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Article

Compare and contrast ways in which dreams have been represented on stage in August Strindberg's *A Dream Play* (1901) and Samuel Beckett's *Rockaby* (1980)

Yiding Jiang^{1,*}

¹ University College London, London, United Kingdom

* Correspondence: Yiding Jiang, University College London, London, United Kingdom

Abstract: Dreams serve as a pivotal theatrical device in modernist drama, enabling playwrights to transcend realistic narrative conventions and visually stage the subconscious human mind. This paper explores and compares the distinct theatrical representations of dreams in August Strindberg's *A Dream Play* (1901) and Samuel Beckett's *Rockaby* (1980), two landmark works that deploy dream frameworks to interrogate the human condition through radically divergent aesthetic strategies. Strindberg constructs an expansive, poetic dream theatre characterised by non-linear scene shifts, fluid temporal transitions, and richly symbolic imagery, framing dreams as a metaphysical space for observing human suffering and pursuing spiritual transcendence. His dramaturgy embraces multiplicity, simultaneity, and the dissolution of fixed identity, positioning the stage as a liminal realm where existential questions are explored through lyrical and visionary means. In stark contrast, Beckett adopts a minimalist, circular dream aesthetic, utilising repetitive physical movements, stark lighting, and fragmented, monotonous monologues to shape a claustrophobic dreamscape that embodies psychological solitude, bodily decay, and existential resignation. By conducting a close comparative analysis of their contrasting uses of dramatic structure, theatrical language, stage technology, and dream imagery, this essay demonstrates two contradictory modernist visions of staged dreams: Strindberg's redemptive, expansive dream spirituality and Beckett's confining, cyclical psychological nightmare. Ultimately, the study illuminates how each playwright's formal and philosophical commitments produce fundamentally different conceptions of what it means to dream on stage, thereby enriching our understanding of modernist theatrical innovation.

Keywords: dream theatre; modernist drama; August Strindberg; Samuel Beckett; stage representation; subconscious

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1. Introduction

Dreams, with their nonsequential structure and heightened emotional resonance, provide a distinctive framework for theatrical investigations of the subconscious, identity, and temporality. When rendered on stage, dream-based narratives shift away from linear progression, move beyond conventional realism, and deepen the audience's engagement with internal psychological states [1]. Dreams blur boundaries among time, space, and self, giving rise to a theatrical language that communicates directly through sensory and affective means. August Strindberg and Samuel Beckett—writing at pivotal moments in the development of modern drama—employ dream structures in markedly distinct ways to examine fundamental aspects of human experience. Strindberg's *A Dream Play* (1901) presents a spiritual and philosophical journey through human suffering, using seamless

scene transitions, archetypal characters, and a compassionate divine figure, Agnes, who observes and shares in human hardship. Its organization reflects associative, poetic logic: episodic, fluid, and evocative. Here, the dream functions as a realm of inquiry and potential transcendence. By contrast, Beckett's *Rockaby* (1980) constructs a tightly constrained, cyclical performance: a lone woman rocks rhythmically while a pre-recorded voice recites a sparse, repetitive account of her seclusion; temporal progression gives way to recurrence; the dream manifests as an inward-turning, self-reinforcing condition of isolation and quiet acceptance.

This essay argues that although both playwrights deploy theatrical form to represent dreams, their underlying aims and aesthetic strategies diverge significantly [2]. Strindberg employs the dream to suggest possibilities for philosophical insight and spiritual renewal, shaping a metaphysical terrain shaped by collective human struggle. Beckett, in turn, distills the dream into a tightly wound pattern of repetition that conveys psychological erosion, profound solitude, and passive endurance. Through contrasting approaches to dramatic structure, linguistic economy, and visual symbolism, Strindberg and Beckett present two divergent stagings of the dreaming mind: one expansive and allegorical, the other confined and atomized.

2. A Dream Play (1901)

Strindberg's *A Dream Play* (1901) stands as the archetype of expressionist theatre — a genre that flourished in early 20th-century Europe, rejecting naturalism in favour of abstraction, symbolism, and psychological interiority. Inspired by the unconscious mind and developments in psychological inquiry, the play's structure and style depart from traditional linear dramaturgy [3, 4]. The preface states that "everything can happen; everything is possible and probable. Time and space do not exist." This declaration prepares the audience for a surreal theatrical experience and establishes the associative logic of dreams, in which chronological and spatial coherence are secondary to emotional resonance. The structure mirrors observed patterns in dream content, where elements undergo condensation and displacement, resulting in distortion and reconfiguration.

