

**Athol Fugard and the Power of Objects: A Symbolic Study of *The Coat*****Evrard AMOI**Université Peleforo GON COULIBALY de Korhogo, Côte d'Ivoire  
amvrrard@upgc.edu.ci

Reçu le : 10/04/2025

Accepté le : 28/06/2025

Publié le : 31/07/2025

**Abstract**

This study offers a semiotic analysis of *The Coat*, a short play by Athol Fugard written in the context of South African apartheid. Focusing on a single object, a coat given to the wife of a political prisoner, the study highlights the central role of nonverbal signs in theatrical meaning-making. The coat emerges as a polysemic sign, simultaneously representing absence, serving as a medium of collective memory, and functioning as a structural element of the play's dramaturgy. Through a semiotic approach that emphasizes the interplay between materiality and symbolism, the analysis demonstrates how this stage object, far from being insignificant, structures the narrative, sustains dramatic tension, and conveys a message of resistance and solidarity within a minimal yet profoundly expressive theatrical form.

**Keywords:** Dramaturgy, Memory, Resistance, Semiotics, Stage object.**Athol Fugard et le pouvoir des objets : une étude symbolique de *The Coat***  
**Résumé**

Cette étude propose une analyse sémiotique de *The Coat*, courte pièce d'Athol Fugard écrite dans le contexte de l'apartheid sud-africain. En se concentrant sur un seul objet – un manteau transmis à la femme d'un prisonnier politique, l'étude met en évidence le rôle central que jouent les signes non verbaux dans la construction du sens théâtral. Le manteau y apparaît comme un signe polysémique, à la fois représentation de l'absence, vecteur de mémoire collective et élément structurant de la dramaturgie. À travers une approche sémiotique qui met l'emphase sur l'interaction entre la matérialité et le symbolisme, l'analyse démontre comment cet objet scénique, loin d'être anodin, organise le récit, soutient la tension dramatique et véhicule un message de résistance et de solidarité, dans un théâtre épuré mais profondément expressif.

**Mots clés :** Dramaturgie, mémoire, résistance, sémiotique, objet scénique.

## Introduction

In the theatrical world, objects are never mere props. When they are staged, integrated into the action, the dialogue, or the space, they become carriers of meaning. This meaningful dimension of theater, where every visible element on stage can be read as a sign, falls under what is known as a semiotic approach. Far from being limited to the text, this method of analysis takes into account objects, gestures, postures, and silences as elements loaded with significance. It is this interpretive framework that we use to analyze *The Coat*, a short play by Athol Fugard co-written with the Serpent Players and set against the tense backdrop of South African apartheid. The play is based on a simple situation: a man has been arrested, and a coat, left behind, is given to his wife. This coat, the only truly central object in the play, becomes a dramatic and symbolic vehicle for rare intensity. In a deliberately stripped-down staging, the coat carries several layers of meaning: it evokes an absent presence, serves as a vessel of memory, and structures the stage space.

Previous analyses of symbolic objects in contemporary theater have often focused on their thematic or narrative functions. L. Kruger (1999, p. 1), in her writings on South African theatre, *The Drama of South Africa: Plays, Pageants, and Politics*, examines the political role of stage symbolism, especially in relation to protest drama. Her contributions are valuable in connecting theatrical representation to historical context. Nevertheless, her focus remains primarily on the textual and ideological dimensions of the plays, rather than on the objects themselves as active signs within a visual and performative system. This study thus builds on these insights by adopting a strictly semiotic perspective, aiming to demonstrate how a single object, here, the coat, carries not only symbolic meaning but also structures the play's dramaturgy through its silent but central presence on stage. The research problem guiding this inquiry is how an ordinary object, within a minimalist theatrical framework, can function as a dense site of meaning that embodies memory, absence, and political resistance, while simultaneously organizing the emotional and narrative structure of the performance.

