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## FRAGMENTED IDENTITY OF THE SPEAKING SUBJECT IN BECKETT'S *FOOTFALLS*: THE AUTHENTIC SELF AND ITS INTERNAL OTHERS

**Abstract:** *The act of “seeing” or more precisely, realizing “the ill around and within us” necessitates a mode of expression that does not mask disturbance but instead echoes its fractured rhythms. Samuel Beckett’s Footfalls, marked by its fragmented structure, spectral characters and playful language, falls into this category. Drawing on Cathy Caruth’s theory of trauma as a belated, unassimilable experience that resists narrative coherence, this paper explores how the play reflects and enacts psychological trauma. At the center is May, a ghostly figure engaged in repetitive pacing and fragmented dialogue with a Woman’s Voice who is presumed to be her mother but arguably a projection of May’s own fractured psyche. Through this lens, the play becomes more about dramatizing the breakdown of a unified self. Accordingly, May is not an authentic, coherent subject but an embodiment of the internal other. Employing Jacques Derrida’s concepts of différance and the instability of presence, the paper argues that Footfalls disrupts conventional binaries such as self/other, presence/absence, and voice/silence and accordingly, the ambiguity of the speaking self, combined with the lack of verifiable reality within the play’s world, destabilizes reader/audience expectations and invites multiple, even contradictory interpretations. The play, thus, becomes a site where language falters, the self dissolves, and trauma endlessly replays, foregrounding the impossibility of arriving at a final or stable truth.*

**Keywords:** *Identity, Trauma, différance, Internal other, Ambiguity.*

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*Nontruth is the truth. Nonpresence is presence. Différance, the disappearance of any originary presence, is at once, the condition of possibility and the condition of impossibility of truth. At once. "At once" means that the being-present (on) in its truth, in the presence of its identity and in the identity of its presence, is doubled as soon as it appears, as soon as it presents itself.*

(Derrida, 2010:p.1732)

## I.

Literature does not merely reveal the emotional and psychological depths of others; it draws us, often willingly, into the intense realms of affect, desire and suffering that belong to lives not our own. In doing so, it offers a paradoxical duality: both an escape from the burden of selfhood and a confrontation with the very traumas we seek to elude. Literature functions as a vehicle through which psychological wounds become accessible, inviting us to acknowledge and interpret what has been repressed. Trauma theory in literary studies emphasizes this interplay between language and psychological rupture, seeking to facilitate what Geoffrey Hartman terms the capacity to 'read the wound' through textual engagement (1995:p.537). To Hartman, trauma communicates through a bifurcated form of knowledge: on the one hand, the traumatic event is 'registered rather than experienced,' bypassing conscious perception and embedding itself directly in the unconscious; on the other, a residual memory of the trauma persists, manifesting as a recurring figuration, a 'perpetual troping' within the fragmented psyche (1995:p.537). Building upon this foundation, Kurtz (2018) expands the discussion by foregrounding the intricate relationship between memory and identity. He argues that personal and collective memories intersect in complex and often fraught ways, shaped by the interplay of biological, psychological, political and cultural forces. Thus, identity is not a fixed or isolated construct, but one that is continuously reconstructed through a dynamic interaction with familial, socio-political and cultural environments.

Hartman explains the intricate interplay between dreams and trauma, asserting that in literature, 'shock and dreaminess collude' (1995:p.546). Drawing on Donald Winnicott's psychoanalytic insight that 'the mother is always traumatizing,' he suggests that while children may idealize the constant presence of the mother, a presence that fosters a foundational sense of trust, this very attachment renders them perpetually vulnerable to psychic wounding. The mother, then, becomes a figure both of security and of potential rupture. In this light, life itself may be conceived

as a continuum of accessible wounds, making it nearly inconceivable to imagine any work of art entirely devoid of trauma's imprint. If one accepts Winnicott's premise, this assumption gains further legitimacy. As a consequence, language, far from being a neutral or purely aesthetic medium, serves as a conduit to the originary site of trauma. As Hartman articulates, 'Literary verbalization, however, still remains a basis for making the wound perceivable and the silence audible' (2003:p.259). In this sense, words assume the role of a mythic (religious) healer, akin to *Lokman*—*an allegorical figure believed to possess the power to cure even the most incurable of wounds through his extraordinary gift of healing*.

Trauma, by its very nature, resists closure, denying the sufferer the possibility of forgetting, instead returning unbidden, unsummoned and unwelcome. These intrusive recurrences force the traumatized subject to relive the original experience, creating a cycle of repetition that becomes both symptom and structure. Hartman contends that 'flashbacks compel the sufferer to involuntarily tell his story again and again' (2003:p.268), underscoring the compulsive aspect of traumatic memory. Such repetitions, while potentially cathartic, more often suggest a lingering, unassimilated shock: 'a rhythmic or temporal stutter' that suspends the sufferer in a purgatorial state, perpetually anticipating the next traumatic resurgence (Hartman, 1995:p.543). Literature, accordingly, often reflects this dynamic through narrative and stylistic repetition. Authors who depict traumatized characters frequently employ these repetitions to embody the enduring and unresolved nature of trauma. In this vein, as Riquelme asserts, truly perceiving the suffering 'around and within us' requires a mode of expression that mirrors the disturbance, one that echoes the illness rather than feigning normalcy or composure (2000:p.587).