The central figure, Agnes, a divine being who descends to Earth, embodies the play's fluid dream logic. Her identity remains unfixed — she merges with other characters, witnesses various facets of human life, and experiences time and suffering non-linearly. This shifting identification reflects mechanisms observed in dream representation, where subjective perspective dissolves boundaries between self and others [5]. Thus, Agnes functions both as observer and participant, a figure of compassionate awareness and a conduit for deeply held emotional responses. She becomes a liminal presence through whom inner truths emerge, embodying the poetic fragmentation of self as performance.

Throughout the play, symbolic and expressionistic imagery proliferates. The door is a recurring motif symbolising existential constraint and the challenges of mutual understanding. The burning castle evokes the dissolution of aspiration and idealised constructs, while the persistent fog enshrouding scenes signals uncertainty and the difficulty of achieving clarity within human experience. These are not realistic environments, but metaphoric landscapes that prioritise affective tone over literal representation. Expressionist techniques align with understandings of dreams as expressions of underlying motivations [6]. Rather than focusing on individual psychology alone, the work conveys a shared human orientation: the enduring desire to rise above the pervasive difficulties inherent in lived experience.

The play's departure from unity in time, place, and action serves a conceptual purpose. Each scene flows into the next with minimal causal linkage; characters appear, disappear, or transform without explicit explanation. Dialogue unfolds not in realistic patterns but in heightened, poetic fragments [1]. This structural approach reflects observed characteristics of dreaming and resonates with broader reflections on the evolving nature of selfhood in modern contexts. Expressionist drama places emphasis on the physical and sensory qualities of language — its rhythm, sound, and evocative power — rather than solely on semantic precision.

Agnes's journey becomes a crucible of empathy. She endures the sufferings of lovers, workers, scholars, and visionaries, and each encounter deepens her understanding of mortality. Her quiet utterance, "It is terribly hard to be married," serves as a pivotal moment — not of narrative resolution, but of emotional insight. This moment captures a central idea of the play: profound understanding arises not through detachment from pain, but through sustained engagement with it. The dream does not eliminate suffering but acknowledges its presence, transforming theatre into a space for reflective catharsis.

In this way, *A Dream Play* (1901) is not only a precursor to modernist and absurdist drama but a powerful dramatisation of the unconscious mind [7, 8]. Strindberg anticipates many concerns that would later dominate twentieth-century theatre, including the fragmentation of narrative, the instability of identity, and the fluidity of time and space. His use of dream logic resonates with early psychological theories concerning how unconscious material surfaces through symbolic forms. At the same time, the work extends beyond strictly psychological frameworks, integrating philosophical perspectives that foreground ambiguity. Rather than seeking definitive answers or fixed meaning, the play embraces open-endedness, presenting human suffering not as an anomaly to be corrected, but as an intrinsic dimension of existence. Through Agnes's descent into the human world and her capacity for transcendent empathy, the work suggests that meaning emerges not from rational systems or external authority, but from attentive, compassionate engagement with life's complexity, fragility, and beauty. The stage becomes a liminal space — a dreamscape — where internal states are made visible, allowing audiences to encounter the emotional and spiritual dimensions embedded in human experience.

3. *Rockaby* (1980)

If Strindberg's *A Dream Play* (1901) offers transcendence through divine empathy, Beckett's *Rockaby* (1980) immerses us in a claustrophobic, recursive dream-state dominated by transformation and terminal stasis. The play presents a single figure, W, seated in a rocking chair, listening to a recorded voice recounting her past loneliness and isolation. There is almost no action beyond the chair's mechanical rocking and the voice's measured delivery. The dream here is stripped bare of narrative or symbolic movement. Instead, it becomes a static nightmare, a slow descent into erasure. W's bleak declaration — "rock her off / stop her eyes / fuck life" — rejects not only the vitality of existence, but also the illusion of dream transcendence.

The structure of *Rockaby* (1980) is rigidly cyclical, built around the repetition of the voice and the rhythmic creak of the chair [7]. The play is segmented into monologic fragments interspersed with silences, suggesting the obsessive return of traumatic memory. "More... till in the end / the day came", the voice intones, in phrases that do not denote progress but imply deterioration. The temporal logic is not linear but iterative, evoking the looping quality of a dream in which one cannot awaken. The work frequently stages conditions resembling Cotard's syndrome, characterized by a profound sense of detachment from self and reality. *Rockaby* (1980) dramatizes precisely this liminal state — a being caught between life and death, presence and absence, memory and oblivion.