In this study, the semiotic approach is grounded in the theories of Roland Barthes, whose work on signs and meaning provides a critical lens through which to examine *The Coat*. R. Barthes' distinction between the *denotative* and *connotative* levels of meaning is particularly useful in analyzing how the coat operates not merely as a functional object (denotation), but as a symbol charged with emotional, political, and ideological significance (connotation). According to Barthes, as quoted by L. Obou,

There are different orders of signification. The first order of signification is that of denotation: at this level there is a sign consisting of a signifier and a signified. Connotation is a second order of signification which uses the denotative sign (signifier and signified) as its signifier and attaches to it an additional signified (L. Obou, 2023, p. 39).

According to Roland Barthes in the above, the first level of meaning, denotation, refers to the literal or primary meaning of a sign, where a specific form (signifier) directly relates to a basic concept (signified). Connotation, as a second level, builds upon this by adding cultural, emotional, or ideological associations, turning the original sign into a new signifier that carries deeper, often socially constructed meanings.

By applying Roland Barthes' concept of *the signifier* and *the signified*, where everyday objects are transformed into carriers of cultural meaning, we consider how the coat becomes a sign that embodies absence, memory, and resistance. In this sense, the coat functions as a kind of theatrical **mythology**, encoding layers of narrative and political commentary through its stage presence. This approach allows us to understand the coat as a semiotic construct whose symbolic weight exceeds its material form, serving as a central mechanism in the dramaturgical and ideological structure of the play.

## 1. The Coat: A Sign of Absence and Silent Presence

From its very first appearance on stage, the coat carries a strong symbolic function. As an object left behind by an absent man, it becomes the tangible sign of that absence, a visible and palpable trace of someone who is no longer there. The coat acts as a silent presence: it occupies physical space, draws the eye, and fills the emotional void left by the arrest. Through its materiality, its texture, shape, and movement, the object seems to continue speaking for the person it once represented. It is handled, moved, and observed with care. This interaction with the object reveals its full evocative power. It becomes an active dramatic element, driving the action forward without ever uttering a word. As a sign, the coat carries multiple layers of meaning: it represents the absent person, the injustice of the arrest, but also human warmth and the fragility of emotional bonds. It does not merely allude to an external reality; it embodies memory, pain, and connection on stage. A. Fugard succeeds here in turning silence into language and an object into speech. This is clearly illustrated through the following exchange between Lavrenti and Marie:

Lavrenti: (...) We discovered that the coat was real. I don't mean that we didn't believe it had ever existed. We knew it had. When I say 'real' I mean we discovered that it was the cause and effect of things. We came to believe in it so strongly that we decided to use tonight to show you what had happened when we discussed and examined it. There are certain facts; we will give you them. There are a lot of questions; we tried to find the answers. Listen and judge for yourself. Just before we start let me answer any of you who might be asking: Why the coat? Why not the man who wore the coat? Isn't he real? Isn't a real man a better subject for an actor's exercise? Of course he is. The man would have been better, but it was the coat that came back

Marie: I brought the coat with me from Cradock, a hundred and sixty miles away. I had gone to Cradock for my husband's trial. The coat isn't his. It belongs to another New Brighton man. There have been a lot of our men in the

Cradock cells. The charges are mostly the same: membership of a banned organisation, distributing pamphlets, addressing a meeting and so on. They go to Robben Island afterwards. The lucky ones get three years. Most of them get five or seven (A. Fugard, 1993, pp. 124-125).

In *The Coat*, A. Fugard masterfully elevates a seemingly ordinary object, a coat into a semiotic centerpiece, deeply infused with symbolic, political, and emotional significance. The selected passage (A. Fugard, 1993, pp. 124-125) exemplifies how the coat comes to signify more than a piece of clothing; it becomes a presence-in-absence, a physical manifestation of someone who is no longer there, yet whose memory, influence, and reality continue to shape the stage and those upon it. Lavrenti's opening remarks reveal the group's evolving perception of the coat: "We discovered that the coat was real". Here, the notion of *real* transcends the coat's material reality, it no longer merely exists; it acts. It is the "cause and effect of things". From a semiotic perspective, this is the moment where the coat shifts from denotation (a garment) to connotation (a symbol loaded with emotional and political meanings). It no longer refers only to its wearer; it now indexes a broader context of loss, resistance, injustice, and shared struggle. It becomes a sign-function, structuring relationships, emotions, and actions even in the wearer's physical absence.