Samuel Beckett's *Footfalls* exemplifies this literary engagement with trauma, memory, and the fractured self. The play masterfully disorients its reader/audience through an ambiguous plot structure and the absence of clear character boundaries. As a postmodern text, it resists definitive interpretation, allowing for the possibility that the suggested narrative (a daughter mourning her deceased mother) is itself a constructed illusion. Rather than representing discrete characters, Beckett may be staging fragmented manifestations of a single disintegrated psyche. In this reading, no character possesses tangible presence; all may be spectral projections of trauma's afterlife. Beckett, thus, deftly manipulates both reader and audience by presenting an unreliable, dissociated figure lost within the labyrinth of memory. In doing so, he destabilizes interpretation itself, compelling us to question not only the narrative but the very nature of perception, identity, and reality.

In his pioneering work, *Dissemination*, Jacques Derrida writes that 'A text is not a text unless it hides from the first comer, from the first glance, the law of its composition and the rules of its game' (2010:p.1697). Beckett's *Footfalls* fits very well into this category, particularly through the playwright's deliberate composition of the characters. It is worth noting that Beckett wrote the play specifically for Billie Whitelaw, who gave the piece's world premiere performance at the Royal Court Theatre as part of the Samuel Beckett Festival, on May 20, 1976 with Beckett in the director seat. Beckett deeply trusted the actress and was confident that Whitelaw would be capable of performing this particular character who could be interpreted as embodying multiple selves that would collide with the authentic self. Seeing as the play clearly resists fixed meaning, perpetually deferring resolution and undermining the stability of signification, *Footfalls* could well be analysed with Derridean terms employing concepts such as *différance*, trace and the dialectics of absence and presence. As Derrida posits, meaning is never fully present but is always deferred within a system of relational differences. The term 'trace' in his theory of *différance* refers to the absence that makes up meaning; each signifier carries the mark of what it is not within, a remnant of what has been and what will be. As identity is always reconstructed and tainted by otherness, this idea undermines any chance of a set meaning or origin. Through this Derridean lens, *Footfalls* might be interpreted, especially in its eerie interplay between presence and absence of the authentic self and how [if] it is dislocated to create individual voices (internal others) throughout the text.

## II. A Traumatic, Authentic Self with Internal Other(s)

*Footfalls* seems to be a rather short and simple play; yet, Beckett readers know very well that nothing is as simple as it seems with Beckett. Mel Gussow from *The New Times* writes that 'The drama apparently centers on a lady who has dedicated her life to caring for her elderly mother. Ritually, the daughter marches back and forth on a small section of floor, with the writer meticulously defining the area and the motion' (March 24, 1994). This comment serves as a strong example of the general perception and interpretation of the plot by the average reader; that it portrays a woman whose life has been consumed by caring for her mother, with the resulting trauma visibly reflected in the performance and appearance of the main character on stage. Although the word 'apparently' is used to avoid fixing the interpretation too rigidly, this reading remains problematic.

Not only does *Footfalls* resist a straightforward, reductive interpretation of its plot, but through deliberate ambiguity and manipulation, the playwright also sug-

gests far more than what appears on the surface. *Footfalls* centres on a middle-aged woman, May, who paces back and forth throughout the play, engaging in dialogue with an unseen female voice whose presence gradually diminishes, growing increasingly hesitant and eventually fading altogether, evoking the impression that she may not exist at all. The minimalist and fragmented exchange between May and the Voice suggests that the latter could be a projection of May's inner, perhaps more authentic self. In simpler terms, while May and the Voice engage in dialogue or what may in fact be a monologue, depending on interpretation during the first two scenes, the audience is subsequently introduced to other figures, namely Mrs. Winter and Amy, in the third Scene. In the final Scene, however, no characters are present. Beckett masterfully constructs a sense of ambiguity from the outset, leading us to perceive the play as a portrayal of a psychologically fractured, traumatized figure, while simultaneously prompting us to question the ontological status of characters such as Amy and Mrs. Winter. We are left uncertain as to who or what they truly are: manifestations of May's disturbed memory, figments of her imagination, or, as I contend, internal others within her authentic self.

*Footfalls*, in this way, exemplifies what Derrida describes as a text that is "forever imperceptible" (2010:p.1697), not only in its elusive character construction but also in the pervasive ambivalence it conveys. Derrida asserts that a text's law and its rules 'can never be booked, in the present, into anything that could rigorously be called a perception' (2010:p.1697), suggesting that meaning itself is always deferred rather than hidden. The act of perceiving, therefore, becomes an ongoing process of uncertainty and re-evaluation, particularly evident as each Scene in *Footfalls* unfolds. In *Scene I*, the sparse stage design and gloomy atmosphere create a space of confrontation between May and the disembodied voice of her deceased mother. This Voice is widely interpreted not as a separate character but rather as a manifestation of May's unresolved trauma, specifically her inability to reconcile with her mother's death, which leaves her suspended in a state that resembles presence without life. Katherina Weiss, for instance, suggests that 'May has remained a prisoner to her trauma' (2013:p.57). One of the clearest indications of this psychological entrapment is her incessant pacing. Through the repetitive sound of May's footfalls, the oppressive silence of the stage is disrupted, while the play's gothic visual and atmospheric elements further intensify the sense of ambiguity. The fragmented dialogue offers insight into both the mother's deteriorating physical state and May's tormented psyche. In this opening Scene of the play, Beckett introduces the central character in conflict, confronting a painful reality that will be gradually deconstructed in subsequent scenes. *Scene I* is, thus, crucial in framing

the play's exploration of trauma, as it acquaints the audience with a psychologically fractured figure and, in doing so, invites a deeper engagement with the ensuing ambiguity. As Dominick LaCapra suggests, trauma can create 'holes in existence,' allowing presence to be interpreted as absence, and absence as presence (qtd. in Kurtz, 2018:p.5).