Thematically, the dream here is not populated with symbols or metaphorical landscapes, as in Strindberg, but is a void — a dream composed of absence. W's life is recounted in sparse, hollow details. Her search for another being is fruitless: "going to and fro / all eyes / high and low / for another". The silence she encounters is total; no contact is made. Her only relationship is with the recorded voice — likely her own — looping her solitude back upon itself in an echo chamber of solipsism. This imagery has been linked to observations of neurodegenerative decline, where patients experience progressive physical limitation and psychological withdrawal while awaiting an unknowable future. W's gentle, mechanical rocking mimics involuntary motor patterns associated with neurological deterioration, while her physical stasis becomes a metaphor for psychological atrophy [9].

Beckett's staging strips theatre of its traditional elements — no set, no colour, no movement save for the rocking. The blackness of the stage mirrors the interior void of the character's mind, reinforcing the suffocating atmosphere of the dream. This minimalism reflects an aim to foreground the embodied and material nature of language. The voice, rhythm, and tonality become the play's primary action, not dialogue or interaction, but an aural rhythm that enacts the character's psychological decline. In psychoanalytic terms, this corresponds to the "dream of convenience", where dreaming replaces action. In *Rockaby* (1980), dream logic serves not as a means of wish-fulfilment, but of passive resignation to decay.

There is no catharsis in *Rockaby* (1980), only cessation. The play closes not with revelation but with silence, as the voice gradually slows and fades: "those arms at last / and rocked / rocked". Death is not rendered as a dramatic climax or metaphysical release, but as the inevitable terminus of repetition and inertia [10, 11]. In contrast to Agnes in *A Dream Play* (1901), who gains insight and ascends in compassion, W experiences no transformation. Her rocking is not a movement toward meaning but an entropic drift toward oblivion. Beckett's dream theatre strips away all hope of transcendence, staging death as a mechanical and affectless process — a rocking into nothingness. While classical theories propose dreams as disguised fulfilments of repressed wishes, in *Rockaby* (1980), the absence of desire is precisely the point. There is no latent content, no longing beneath the surface — only the recursive voice echoing a life devoid of connection or resolution. Even the dreamer has dissipated; the body rocks, but the self is already gone. In this dream vision, there is no awakening, only the slow erasure of presence, thought, and voice — an ending without climax, without epiphany.

4. Comparative Discussion

While *A Dream Play* (1901) and *Rockaby* (1980) explore dreamscapes, they differ significantly in aesthetic approach, emotional tone, and philosophical scope. Strindberg's dream is expansive, surreal, and oriented toward transformation; Beckett's is minimalist, confined, and characterized by persistent repetition. These differences reflect the playwrights' distinct worldviews and illustrate the theatrical adaptability of dreams as both a formal and thematic device.

In terms of structure, *A Dream Play* (1901) employs a fluid, episodic form that mirrors the associative and nonlinear qualities of actual dreams. Scenes dissolve into one another without conventional causality, enabling rapid shifts in setting and character that depart from realism. Dream logic, as observed in psychological studies, follows associative rather than rational connections between ideas, and Strindberg's play exemplifies this with its drifting transitions — from a castle with endless staircases to a lawyer's office flooded by tears. This expansive structure serves a purpose: to map the full emotional and existential range of human experience from the vantage of a detached, observant perspective. Agnes's descent into human life echoes a mythic journey, lending the dream philosophical and spiritual resonance.

In contrast, Beckett's *Rockaby* (1980) reduces structure to a tightly bounded system. The play centers on a single repetitive action — a woman seated in a rocking chair, listening to a recording of her voice. There is no linear progression, only a cyclical pattern of utterance and silence, motion and stillness. *Rockaby* (1980) uses the rocking chair, recurring phrases, and gradual fade-outs to present a repetitive, circular structure of waiting and depletion [12]. Unlike Strindberg's generative dream, Beckett's functions as a self-reinforcing loop. It portrays a mind undergoing progressive withdrawal, unable to disengage from its own voice, memories, or physical inertia. The dream here is not an opening but a narrowing — a tautology of diminishing presence.

This structural difference reflects two distinct psychological experiences of dreaming. Strindberg's play resembles what might be termed a visionary dream — one that broadens awareness and invites moral reflection. Beckett's play, by contrast, represents a dream shaped by profound psychological strain — one associated with prolonged grief, cognitive fatigue, or neurological change. Clinical observations note that certain

conditions involve speech patterns marked by fragmentation and reduced prosody, as if linguistic capacity itself is attenuating. Rockaby stages precisely this phenomenon: a dream that does not conceal desire but expresses a deep withdrawal from lived experience.

