeless symbol of defiance.

D. For God’s sake! What next? Raise his head? Where do you think we are? In Patagonia? Raise his head? [Pause] Good. There’s our catastrophe. In the bag. Once more and I’m off. (Beckett 460)

In *Act Without Words I*, Greene observed that the protagonist’s persistent, yet ultimately useless, efforts to reach the water and palm tree become ritualistic, much like a Sisyphean struggle, even in the face of repeated setbacks (69). The tramp becomes an archetypal figure of suffering humanity, eternally striving against an indifferent universe. The play is a stripped-down, modern ritual of existential futility.

The big cube is pulled from under him. He falls. The big cube is pulled up and disappears in flies. He does not move...he looks at his hand. (Beckett 206)

May’s pacing in *Footfalls* is explicitly ritualistic, measured and precise, almost a dance with death. The counting of steps, the specific turns, and the cyclical nature of her narrative (revisiting the past) evoke a sacred, almost purgatorial rite. May herself, a spectral, decaying figure, becomes an archetype of isolation and mental anguish.

Both Artaud and Beckett fundamentally engage in the subversion of conventional theatricality. Beckett fundamentally subvert[s] traditional dramatic elements. Plot is minimal, characters are not psychologically developed in a realistic sense, and conflict is often internal or existential

rather than externally driven. In *Catastrophe* there is the subversion of character development (Protagonist is made, not developed), plot (it's a static scene of arrangement), and conventional dialogue (it's mostly technical direction). The focus is entirely on the tableau and its symbolic resonance, aligning with Artaud's call for a theatre that operates beyond mimetic representation. A complete subversion of dialogue-driven theatre in *Act Without Words I*. Its reliance on mime and physical action, the absence of named characters or backstory, and the focus on pure event directly echo Artaud's desire to transcend the 'written word' and create a theatre of gestures and signs. *Footfalls* challenges narrative coherence and conventional character psychology. May's identity is fluid, her memory unreliable, and her dialogue often disjointed. The play's impact comes from its atmosphere, soundscape, and the visual repetition, moving far beyond traditional plot or character-driven drama.

Beckett's plays demonstrably echo Antonin Artaud's Theatre of Cruelty, particularly through their potent use of non-verbal elements. In *Act Without Words I*, the "dazzling light" (Beckett 203) functions as an "actual language" (Artaud 119), akin to Artaud's emphasis on light to shock and impact the audience's sensibility (Artaud 95). Similarly, the protagonist being "flung" (Beckett 203) aligns with Artaud's vision of violent physical images that "crush and hypnotize" the sensibility of the spectators (83). The repeated attempts at suicide, whether with "scissors" (Beckett 206) or "rope" (Beckett 205), exemplified Artaudian cruelty (Artaud 103). In *Footfalls*, the striking manipulation of lighting, such as May's sudden transition from light to "utter darkness" – "[M resumes pacing. Five seconds. Fade out on strip. All in darkness. Steps cease...]" (Beckett 400). This serves as a visual "language" signifying the cessation of the mind's ability to reflect. May's endless "pacing" (Beckett 399) from left to right, a portrayal of mental confinement enforced by unseen forces, also embodies Artaud's concept of cruelty (Artaud 79). The cruelty extends to *Catastrophe*, where the protagonist's placement on a "plinth" (Beckett 457) is designed to expose his lower body, leaving him vulnerable and shockingly revealed. Further stripping away his defences, the removal of his "hat" (Beckett 458) intensifies this act of exposure, a raw gesture intended to jolt the audience into discomfort. The Director's demand for "more nudity" (Beckett 460) and the "gag" (Beckett 459) used to silence the protagonist are direct enactments of violence, oppression, and force that are meant to "hypnotize their sensibility" (Artaud 83) and profoundly disturb the spectators.

Conclusion

The study laid excellent groundwork for exploring Artaud's pervasive, albeit indirect, influence on Beckett. The subsequent discussion of the chosen plays was elevated to a deeper critical analysis and moved beyond thematic statements to demonstrate how the specific dramatic and performative elements within *Catastrophe*, *Act Without Words I*, and *Footfalls* concretely manifest Artaudian principles. This involves a meticulous examination of stage directions, character actions, sound, silence, and visual composition, highlighting the 'beyond the script' impact that truly connects Beckett's minimalism to Artaud's call for a more profound and non-rational theatre. By doing so, the analysis has effectively argued for the symbiotic nature of their relationship, where Beckett, perhaps unconsciously or selectively, gave concrete theatrical form to the very essence of Artaud's revolutionary, albeit often unrealized, vision.

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