Just as Derrida locates the text's meaning in what resists perception, Beckett locates the self in what resists articulation. In attempting to understand Beckett's manipulation of language, it is essential to attend closely to the stage directions throughout *Footfalls*, not only those that frame the dialogue but also those embedded within a single character's speech. The recurring silences in the text function as more than mere pauses; they can be interpreted as manifestations of trauma, moments where speech is fractured by the weight of unprocessed experience. As Shoshana Felman argues, such silences may also constitute 'a positive avoidance—and erasure—of one's hearing, the positive assertion of a deafness, in the refusal not merely to know but to acknowledge—and henceforth respond to, answer to—what is being heard or witnessed' (1992:p. 183). May, incapable of acknowledging her past, remains trapped in its shadow. Her silence, then, is not simply the absence of speech, but an active suppression of awareness: 'the active voiding of the hearing, the voiding of witnessing of a reality whose transmission to awareness is obstructed and whose content is insistently denied as known—insistently asserted (reasserted) as not known—because essentially remaining unacknowledged' (Felman, 1992:p.183).

It is important to recognize that trauma does not reveal itself transparently or neutrally; it demands both inward reflection and external articulation. May's silences represent not only a denial of trauma but, following Felman, an 'affirmative declaration of deafness,' a refusal to listen, to engage, and ultimately to respond (1992:p.183). In this context, silence becomes a form of resistance against the existential imperative to confront and acknowledge one's own past. May observes her life from a distance, yet actively resists its implications. Thus, the Beckettian examination of the self as a shadowy, frequently inaccessible presence is echoed by her silences, which impede the presence of a unified, continuous self. Rather than expressing a coherent and stable identity, May embodies an absence shaped by fragmentation and refusal. This resistance generates a painful yet essential tension: silence serves as both a rejection and a means of enduring. It enables May to evade being overwhelmed by the traumatic truth while also highlighting her solitude and pain. In this vein, silence not only deepens the play's psychological resonance but also contributes to the layering of textual ambiguity that defines the play. The

following quote exemplifies how Beckett stages silence not merely as absence but as the dialogue's very structure, a rhythm of interruption, repetition, and deferred understanding.

M: What age am I now?

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

M: Ninety.

V: So much?

M: Eighty-nine, ninety.

V: I had you late. [Pause.] In life. [Pause.] Forgive me again. [Pause. No louder.] Forgive me again. [M resumes pacing. After one length halts facing front at L. Pause.]

M: What age am I now?

V: In your forties.

M: So little?

V: I'm afraid so. [Pause. M resumes pacing. After first turn at L.] May. [Pause. No louder.] May.

M: [Pacing.] Yes, Mother.

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' (I, 240).

This dialogue subtly exposes a profound disorientation of identity, particularly through the characters' ambiguous relationship with time and memory. Neither character appears to know their own age, which is one of the first aspects of self-awareness. While V's unawareness may be rationalized by her spectral or posthumous nature (assuming she represents the deceased mother, and is therefore no longer a fully conscious entity) May's uncertainty is more unsettling and psychologically charged. Her inability or refusal to recall her own age may be read as a symptom of trauma. This interpretive framework resists readings that seek to stabilize character identity, for such an approach ignores the inherent fluidity and instability Beckett often embeds within the dramatic form. The ambiguity deepens as the dialogue discloses that V gave birth to May sometime after her forties, a notably late age for motherhood. This temporal detail, though only implied, introduces a possible causal relationship between V's late motherhood and May's psychological fragmentation. V's request for forgiveness suggests a latent guilt which could be tied to the burden May has borne as her mother's caretaker. Yet,

Beckett sustains the tension of uncertainty, ensuring that no single interpretation can anchor the play's elusive psychological landscape.

May's repetitive pacing, and V's curious use of the future perfect tense while asking whether May will 'have been revolving it all' intensifies the play's temporal and existential indeterminacy. The phrase 'revolving it all' becomes a site of semantic instability: What is being revolved, a memory, a trauma or a perpetual thought-loop? The use of future perfect to describe an ongoing, compulsive action further complicates temporal logic, suggesting a recursive temporality where past, present, and future collapse into one another. As Katherina Weiss observes, the elusive 'it' of the play 'remains hidden, perhaps repressed' (2013:p.56), and the memory it references 'is so horrific she cannot face "it"' (2013:p.58). Building on Weiss's insight, I would argue that the inability to confront this unbearable memory leads to the fragmentation of identity. In response to trauma, the authentic self becomes untenable, and thus generates alternative selfhoods as a means of psychic survival. The speaking subject, therefore, is not stable but shifts according to which version of the self can momentarily bear witness to the traumatic experience. Beckett's *Footfalls* thus stages not only the effects of trauma but also the disintegration of the speaking subject under its burden.

'V: I walk here now. [Pause.] Rather I come and stand. [Pause.] At nightfall. [Pause.] She fancies she is alone. [Pause.] See how still she stands, how stark, with her face to the wall. [Pause.] How outwardly unmoved. [Pause.] She has not been out since girlhood. [Pause.] Not out since girlhood. [Pause.] Where is she, it may be asked. [Pause.] Why, in the old home, the same where she— [Pause.] The same where she began. [Pause.] Where it began. [Pause.] It all began. [Pause.]' (II, 241).