Emotionally, *A Dream Play* (1901) moves between sorrow and uplift. Though it addresses human suffering — unfulfilled love, injustice, toil — its tone is not despairing but compassionate. Agnes responds to what she witnesses with empathy, absorbing the pain of others in a gesture of selfless care. Strindberg's poetic language reinforces this tone: imagery of nature, celestial bodies, and transcendent phenomena suggests a belief in ultimate coherence, however provisional. The dream ends not in silence, but in return — Agnes ascends, having gained insight into human existence. Beckett's emotional register is markedly restrained. *Rockaby* (1980) is emotionally subdued, stripped of affective resolution, comfort, or catharsis. Phrases like "no / night dead one night" articulate a minimalism of feeling as much as of form. There is no discovery, only recurrence; no shared understanding, only inward focus. This restraint has been linked to representations of cognitive weariness, where characters remain suspended in an indeterminate present — a night without morning.

Language itself operates differently in each play. Strindberg's dreamworld is rich in metaphor and lyricism. His characters speak in symbolic, often elevated terms, frequently invoking mythological or archetypal imagery. The presence of divine figures and cosmic visions underscores the dream's allegorical function. Beckett, by contrast, works through linguistic economy. His language is spare, fragmented, and elliptical. The recorded monologue in *Rockaby* (1980) consists of short phrases, often repeated with subtle variation, creating an incantatory rhythm. In this context, language does not merely describe experience but embodies it — speech becomes a physical manifestation of endurance and attenuation.

Each play thus presents the mind in fundamentally different ways. *A Dream Play* (1901) imagines the dream as a journey across the breadth of human consciousness. Agnes is both observer and participant, gradually recognizing the interconnectedness of human experience. In this regard, the dream functions as an expression of deeply held moral or spiritual yearning — a wish for meaning, fairness, and empathetic connection. Beckett's *Rockaby* (1980), on the other hand, presents the mind as a self-contained feedback system. There is no journey, no revelation — only the voice repeating itself, the chair rocking mechanically, the body slowly yielding to stillness. The dream here departs from wish-fulfillment; instead, it conveys a profound withdrawal from engagement with existence.

Therefore, Strindberg and Beckett use dream structure for markedly different purposes, crafting theatrical experiences at opposite ends of the emotional and philosophical spectrum. Strindberg's *A Dream Play* (1901) embraces the fluidity of dream logic to explore existential suffering with a sense of openness. His dream structure permits philosophical inquiry, symbolic transformation, and ultimately, a suggestion of empathetic resonance. Through Agnes's descent and eventual ascension, the play implies that meaning, while elusive, may emerge through compassion and shared experience. In contrast, Beckett's *Rockaby* (1980) offers no such resolution. Its dream is an inward-focused, self-contained cycle, absent transcendence or interpersonal connection. Here, dream becomes a space of containment, where thought simplifies and the body gradually settles into stillness. Beckett distills the dream to its essential elements — repetition, attenuation, silence — evoking the quiet intensity of psychological and physical transition. While Strindberg dreams toward insight and renewal, Beckett dreams toward cessation [13]. One presents the dream as a conduit to understanding; the other, as a space of final stillness. Together, they reveal the versatility of dream structure in modern theatre — not merely as a narrative device, but as a medium for examining the full range of human consciousness, suffering, and imagination.

5. Conclusion

This essay has explored how Strindberg's *A Dream Play* (1901) and Beckett's *Rockaby* (1980) represent the dream state on stage through contrasting formal and emotional

strategies. Both plays disengage from realism and instead use the dream to delve into psychological and existential questions. However, where Strindberg offers a symbolic journey of empathy and metaphysical insight, Beckett constructs a tightly constrained loop of isolation and repetition.

These differences reveal the range and elasticity of theatre's capacity to stage the subconscious. Through structure, imagery, and rhythm, the stage becomes a site not of external action but internal revelation. For Strindberg, the dream expands — time, identity, and setting are fluid; language becomes poetic; and the ultimate movement is upward, toward understanding. For Beckett, the dream condenses — time recurs in cyclical patterns; identity dissolves into voice and body; and the final movement is downward, toward oblivion.

In both cases, the dream enables access to otherwise difficult-to-articulate psychological states. The dream is understood as a valid psychical phenomenon rooted in wish-fulfilment. Whether that wish is for compassion or cessation, the theatrical dream mirrors the unconscious.

More broadly, these plays illustrate that staging dreams allows playwrights to bypass linear storytelling and realism, entering instead the domain of symbolic logic, sensory memory, and psychic truth. From Agnes's poetic pilgrimage to W's final whisper, Strindberg and Beckett show that dreams are not just escapes from reality — they are confrontations.

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