

**“OVIDIUS” UNIVERSITY OF CONSTANTA
DOCTORAL SCHOOL OF HUMANITIES
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**THE ABSENT
CHARACTER AND THE
POETICS OF ABSENCE
IN LITERATURE
PHD THESIS SUMMARY**

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ABSTRACT OF THE DOCTORAL THESIS

Keywords: *absence, presence, lack, literary character, functions of literary characters, models of representation, memory, dramaturgy, modernity.*

Nowadays, the concept of *absence* in literature leaves uncovered a perspective of criticism incapable of accurately fixing its object of study. Our attempt to capture the current state of the research that focused on the concept of *absence* revealed a rather narrow overview. The lack of fundamental studies to investigate the problem of absence is, first of all, since we are dealing with a concept still unauthorized by literary theories – in other words, an “emerging” concept. Moreover, the notion of *absence* does not belong to an epistemological tradition that claims it with authority. For this reason, the term is currently only partially recoverable from a few directions such as philosophy, literature, history or psychoanalysis. However, even though we are facing a term resistant to theorizing, we considered that *absence* is a concept that deserves to be “called” to be present to highlight the complexity of literary texts and how they speculate the dialectical relationship between visibility and invisibility.

Starting from the above-mentioned premises, we addressed the specific issue of the fascination of what is “hidden”, as Jean Starobinski calls it, in an attempt to find those situations in which the study of *absence* becomes applicable to literature. We have positioned ourselves with caution towards a term that we intended to move away from the area of impressionist criticism towards a research area with epistemological authority. Thus, the study aimed to highlight a series of interrogations specific to a type of literature that, in the mid-twentieth century, is waiting for Godot or invites on Ionesco’s *Chairs* some invisible guests: what does the discussion about absence in literary studies help us with? In what terms can we talk about something or someone who, at no time, makes an entrance on the stage? What is the dynamic

between *presence* and *absence*? Why is the discussion about absence relevant in the current context of literary research?

The present work, *The Absent Character and the Poetics of Absence in Literature* had as its main objective the uncovering of a plan of depth of the term in the reflections on the literature of the XXth century, in a broad sense, and, in a narrow sense, on dramaturgy. First of all, we have been able to discover a field of possibilities in which we can build around the notion of absence. Thus, to properly use the ideas about *absence* in the specific context of modernity, in the first part of the thesis we recovered the term from a series of epistemological directions such as philosophy, psychology, psychoanalysis, fine arts, cinema and the list goes on.

The concept left in a neglected area of literary theory has been put in the limelight on several occasions, if not on purpose, at least as a secondary objective, by remarkable exegetes that have revealed valuable ideas about the concept of absence and the functions of the absent character, among which we mention William Gruber's study, *Offstage Space, Narrative, and the Theater of the Imagination*, the volume *Reassessing Theater of the Absurd: Camus, Beckett, Ionesco, Genet and Pinter* written by Michael Y. Bennett or the study of L. A.C. Dobrez, *The Existential and Its Exits: Literary and Philosophical Perspectives on the Works of Beckett, Ionesco, Genet and Pinter*.

The theoretical framework followed the exegesis of two important names in theatre studies: Anne Ubersfeld and Patrice Pavis. Therefore, the reflections about the absent character have particularly focused on the dramatic genre, because it is in the double nature of dramaturgy to provocatively urge to question the boundaries between visible and invisible space. Thus, by its polycentric nature, the character credits a paradox that we set out to explore: an absence “present” in the text, at a discursive level, and invisible or unseen on-stage. For these reasons, a dialectic that accompanied our approach was the relationship between presence and absence, which is why we have always positioned our point of view “in the interval”, borrowing the method that Andrei Plesu uses in his study about the unseen beings (*Despre îngerii/About Angels*).

A term whose meanings cannot be easily defined raises several difficulties. Even with a partial synonymy, the notion of absence can be replaced, by turns, by fragmentary, incompleteness, nothingness, non-existence, and so on. Thus, in the first part of the study, *Definitions of absence. Within the interval*, an important concern was represented by the various

definitions of the term. Defining the concept of absence is necessary in order to understand what we keep and what we leave outside the focal lens, to better use the term when reading literature. Going beyond the simple *hic et nunc* convention, of something absent simply because it is not *here* and it is not *now*, we agreed that a definition with which we can operate in this study is that which, additionally, highlights a subjective dimension of the concept—something is absent only to the extent that that particular something is missing to someone or to the extent that someone absent was supposed to be present, or is “called” to be present in Starobinski’s terms.

For this reason, we analyzed the absence in relation to the “games” of memory to observe how something that is now *in absentia* remains inseparably connected to the present/presence through memory. The ideas about absence and how it is linked to the present/presence were interpreted, having analyzed the reflections on memory in the writings of Aristotle, Friedrich Husserl, Maurice-Merleau Ponty, Jean-Paul Sartre or Paul Ricoeur. Here we went beyond the wordy structure of the binomial presence-absence or visible-invisible. We found a way to move the discussion from an area with a high degree of abstraction to a form recoverable at the level of the text through signs and symbols that bear a close connection with the absence: photography, portrait, perfume, etc.

Beyond this first objective of defining the terms, we managed to insert in the first part of the thesis two new concepts to help us have a nuanced perspective upon the dynamic between presence and absence: *more-than-presence* and *more-than-absence*. The terms have been useful in discussing those situations that go beyond the definitions of presence and absence. Thus, we have introduced from this moment forward those perspectives of an accentuated, superfluous, redundant presence (*more-than-presence*), respectively of an insufficient presence or of a type of non-existence which is felt like a form of absence to someone (*more-than-absence*).