The quoted lines further complicate any straightforward interpretation of the play. Contrary to the commonly held assumption in the opening Scene, (that May is engaged in a conversation with her prematurely deceased mother) Voice asserts, 'She fancies she is alone.' This statement destabilizes the reliability of the Scene itself, suggesting that the Scene may be no more than a projection of May's traumatic memory. Consequently, the Scene cannot be taken at face value. Yet, to embrace this interpretation, one must paradoxically place trust in the voice of V—a spectral, possibly posthumous figure whose ontological status is itself in question. This reliance on a ghostly voice renders the interpretive act even more absurd than trusting a visibly traumatized and unreliable subject. Beckett, in this way, leads the audience into a carefully orchestrated ambiguity, a deliberate and profound



manipulation that deconstructs narrative coherence and stability. At this point in the play, the reader/ audience is compelled to relinquish faith in any source of narrative authority, whether the characters or even the playwright himself. This pervasive unreliability collapses the traditional boundaries between observer and participant. As our interpretive anchors are stripped away, the 'real' play begins: we, the audience, are drawn into the performance not merely as spectators, but as active agents in the meaning-making process. Beckett confronts us with *a certain uncertainty*, a paradox that demands our complicity. It is only when we accept this interpretive burden, this act of assigning meaning in the face of irresolvable ambiguity that *Footfalls* fully unfolds, not as a closed narrative, but as an existential and epistemological experience.

Enoch Brater contends that 'May is a presence, not a person—certainly not a person who has ever been properly born outside of the imagination. She is neither more nor less substantial than any other stage character' (1978:p.39). This perspective aligns closely with my own reading of *Footfalls*, particularly in its rejection of the conventional narrative that treats May as a psychologically coherent character engaged in a dialogue with her deceased mother. However, while Brater's interpretation resists the traditional storyline, it nonetheless risks reinstating a new kind of closure by asserting that May exists solely as a figment of imagination. In other words, by denying the assumed realism of the narrative, it imposes a different kind of determinacy, one that limits May to the status of a theatrical abstraction, devoid of ontological substance. Yet Beckett, in characteristic fashion, does not allow even this interpretation to settle. With each successive Scene, he escalates the ambiguity rather than resolving it, destabilizing every interpretive foothold just as it begins to take shape. The play resists finality at every turn, continuously undermining both narrative and ontological certainty. Rather than allowing us to anchor our reading to a definitive understanding, Beckett confronts us with proliferating possibilities. *Footfalls*, then, operates as a sustained challenge to the very impulse toward interpretive closure, inviting us not to resolve its meaning, but to dwell within its structured indeterminacy. In this way, Beckett withholds resolution not merely to frustrate, but to implicate the audience in the act of meaning-making, compelling us to remain suspended within the ever-deepening space of ambiguity.

'Till one night, while still little more than a child, she called her mother and said, Mother, this is not enough. The mother: Not enough? May-the child's given name -May: Not enough. The mother: What do you mean, May, not enough, what can you possibly mean, May, not enough? May: I mean, Mother, that I must hear the feet, however faint they fall. The mother: The motion alone is

not enough? May: No, Mother, the motion alone is not enough, I must hear the feet, however faint they fall' (II, 241).

May exists in a liminal state, simultaneously present and absent, her identity shaped by a ghostly repetition that suggests a being haunted by the very void of her own existence. She does not so much inhabit the stage as she haunts it. Her ceaseless pacing, accompanied by a disembodied maternal voice, evokes Derrida's notion of the *trace*, the mark of an absence that structures presence. In *Footfalls*, May becomes the embodiment of this trace, moving rhythmically across the stage in what appears to be a conversation with her offstage mother. Within the first two scenes, Derrida's principle that absence is always at the heart of meaning is powerfully enacted. The mother's voice, intangible and possibly imagined, undermines the security of origin and selfhood. May's repetitive motion becomes not merely a physical act but a theatrical manifestation of *différance*; a spectral echo of being, deferred and fragmented, a ritual of presence without substance. In this way, *Footfalls* stages a meditation on the precariousness of human subjectivity and the impossibility of full presence, dramatizing Derrida's philosophical insights with haunting precision.

These ambiguities are further amplified in the third Scene, where the instability of identity intensifies. Though only one actress appears on stage, under Beckett's direction, May ostensibly transforms into Amy, while Voice assumes the name Mrs. Winter. One reading suggests these are entirely new characters; another, perhaps more compelling, interprets them as projections from May's fractured consciousness, iterations of herself and her mother seen through a distorted interior lens. Thus, not only does the narrative elude closure, but the very catalogue of characters destabilizes. The boundary between self and other, fiction and memory, dissolves, inviting speculation about the multiplicity of the self, perhaps even aligning with Whitman's assertion that we 'contain multitudes'.<sup>2</sup> Conversely, this proliferation of personae may signal not multiplicity but negation, the possibility that none of these figures exist at all. This interpretation finds support in Beckett's own directorial instruction. Billie Whitelaw, who performed as May, recounts Beckett's cryptic guidance: 'Well, let's just say you're not quite there' (1996:p.143). Such a statement, coming from the playwright-director himself, underscores the ontological indeterminacy Beckett sought to evoke. The character is not simply elusive; she is existentially unanchored, a spectral trace rather than a grounded subject. This

<sup>2</sup>Walt Whitman, "Song of Myself"  
'Do I contradict myself?  
Very well then I contradict myself,  
(I am large, I contain multitudes.)'

profound absence at the core of the performance invites the audience to engage not with concrete meaning, but with the unsettling awareness of its perpetual deferral.