The rhetorical question "Why the coat?" directly confronts the spectator's natural inclination toward character-driven narrative: why focus on the object rather than the man? Lavrenti's response, "The man would have been better, but it was the coat that came back," suggests a displacement of presence. The man cannot return; his body is absent, removed by incarceration. But the coat, as his surviving trace, has returned. In this way, the object becomes an embodied absence, standing in for the silenced, absent subject. Thus, the stage becomes haunted by what is not seen, and the coat takes on the paradoxical role of a silent protagonist. Marie's statement continues this semiotic layering. She brings the coat from Cradock, a town symbolically tied to state violence and political repression, over a journey of "a hundred and sixty miles". This journey is

more than geographic; it is symbolic labor, an act of memory, loyalty, and continuity. Her speech situates the coat within a network of shared suffering: “There have been a lot of our men in the Cradock cells”. The coat is no longer an individual’s possession but now operates as a collective signifier of all the men imprisoned under similar charges, membership in banned organizations, distribution of pamphlets, public speaking. These were the everyday acts of resistance criminalized by the apartheid regime.

Again, the coat functions not only as a personal relic, but also as a political sign. It bridges the personal and the collective, the individual and the community. Its mute presence on stage speaks louder than any monologue. It evokes not just the absence of one man, but the systemic disappearance of many. It speaks for those who cannot speak, those exiled, silenced, or erased by state violence. The coat is therefore not only a metonym for the absent body; it is also a synecdoche for the oppressed class, the black South African political prisoners whose identities remain offstage but whose presence shapes every line and movement. From a dramaturgical standpoint, the coat also reorients the spectators’ attention. A. Fugard compels the audience to focus on an inanimate object rather than a character, challenging traditional dramatic hierarchies. The coat is dynamic; it organizes space, catalyzes dialogue, and triggers emotional and narrative responses. It is a performative object that generates action, not just reflects it. Through its very stillness, the coat animates the drama, becoming an axis of meaning in a world stripped of material excess.

Furthermore, the ambiguity of its ownership, “the coat isn’t his”, adds another layer of symbolic density. It belongs to “another New Brighton man,” reinforcing the notion that this is not about a singular biography, but about shared fate and collective trauma. The coat, interchangeable among prisoners, becomes a universal symbol of dispossession and resistance. It represents not one absence, but many. It absorbs memory, protest, and identity. It also becomes saturated with the ghosts of those it once clothed. In a word, this passage encapsulates the essence of *The Coat* as a theatrical meditation on absence, memory, and resistance. Through the lens of

semiotics, the coat stands as a dense, polysemic sign: a tangible reminder of injustice, a repository of shared experience, and a structural device that drives the narrative forward. It is a presence in absence, a character in its own right, and a silent witness to oppression and endurance. By focusing on an object rather than a body, A. Fugard not only defies narrative expectations but also elevates silence and stillness to profound acts of storytelling.

## **2. The Coat as Collective Memory and Symbolic Transmission**

The coat as a collective memory is well developed in the play written by A. Fugard. Indeed, the woman's decision not to keep the coat for herself, but to pass it on to those in need, profoundly transforms the object's meaning. It is no longer a mere personal keepsake, but a shared symbol. By moving away from a strictly private use, the coat becomes a vessel of collective memory. This gesture places the object within a logic of transmission: it is given, lent, entrusted to others, in a movement that transcends the individual. The coat becomes a vehicle of living memory, a kind of silent relay of the man's struggle, a sign that his presence continues through the solidarity of others. This shift in meaning from the personal to the collective illustrates theater's ability to turn objects into bearers of broader social and emotional stakes. The coat becomes an emblem of dignity and unity, a symbol of resistance rooted in memory, sharing, and care for others. It conveys a message without relying on verbal language: this is the pure power of the sign, in its simplest yet most profound form. This can be perceived through the following dialogue:

Marie: (...) While I was talking to him the two men came past. The one with the coat came up to me quickly and ask me to see his wife and children. He gave me the adress. He asked me to tell them what had happened to him. Then he took off his coat and said I must give it to his wife. 'tell her to use it,' he said. 'Tell them I will come back'. I said goodbye to them. Outside I folded up the coat and put it in the shopping bag in which I had brought my husband's clean clothes. I brought it back with me to New Brighton.