Literary history displays an impressive gallery of absent characters from Greek Antiquity to contemporary times. A systematization of all the unseen characters would have been inoperable and, at the same time, incongruent with our objectives. We paid more attention to the dramaturgy of the twentieth century. In addition to the “economic” reasons of this selection, we have motivated the choice of this period in the following way: it is the period in the history of dramaturgy that imposes most originally the absent character as a dramatic strategy in some of the most famous plays in the repertoire of the early twentieth century. Given these considerations, the cutout that we considered beneficial in exposing the polymorphism of

the absent character included works by Eugen Ionescu, Eugene O'Neill, Tennessee Williams and Samuel Beckett, even though we are sure that we could have put in the same frame other important names of dramaturgy such as Luigi Pirandello, Edward Albee or Jean Anouilh, just to mention a few.

In the second part of the thesis, *Aspects of Absence in the XXth Century Dramaturgy: Models of Analysis*, the main objective was represented by the analysis of the forms and figures of the absent characters, as they are represented in a selection of plays representative for our research topic. The first chapter that opens the series of analyses is dedicated to Eugene O'Neill. *Absence and the Romantic Imagination. The Absent Character in Eugene O'Neill's Theatre* is the chapter in which we have explored the strategies of constructing the absent character in two of the American playwright's best-known plays: *Mourning Becomes Electra* and *Strange Interlude*. In the first place, the character is created *in praesentia*, in relation to the other characters, so that later the same character is evicted from the stage, *in absentia*, leaving room for the shock wave specific to major losses. Here we focused on the strategies of bringing *in praesentia* something or someone that has ceased to exist and the ways the present characters survive the loss. Thus, we found two important strategies: romantic imagination and compensative otherness. If the first show the capacity of the present character to insert himself into a fictional narrative in which his existence continues alongside the memory of the absent character, with the help of romantic imagination, the second strategy proposes the perspective in which an identity transfer is made between an absent and a present character; the spirit of someone absent finds a way to survive in a present body.

The second chapter, *Tennessee Williams and The Derealization Model. The Character in Crisis and the Crisis of the Character in A Streetcar Named Desire* explores the absence in close relationship with the psychological profile of the characters. The exegesis engages a theoretical language borrowed from the epistemological system refined by the philosophical and psychoanalytic thinking of Sigmund Freud, Carl Gustav Jung, Jacques Lacan or Emmanuel Levinas. In the drama *A Streetcar Named Desire*, Tennessee Williams illustrates some nuances of absence: we have on the one hand the absent characters Allan Grey and Shep Huntleigh and, on the other hand, absence as a form of derealization in the case of the female character, Blanch DuBois. Characters with the vocation of failure, the present ones compete by the degrading state of their condition, with the precarious nature of the absent ones. The absence, in Tennessee

Williams' play, involves two coordinates: we have the prospect of a loss (the death of Blanche's husband) and the prospect of an unattainable dream (Blanche dreams of something she cannot have, of a saviour who, in fact, does not exist).

The third chapter brings us closer to the regime of a theatre that gives a new prosthesis of meaning to the absent character. *Eugen Ionescu and The Poetics of The Absurd*. Ionescu's *Creation Between More-Than-Presence and More-Than-Absence* places the term of absence in a space that is no stranger to what is represented off-stage, to what the text keeps in the invisible: the theatre of the absurd. The guests of the elders in *The Chairs* are invisible, the knife with which the teacher kills his student in *The Lesson* might be invisible, while some on-stage characters are insufficiently present (The Orator in *The Chairs*). The tragic farce proposed by the playwright of Romanian origins disguises the lack in abundance (*more-than-presence*), while the characters no longer have the strength to develop a body, thus remain unseen (*more-than-absence*). Language becomes an important way of vectoring a type of absence camouflaged in verbiage: there is a lot of talking going on to fill some significant gaps (cognitive, relational, etc.). Moreover, the term absence is authorized in several absurd situations such as the search for a missing Godot (*Victims of Duty*) or the proliferation of a corpse (*Amedeu*).

The fourth and final chapter of our hermeneutical proposals is devoted perhaps to the most well-known absent character in world literature: Godot. *Samuel Beckett and the Godot-centrist Revolution*. *Towards the Poetics of Absence in Waiting for Godot* is the analytical segment that aims to go beyond the tradition that seeks to answer the question of who is Godot? Although this direction is far from being outdated, we nevertheless considered that the following interrogation is better intentioned concerning the objectives of our research: why do we have Godot? Rephrasing the premise from which we started, we wonder what exactly does the absence of Godot displace in the scenario in which someone present (Vladimir and Estragon) is waiting for someone or something who is absent but is expected to make an entrance at any time (Godot). The absurd situation lies not in the fact that Godot never appears on-stage, but in the fact that two friends are held in place by the promise of a meeting that has not been made at any time, by someone who is *more-than-absent*.

The ineffable nature of the absent character raised several difficulties in developing a study that would systematize the perspectives of absence in a manner that would give adherence

and relevance to the uses of the concept in literature. However, the present study manages to offer innovative nuances to the term of *absence*, a perspective that could further explore a research topic insufficiently studied in dramaturgy.

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