Accordingly, in S. E. Gontarski's view, *Footfalls* is not 'a reversal of the iconography of dismemberment' in his earlier works, but rather 'its culmination, an absent presence, or a present absence' (1985:p.162). Gontarski's words ('an absent presence, or a present absence') not only remind us Derridean *différance* but also support my claim that the play's character list is manipulative and that neither Beckett nor the characters can be trusted when putting the pieces together to understand the ambiguities that exist in *Footfalls*.

'M: Sequel. [Pause. Begins pacing. Steps a little slower still. After two lengths halts facing front at R. Pause.] Sequel. A little later, when she was quite forgotten, she began to – [Pause.] A little later, when as though she had never been, it never been, she began to walk (III, 242)'.

Here, the phrase 'she had never been' turns into yet another potent Derridean marker of absence that haunts the present. In this instance, the character's disappearance from recollection ('as though she had never been') enacts a type of ontological erasure in which the past perfect undermines existence and frames it in the conditional. Her previous presence is reinterpreted as non-being, a ghostly remnant within language itself, rather than being simply forgotten. Yet, because the very articulation of absence requires a past presence to deny, this negation paradoxically validates her having-been. By destabilizing binary oppositions such as presence/absence and being/non-being, the quote reveals how identity is constructed in the spaces between inscription and silence, memory and oblivion.

We should not forget that through the construction of such a complex and deliberately unstable dramatic structure, Beckett powerfully conveys the psychological fragmentation wrought by trauma. It may be said that *Footfalls* does not merely depict trauma; it enacts it, disassembling narrative coherence and destabilizing identity to mirror the disintegration experienced by the traumatized subject. What emerges by the play's end is not resolution, but a condition of certain uncertainties. Drawing on Ruth Klüger's reflections on Auschwitz, Geoffrey Hartman characterizes trauma as a *Fremdkörper*, a 'foreign body' embedded in the psyche, like 'an inoperable bullet' that remains lodged, continually emitting 'strange signals' (2003:p.257). This metaphor aptly captures the disjointed and often incoherent reverberations of trauma, which refuse assimilation into a cohesive narrative. *Footfalls* resonates with this insight: each line, each pause, each echoing phrase operates as one of those strange signals, offering up new interpretive possibilities only to overturn previous

assumptions. The result is a text that perpetually dazzles and disorients, compelling the reader/ audience to inhabit the fractured, recursive temporality of trauma itself.

‘Amy: No, mother I did not. Mrs. W[inter]: Perhaps it was just my fancy. Amy: Just what exactly Mother, did you perhaps fancy it was? (Pause.) Just what exactly, Mother, did you perhaps fancy this...strange thing you observed? (Pause.) Mrs. W: You yourself observed nothing strange? Amy: No, Mother, I myself did not, to put it mildly. Mrs. W: What do you mean, Amy, to put it mildly, what can you possibly mean, Amy, to put it mildly? Amy: I mean, Mother, that to say I observed nothing... strange is indeed to put it mildly. For I observed nothing of any kind, strange or otherwise. I saw nothing, heard nothing of any kind. I was not there. Mrs. W: Not there? Amy: Not there.’ (III, 243)

In light of the exchange quoted above, the character of Mrs. Winter may also be interpreted as an embodiment of the internal other, an extension or inversion of the self that destabilizes boundaries between identity and alterity. Notably, her name later appears only as ‘W’, almost the inverted form of ‘M’, suggesting a possible mirroring or reversal of May. Whether this is a deliberate symbolic move or a coincidental typographic play is not easily dismissed. Given that Beckett notoriously delayed the printing of his plays until after their stage performances, allowing performance itself to finalize the text, such minor textual choices are unlikely to be arbitrary. Moreover, with an author so meticulously attentive to form, rhythm and spatial arrangement, what might be a coincidence in another writer’s work could be read as intentional in Beckett’s. These subtle shifts function within the play’s broader strategy of ontological and linguistic destabilization.

In this context, the introduction of the character Amy can be read as yet another manifestation of May’s fractured psyche, an internalized other, a dissociated self-state that has become estranged from the original identity. Rather than a distinct character, Amy may signify a splintered identity that exists in tension with May, a psychic fragment externalized through the dramatic form. Beckett’s portrayal thus enacts a haunting vision of self-division, where the boundaries between characters, voices, memories and identities dissolve entirely. *Footfalls* becomes a dramatization of the internal other: a performative exploration of self-fragmentation wherein May exists as a split subject, endlessly disintegrating across the play’s shifting relational dyads—May and the Mother’s Voice, May and Amy, the Mother’s Voice and Mrs. Winter and even May and Mrs. Winter.

May’s very existence appears to be constructed through compulsive repetition—her pacing not merely theatrical but psychological, as if the internal other were

persistently eroding the authentic self through the cyclical re-enactment of trauma. This repetition aligns with Cathy Caruth's observation that the traumatic flashback is not a recollection but a re-living that, in its very recurrence, can re-traumatize the individual. As she explains, the recurrence of traumatic experience poses a threat to the brain's chemical makeup and may eventually cause deterioration (1996, 63). From this perspective, May's disintegrating self becomes more intelligible: her psyche emits 'strange signals', as Hartman would say, precisely because it is fragmented, caught in a loop of unresolved trauma that manifests through internal division. In *Footfalls*, Beckett does not merely represent trauma; rather, he constructs a theatrical apparatus that enacts the ongoing collapse of the self, staging both the internal other and the impossibility of a stable, coherent identity.