Lavrenti: What sort of coat was it?

Marie: Oh, just an old coat. A man's sportscoat.

Lavrenti: (*to the audience*). Those were our facts. The first thing we did was to improvise the little scene where the coat was handed over. We wanted to see it, that moment, when it passed from the hands of a stranger to the wife, because that is when the coat starts to live again, where it comes back into our lives (A. Fugard, 1993, pp. 125-126).

In the passage from *The Coat* (A. Fugard, 1993, pp. 125-126), the act of handing over the coat unfolds as a quiet yet profoundly meaningful moment, one that encapsulates the symbolic core of the play. The coat transcends its original function as an article of clothing to become a symbolic artifact, deeply embedded in a network of emotional, social, and political significations. In this scene, it is not merely passed from one person to another; it is transmitted, in the full semiotic sense, as a carrier of collective memory and a symbol of continuity amid rupture and displacement. Marie's recounting of the scene when the imprisoned man entrusts her with his coat and a message for his family is framed in terms of obligation and transmission: "He asked me to tell them what had happened to him. Then he took off his coat and said I must give it to his wife" (A. Fugard, 1993, pp. 125-126). This gesture transforms the coat into a memorial object, infused with the memory of a life interrupted by political violence. The coat becomes a proxy for the absent body, and a testament of existence. It is a physical stand-in, preserving the connection between the man and his family, while simultaneously bearing witness to a systemic pattern of imprisonment and silencing.

What makes this transmission even more powerful is the intention behind it: "Tell her to use it... Tell them I will come back" (A. Fugard, 1993, p. 126). These lines articulate both a pragmatic and symbolic request. On the one hand, there is the utilitarian use of the coat. On the other hand, there is a deeply resonant gesture of hope and affirmation: the coat serves as a promise of return. It thus carries not only the weight of loss, but also the potential of continuity. This dual function, practical and symbolic

reinforces the coat as a living sign, one that holds affective value and anticipatory meaning. Marie's actions following the handover further embed the coat within a ritual of preservation and care. Placing it in the same bag she had brought for her own husband's clean clothes is not an incidental detail; it signifies the interweaving of individual and collective narratives. Her personal sorrow becomes entangled with the fate of another woman, another family. This scene reflects a shared condition: the coat thus becomes interchangeable and communal, a floating signifier of absence, resistance, and shared trauma.

Lavrenti's interjection "That is when the coat starts to live again" (A. Fugard, 1993, p. 126) marks a critical dramaturgical moment. His statement acknowledges the coat's transformation into a performative object. Through the act of transfer, the coat is reanimated; it becomes a central organizing symbol, structuring not only the narrative but also the emotional engagement of the characters and the audience. The coat is no longer an object of the past; it enters the present, asserting itself as a repository of memory and a vehicle of solidarity. Furthermore, Lavrenti insists on the group's decision to improvise the moment of transmission. This decision is significant: it recognizes that the true meaning of the coat does not reside in the object alone, but in the gesture, in the relational act of giving and receiving. In semiotic terms, the meaning is not fixed in the referent, but emerges through performance, through context, interaction, and repetition. The scene, then, is not simply dramatized; it is ritualized. The transmission is repeated on stage so that the meaning can be shared, witnessed, and kept alive.

The description of the coat as "just an old coat. A man's sportscoat" (A. Fugard, 1993, p. 126) also plays a crucial role. It underscores the banality of the object, which paradoxically heightens its symbolic charge. In its ordinariness, the coat stands for everyman; it is universal, accessible, and unremarkable in form, yet extraordinary in function. This contrast highlights the ability of theatre to invest the mundane with profound meaning, transforming the everyday into the emblematic. On a broader level, the coat becomes a symbol of the interpersonal and intergenerational

transmission of trauma and hope. It embodies the resilience of communities torn apart by political violence, the bonds that persist despite separation, and the quiet rituals through which people maintain connection and identity. The coat is not just a memory object; it is a sign that travels, that speaks across distance and silence, and that sustains the presence of those who have been forcibly removed.