'Amy. [Pause. No louder.] Amy.  
[Pause.] Yes, Mother. [Pause.] Will you never have done?  
[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.' (III, 243)

The above quote is taken from the third Scene, yet it features a repetition of the first Scene with a striking difference that supports my analysis thus far. In the first Scene (see page X), a dialogue occurs between May and V. (Mother's Voice), with V. calling May's name. Here, by contrast, only Mrs. W (not even Mrs. Winter) speaks to herself after Amy claims not to be there.

'Amy: I mean, Mother, that to say I observed nothing ... strange is indeed to put it mildly. For I observed nothing of any kind, strange or otherwise. I saw nothing, heard nothing, of any kind. I was not there.  
Mrs. W: Not there?  
Amy: Not there.' (III, 243)

At this point, the dialogue terminates at this juncture, after which only Mrs. W remains engaged in a soliloquy. The speech is punctuated by pauses that fragment both the sentences and Mrs. W's pacing, thereby enhancing the disjointed and disrupted cadence of the monologue. Within this speech, both Amy and Mrs. W are represented; it ceases to be a dialogue between two distinct entities and instead becomes Mrs. W addressing and embodying Amy simultaneously: 'Mrs. W: But I heard you respond. (Pause.) I heard you say Amen. (Pause.) How could you have responded if you were not there (Pause) How could you possibly have said Amen if, as you claim, you were not there?' (III, 243). As previously noted, this passage constitutes a reiteration of the same dialogue, though ostensibly delivered

by different characters. This instance further corroborates my contention that each re-experiencing of the traumatic figure precipitates a systematic fracturing of the authentic self, engendering multiple internal others who, in essence, remain facets of a unified identity. Consequently, it is conceivable that recurrent engagement with the traumatic memory exacerbates the disintegration of the authentic self.

James Knowlson characterizes *Footfalls* as a 'ghost story,' designating May as the spectral presence that permeates the play due to her ethereal appearance and ambiguous ontological status throughout the text. Knowlson anchors his interpretation in the influence of Carl Jung on Beckett, particularly referencing Jung's patient who was 'never properly born,' and asserts that 'If Jung's girl patient has haunted Beckett for so long, it is because she epitomized for him a permanent sense of existence by proxy, of being absent from true being' (2012:p.271). Beckett's documented attendance at a Jungian conference concerning this patient is thus crucial in elucidating the dialectic of absence and presence in the play. Knowlson also addresses the characters Amy and Mrs. Winter, identifying them as mental constructs fabricated by May (2012:p.269). This stance diverges from my interpretation, which posits them as manifestations of the authentic self's internal division. Beckett also stipulates that the third Scene should be performed as if May has documented it for posterity (Asmus, 2012:p.256). Nevertheless, as a recipient of the work, I take the liberty to propose that Amy constitutes the split self, an internal other, whose existence is recorded and mediated by the authentic self, in accordance with the playwright's intentions.

In his rehearsals for the 1976 German premiere of *Footfalls*, Beckett referred to the play as 'a very small play, but a lot of problems concerning precision' (Asmus, 2012:p.258). This remark captures the paradox at the play's core: formally minimal yet semantically dense. The play resists fixed interpretation, instead functioning as a fragmented space where language, time, and identity collapse into repetition and absence. One fruitful method of engaging with the play's ambiguity is to reverse the conventional binary of the mother-daughter relationship, interpreting May not simply as the daughter of the disembodied voice, but potentially as a grieving mother herself. Such a reversal opens a path toward a different axis of trauma, centred not on maternal loss but on the loss of a child. The destabilizing use of the pronoun 'it,' particularly following the gendered 'she,' becomes key to this interpretation. While critics such as Weiss (2013:p.58) have attempted to identify 'it' as a symbolic stand-in for trauma, such readings often overlook the linguistic and ontological shift enacted by Beckett through this pronoun change. The move from *she* to *it* signifies not only depersonalization but disappearance, a transition from subjectivity to objectivity. In this regard, Cathy Caruth's theorization of trauma as

an experience that 'is not fully assimilated as it occurs', and that returns belatedly in fragmented, symptomatic forms (1966:p.5), becomes especially pertinent. May's compulsive pacing (her footfalls) functions not simply as a theatrical device but as a non-verbal statement of unprocessed grief, a corporeal echo of something lost and unnamed.

This recursive movement can also be situated within what Steven Connor identifies as Beckett's poetics of repetition, where meaning is never stable but endlessly deferred. In *Samuel Beckett: Repetition, Theory and Text*, Connor emphasizes that repetition in Beckett is not merely mechanical but philosophical; it signals a condition in which language communicates around a lack (1988:p.39), endlessly revisiting an origin that can no longer be reached or named. May's walk, marked by exact steps, pauses and silences enacts this very condition: each return to the end of the strip marks both an approach and a deferral, a performance of absence. The line 'where it began' thus becomes less a reference to biographical origin and more a pointer to the unrepresentable moment of psychic rupture. In this interpretive framework, May *may* be understood as a split subject—one who simultaneously occupies the positions of daughter, mother and mourner. This tension between ritual precision and semantic instability echoes both Caruth's model of trauma as unclaimed experience and Connor's analysis of repetition as a gesture toward, rather than a resolution of, meaning. Ultimately, *Footfalls* stages a theatre of deferred recognition and unresolved grief, where every utterance and every step mark both presence and erasure.