In a nutshell, this passage encapsulates the coat as a semantically rich object, central to the play's emotional and political structure. It operates as a collective memory device, passed from hand to hand, body to body, sustaining presence through absence and connecting individuals across separation. Through this act of symbolic transmission, *The Coat* affirms the enduring power of material signs to hold and share meaning, and to bear witness to human dignity in the face of erasure. The coat thus lives on not simply as clothing, but as a testament to survival, memory, and the shared burden of history.

### **3. A Structuring Dramaturgical Element and Organizer of Meaning**

Beyond its symbolic role, the coat plays a fundamental part in the very construction of the play. It structures the action, guides the interactions, and directs the audience's gaze. It becomes the dramaturgical center of gravity of the work: everything revolves around it, from the beginning to the final resolution. It is through the question, "What sort of coat was it?" (A. Fugard, 1993, 126) that the play's dramatic tensions unfold. The object creates a stake, an expectation, a decision to be made. In this sense, it functions as a driving force in the narrative. It does not remain fixed in a decorative role, but shapes the movement, the dialogue, and the silences. This central role reveals a highly precise narrative and scenic economy: in a stripped-down theatrical universe, where resources are limited, every sign matters. A. Fugard uses a single object to evoke an entire story, a whole social context, and to elicit deep emotions. The coat thus becomes the tool of a minimalist dramaturgy, where apparent simplicity conceals a remarkable richness of meaning. This is made especially clear in the following passage:

Lavrenti: What do you think she felt? Was she sad or ....

Jingi: Of course she was sad. She's lost her husband for five years.

Haemon: But remember she said she thought he might have got longer. She must have also been a little bit relieved.

Aniko: Can I work it out? Give me a chair.

*(Lavrenti moves forward Aniko's chair.)*

The Scene Where The Old Woman Is Alone With The Coat. When Marie left she hung it up... Ja !... and then she said a prayer

Thanks God it's all over. After waiting for so long, now I know I only have to wait for five years. It could have been longer. God, please give me strength to wait, and look after him in gaol. Thanks God. Ja, then she goes on with her housework. I' am alone in the house. I look at the coat, I think about the man. His name is Temba. Temba's coat (A. Fugard, 1993, pp. 128-129).

In this excerpt from *The Coat*, the dialogue among Lavrenti, Jingi, Haemon, and Aniko illustrates the transformation of the coat from a symbolic object into a dramaturgical axis, around which both character development and audience interpretation are organized. The coat is no longer a passive object with symbolic overtones; it becomes a performative and structuring device, shaping the dramatic flow, emotional trajectory, and thematic depth of the scene. Lavrenti's initial question, "What do you think she felt?" invites the group into a speculative exploration of emotion. This speculative framing is significant because it indicates that the dramatic process is collaborative, interpretive, and open-ended. The characters are not simply relaying a pre-written script; they are constructing meaning through rehearsal, improvisation, and embodiment. In this context, the coat becomes a catalyst for theatrical creation, prompting the actors to fill the silence of absence with interpretive presence.

Jingi and Haemon's responses introduce emotional ambiguity into the narrative: sadness, yes, but also relief. The duality of Marie's feelings, grief for her husband's imprisonment and relief that his sentence was not worse mirrors the dual symbolic charge of the coat itself. It is an emblem of loss, but also of endurance and hope. This ambivalence is what allows the coat to function as a rich and polyvalent sign within the dramaturgical structure. It supports multiple interpretations, inviting the performers and by extension, the audience to engage with layered emotional truths. Aniko's request, "Can I work it out? Give me a chair" (A. Fugard, 1993, p. 129) marks a critical dramaturgical shift. She takes agency not only as a character but as a co-creator of the scene. Her movement from analysis to embodiment transforms the coat from a static referent into an active dramaturgical locus. In asking for a chair and initiating a new scene, "The Scene Where The Old Woman Is Alone With the Coat", Aniko effectively introduces a metatheatrical moment, where the performance reflects on itself as an act of meaning-making. The coat becomes a narrative hinge, enabling a transition from discussion to enactment, from external commentary to internal experience.