Not only the characters but also the voices in *Footfalls* may be interpreted as traces that emphasize the incessant deferral of meaning, thereby positioning the audience within the unresolved dialectic of presence and absence. Throughout the play, we observe not only the gradual physical disintegration of May's body but also the simultaneous dissolution of her voice. Her movements decelerate and she progressively fades, mirroring the disappearance of other presences within the dramatic space. This trajectory culminates in the final stage direction: '[Pause. Fade out on strip. All in darkness. Pause. / Chime even a little fainter still. Pause for echoes. Fade up to even a little less still on strip. / No trace of MAY. / Hold ten seconds. Fade out.]' (IV, 243). This passage explicitly reinforces the play's pervasive ambiguity by enacting the complete erasure of the already fragmented figure of May, emphasizing that there remains 'No trace of MAY'. Such a rare and unequivocal declaration invites the interpretation that *Footfalls* offers no stable or authentic presence; rather, all manifestations including May herself, may be construed as spectral emanations of a disintegrated self, one that perhaps never fully existed or that emerges solely as an illusion conjured by the failures and limitations of language.

### III.

*Footfalls* purposefully resists narrative closure and psychological resolution, enacting a postmodern aesthetics of uncertainty. As Brater asserts, the play ‘makes us suspect that there is far more in his play than first meets the eye’ (1978:p.37). It is never intended as an open text to be understood directly; rather, through Beckett’s repeated linguistic manipulations, it stands as a hallmark of postmodern ambiguity, a space for multiple, often conflicting readings, where each interpretation risks undoing or erasing the last. Derrida insightfully describes this dynamic as ‘a web that envelops a web, undoing the web for centuries; reconstituting it too as an organism, indefinitely regenerating its own tissue behind the cutting trace, the decision of each reading’ (2010, 1697). Beyond the traces inherent in language itself, I argue that Beckett intentionally implants deliberate traces throughout *Footfalls* that defer meaning, continually shifting the terrain between absence and presence.

At first glance, the play seems to depict a traumatic subject recalling conversations with her deceased mother, whose late maternity may intensify the trauma. Yet the emergence of new characters, most notably Amy, a name cleverly crafted as an amalgam of May, provokes doubt about the presence and identity of the original figure, May, whose very name ironically suggests renewal and presence. The introduction of an absent male figure identified only by ‘his arm’ further unsettles meaning, inviting speculation that the authentic self may be mourning an unborn child. It is arguable that Amy, rather than May, embodies the authentic self, fractured repeatedly; May, Mother’s Voice, Mrs. Winter and W serve as internal others, each reflecting trauma in divergent ways that fragment both language and subjectivity. Thus, the subject is reduced to ritualistic repetition and a relentless erasure of authenticity, culminating in a final scene where presence becomes a contested site between authentic self and internal others. How, then, can we trust such a manipulative interplay of language, characters, and playwright to yield any fixed or stable meaning amid these floating traces? It must be emphasized that a postmodern text such as *Footfalls* precisely compels us to question everything: every utterance, every interpretation, even our own selves. Each attempt to understand the text, each sentence we form, may only give rise to new mysteries, new uncertainties. In this vein, Derrida offers a crucial reflection on the perils and possibilities of criticism:

‘There is always a surprise in store for the anatomy or physiology of any criticism that think it had mastered the game, surveyed all the threads at once, deluding itself, too, in wanting to look at the text without touching it, without laying a hand on the ‘object,’ without risking—which is the only chance of getting into



the game, by getting a few fingers caught—the addition of some new thread.’  
(2010:p.1697)

This acknowledgment of risk or the necessity of engaging with the text, even at the cost of partial failure or entanglement is the ‘only chance’ for entering the play’s game. It is precisely this spirit that I embrace: admitting that I have not mastered the game, yet relishing the steps taken along the way, the generative potential of new readings, and the ever-unfolding possibilities of discovering new threads within Beckett’s intricate web.

Finally, *Footfalls* leaves us unable to definitively locate the speaking subject, whether it is the authentic self or one of the internal others that haunt the text. The voice may belong to May, to Amy, to the Mother or to a fractured amalgamation of all three, making any stable identification elusive. In this way, Beckett sustains the play’s postmodern refusal of resolution, where subjectivity is dispersed across voices, silences, and spectral presences that resist containment.

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## FRAGMENTISANI IDENTITET GOVOREĆEG SUBJEKTA U BEKETOVOJ DRAMI *FOOTFALLS*: AUTENTIČNO JA I NJEGOVI UNUTRAŠNJI DRUGI

### *Rezime*

Ovaj rad proučava *Footfalls* Samjuela Beketa kao snažnu dramatizaciju psihološke traume i fragmentacije sopstva, tvrdeći da sama forma drame – njen rascjepkani okvir, sablasna prisustva i isprekidani jezik – ostvaruje poremećaj koji nastoji da prikaže. Polazeći od teorije Ketí Karut o traumi kao odloženom, neasimilabilnom iskustvu koje se opire koherentnoj naraciji, analiza postavlja *Footfalls*, u okviru kojeg daje prednost rascjepu i nesigurnosti u odnosu na razrješenje. Beketov izraz ne prikriva poremećaj; naprotiv, on ga ogoljuje i ponavlja njegove prelomljene ritmove. U središtu drame nalazi se Mej, sablasna granična figura čije ritualno hodanje i isprekidani razgovori sa Ženskim Glasom – za koji se pretpostavlja da pripada njenoj majci, ali može biti i projekcija njenog vlastitog rascjepljenog uma – predstavljaju raspad jedinstvenog subjekta. Iz ove perspektive, Mej nije autentična, koherentna ličnost, već oličenje unutrašnjeg Drugog, glasa među mnogima u razbijenom sopstvu.

Koristeći Deridove pojmove *différance* i nestabilnosti prisustva, rad dalje tvrdi da *Footfalls* sistematski potkopava tradicionalne binarnosti poput ja/drugi, prisustvo/odsustvo i glas/tišina. Ambigvitet koji okružuje identitet govornika i neodređenost stvarnosti unutar drame zajedno destabilizuju očekivanja publike i tumača. Becketov tekst podstiče mnoštvo čitanja: svako novo tumačenje otvara mogućnosti, ali istovremeno poništava prethodne izvjesnosti. Kako primjećuje Brejter, drama 'navodi da posumnjamo da u njoj ima mnogo više nego što se na prvi pogled vidi' (1978:p.37). Ona odbija da bude proziran, otvoren tekst; naprotiv, kroz Beketove namjerne jezičke manipulacije postaje obilježje postmodernističke dvosmislenosti – složen prostor u kojem se značenje stalno odgađa, rascjepljuje i iznova obnavlja.

Deridini uvidi u igru teksta ključni su za ovo razumijevanje. On opisuje interpretaciju kao 'mrežu koja obavija mrežu, razara mrežu vijekovima; ali je i ponovo uspostavlja kao organizam, beskrajno obnavljajući sopstveno tkivo iza reza svake interpretacije' (2010:p.1697). *Footfalls* ostvaruje upravo ovu Deridinu dinamiku, u kojoj značenje nikada nije fiksirano, već se stalno pomjera između prisustva i odsustva. Becket namjerno usađuje tragove u dramu koji pomjeraju i destabilizuju razumijevanje, primoravajući čitaoca ili gledaoca da preispita svaku rečenicu, svaki zvuk i čak sopstveno tumačenje. Na narativnom nivou *Footfalls* izgleda kao prikaz traumatizovanog subjekta koji priziva razgovore sa preminulom majkom, čije kasno majčinstvo može dodatno pojačati bol kćerke. Ipak, iznenadno pojavljivanje novih figura – naročito Ejmi, čije ime spaja *A* i *May* – dodatno rascjepljuje identitet. Ova jezička igra izaziva sumnju u autentičnost ili čak postojanje same Mej, čije ime ironično priziva obnovu i prisustvo. Pominjanje odsutne muške figure poznate samo po *njegovoj ruci* još više komplikuje osjećaj sopstva, sugerišući slojeve gubitka i žalovanja koji se ne mogu neposredno izraziti. U ovom pomjerenom pejzažu, Ejmi, Mej, Glas Majke, gospođa Vinter i V postaju potencijalni fragmenti jednog razbijenog uma, odražavajući različite oblike ponavljanja i unutrašnjeg djelovanja traume.

Kako drama odmiče, identitet subjekta rastvara se u ritualnom ponavljanju, a autentičnost postaje nemoguća za održavanje. Završna scena ostavlja pojam prisustva duboko neodređenim: nije moguće jasno odrediti ko govori, a granica između sopstva i unutrašnjih drugih potpuno se briše. Ova nerazriješena potvrđuje Beketovu postmodernu estetiku nesigurnosti. *Footfalls* ne nudi psihološko razrješenje ni stabilno središte – samo sablasnu igru glasova i tišine u kojoj se subjektivnost raspada u mnoštvo prisutnih i odsutnih glasova.

Deridina razmišljanja o prirodi kritike – njenom riziku, zapletenosti i neizbježnoj nepotpunosti – oblikuju i kritičku poziciju ovog rada. On nas podsjeća

da nijedan tumač ne može 'gledati tekst a da ga ne dodirne', da se ne uplete u njegove niti, i da je takav rizik 'jedina šansa da se uđe u igru' (2010:p.1697). Slično tome, svaki pokušaj interpretacije *Footfalls* zahtijeva spremnost da se uđe u Beketovu mrežu odloženih značenja, uz svijest da je potpuno ovladavanje nemoguće. Sam čin čitanja postaje proces zaplitanja – produktivan, uznemirujući i beskrajno stvaralački.

Na kraju, *Footfalls* se opire svakoj potrebi da se pronade jedinstven, stabilan govorni subjekt. Glas može pripadati Mej, Ejmi, Majci ili njihovom spoju. Beketova odluka da ne razjasni ovu dvosmislenost osigurava da drama ostane otvorena, nerazriješena i duboko samorefleksivna. Ona prikazuje raspad identiteta, kolaps narativne koherentnosti i vječni povratak traume koja se ne može asimilovati. Na taj način *Footfalls* postaje i odraz i ostvarenje postmoderne nesigurnosti – prostor u kojem jezik posrće, značenje se rasipa, a svako tumačenje ostaje samo još jedan trag u Beketovoj beskrajno obnavljajućoj mreži.

► **Keywords:** Identitet, trauma, *différance*, unutrašnji Drugi, višeznačnost.

Preuzeto: 30. 9. 2025.  
Prihvaćeno: 28. 10. 2025.