Moreover, when Aniko says, "I look at the coat, I think about the man. His name is Temba. Temba's coat" (A. Fugard, 1993, p.129), the coat assumes identity-forming power. It individualizes memory, assigning a name and narrative to an otherwise anonymous or collective suffering. Naming the man "Temba" not only gives specificity to the absent subject but cements the coat as a bearer of personal history. This personalization reinforces the dramaturgical role of the coat: it anchors a dispersed and silenced life into the reality of the stage, allowing memory to become visible, nameable, and shareable. From a theatrical standpoint, the coat also functions as a structuring principle. Its presence initiates scenes, prompts emotional responses, and structures the flow of dramatic time. In this instance, the coat is the reason the scene exists; it is the core around which the performance revolves. Aniko's improvisation would not occur without it. It organizes space (as seen when the chair is moved), generates action (through the silent dialogue between character and object), and articulates

time (five years to wait). The coat structures both the physical stage space and the temporal-emotional landscape of the scene.

In addition, the coat performs a linking function within the broader dramaturgy of the play. It connects off-stage realities (the imprisonment, the man's absence, political repression) to on-stage moments of reflection, enactment, and resilience. The absence of the man is dramatized not by his physical presence or dialogue, but through the presence of the coat, which becomes a theatrical surrogate, silent, yet fully expressive. In clear, this passage highlights the coat's function as more than a symbolic or narrative device; it is a dramaturgical engine. It not only drives the scene but also generates structure, organizes emotion, and produces meaning. The coat becomes a site of convergence where memory, absence, performance, and identity intersect. Through it, *The Coat* redefines the role of the inanimate in drama, showing how an object can shape dramaturgy, channel affect, and sustain the presence of what is no longer visible.

## **Conclusion**

This study has set out to examine the symbolic power of the coat in Athol Fugard's *The Coat*, to understand how a single object can function simultaneously as a dramatic device, a carrier of collective memory, and a site of political meaning. Through a semiotic and dramaturgical analysis, the research explored the multifaceted role of the coat—not merely as a prop, but as a vital sign that embodies absence, enacts memory, and mediates historical trauma within a minimalist theatrical framework. The analysis demonstrated that the coat operates as a symbolic vessel that carries profound emotional, ideological, and political significance. It was shown that Fugard's use of the object allows for a concentrated semiotic economy, where meaning is generated through repetition, interaction, and silence. The coat emerges as a performative archive, a surrogate presence for the silenced and disappeared, and a dramaturgical anchor around which the play's narrative and emotional resonance revolve.

These findings reveal that *The Coat* is not only a product of theatrical innovation but also a politically charged intervention. Fugard's symbolic use of an inanimate object underscores the ontological power of theatre to transform silence into speech and absence into presence. The study highlights how material simplicity can produce interpretive and emotional complexity, thereby affirming the potential of objects in theatre to engage with memory, resistance, and identity. From an academic perspective, this analysis contributes to broader discussions in performance studies, memory studies, and political theatre, offering a model for examining the semiotic and dramaturgical function of objects on stage. Socially, the findings emphasize the importance of symbolic representation in contexts of historical violence and erasure, pointing to theatre's capacity to serve as a space for collective remembrance and ideological critique. This approach invites further research into the symbolic agency of objects in postcolonial, resistance, and testimonial theatre traditions.

### References

- FUGARD Athol, 1993, *Township Plays*, Oxford/ England, Oxford University Press.
- KRUGER Loren, 1999, *The Drama of South Africa: Plays, Pageants, and Politics Since 1910*, New York, Routledge.
- OBOU Louis, 2023, *Kriticos: Immersion into Literary Theories*, Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire, Inidaf Editions.
- PAVIS Patrice, 2003, *Analyzing Performance: Theater, Dance, and Film*, Michigan, University of Michigan Press.
- LEHMANN Hans-Thies, 2006, *Postdramatic Theatre*, Translated by K. Jürs-Munby, London, Routledge.
- PEIRCE Charles Sanders, 1991, *Peirce on Signs: Writings on Semiotic*, (J. Hoopes, Ed.), North Carolina, University of North Carolina Press.
- WALDER Dennis, 1993, "Crossing Boundaries: The Genesis of the Township Plays", in *Twentieth Century Literature*, Vol. 39, No 4, Hempstead, NY: Hofstra University Press, pp. 409-422.