

The Cenci Study Guide

The Cenci by Antonin Artaud

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Author Biography

Antonin Artaud is a French writer, actor, and intellectual figure as well known for his supposed madness and troubled genius as for his prolific output of writings, plays, films, and drawings. Although he suffered from mental illness and spent a great deal of his life in sanitariums, he is far more respected for his artistic and intellectual innovations than for his biographical mystique.

Born September 4, 1896, in Marseilles, France, to a Catholic family, Antonin Artaud was raised mainly by his mother, his grandmothers, and his governess, because his father, a shipfitter, was frequently away on business. Artaud contracted a severe case of meningitis at age four, and as a result he suffered throughout the rest of his life from neuralgia, a condition characterized by sharp and intense pains in nerve centers. At age seventeen, he became depressed, destroyed the manuscripts of his early work, and withdrew from school. In 1915, he was sent to a sanatorium near Marseilles.

Artaud spent a short amount of time in the army in 1916, but was quickly discharged. He spent the next four years living in various sanitariums, reading and drawing. In 1920, he expressed a desire to live and write in Paris, and his parents referred him to a leading psychotherapist named Edouard Toulouse, who was also the editor of a literary magazine called *Demain*, which published some of Artaud's work. Artaud began to work as a theatre and film actor in 1922, and in 1923, he published his first book of poetry, *Tric trac du ciel* (Backgammon of Heaven). He wrote a variety of prose works throughout his acting career, and he became a leading figure in the surrealist movement, until he was expelled from it in 1926. Meanwhile, he began a sexual relationship with a Romanian actress named Génica Athanasiou, but due to an addiction to opiates and other drugs he had developed, the relationship ended in 1927.

From 1927 through the early 1930s, Artaud concentrated on translating his theoretical work for the film industry, writing a variety of scripts while continuing to act. He attempted to launch a theatre company, Théâtre Alfred Jarry, with several friends, and composed two books characterized by extreme violence. In the early 1930s, Artaud began to write the essays that would be included in *The Theatre and Its Double* (1938), which criticizes the Western theatre conventions of the day and characterizes what came to be known as Theatre of Cruelty. Perhaps Artaud's most groundbreaking innovation, Theatre of Cruelty combines elaborate lighting, props, and magic tricks with violent themes that included rape, murder, and torture. It was intended to shock the audience and force them to confront the seamier side of life. Artaud's play *The Cenci*, first performed in 1935, is his best-known work that follows these conventions.

Artaud drifted around to various hotels in Paris, and in 1936, he made three trips to Mexico to study the Tarahumara Indian tribe and to explore his interest in primitivism. In August 1937, in a state of worsening psychosis, he traveled to Ireland. In September that same year, he was expelled from Ireland, restrained, and placed in a French asylum. Artaud spent the duration of World War II in various asylums, undergoing a complex religious conversion. In 1943, he was put through several courses of



electroshock therapy. Afterward, he began to write prodigious amounts of material, much of which remains incomprehensible to most readers, including rewrites of classical Western texts; ambitious philosophical theory; autobiographical tales; and fantastical, often violent, narratives. He was released from Rodez Asylum in 1946, and he died of cancer in 1948.



Summary and Analysis

Act 1

The Cenci begins with Cardinal Camillo talking with the powerful Count Cenci about a murder in which Cenci is implicated. Camillo threatens to publicly proclaim the crime unless Cenci gives a third of his possessions to the Pope, but Cenci refuses, jeers at the Church, and stresses his desire to "practice evil." When Camillo leaves, Cenci expands on his desires, suggesting that he wants to kill his wife and two of his sons, as well as rape his daughter Beatrice.

In the next scene, Beatrice is with her lover Orsino in a moonlit garden in the Cenci palace. Beatrice laments that her father is keeping them apart, but when Orsino vows to overcome all obstacles for their love, Beatrice tells him that their love is doomed because of her duty to her family. She then expresses her loathing for her father and departs for dinner.

At the dinner, Cenci frightens his guests by telling them that two of his "rebellious" sons have been killed and that he wishes his entire family doom and destruction. Beatrice begs the guests not to leave, and Cenci threatens to kill anyone's offspring who says anything about what has happened at dinner. Cenci orders everyone away except Beatrice, whom he approaches and tells that he knows the "charm" to make her "meek and tame." Beatrice flees and Cenci says that now she cannot escape him.

Act 2

The second act begins with Lucretia telling Bernardo that she loves him, at which time Beatrice enters and asks for help in escaping from Cenci. Beatrice describes how Cenci is torturing her and her brother. Cenci enters and seizes Beatrice by the arm, but Lucretia steps between them and Bernardo drags his sister out of the room. Cenci tells his wife that his family is a wound, that they have "corrupted everything," and that they are plotting against him. Lucretia protests, but Cenci tells her he is taking the family to a silent fortress.

In act 2, scene 2, Camillo attempts to persuade Giacomo Cenci to plot against his father, but Giacomo retorts with criticism of the Church. Camillo then urges him to listen to Orsino, who reveals to the audience that he has abandoned his hopes to marry Beatrice and that he desires to see the Cenci family destroyed. Orsino describes Cenci's tyranny to Giacomo and persuades him to plot a scheme against the count.

Act 3

Act 3 begins with Beatrice rushing onstage to tell Lucretia that her father has raped her. Lucretia attempts to return her to her senses, and Beatrice describes a recurring dream



from her childhood in which she is lying naked and hungry in a room until a wild animal appears and chases her through the cellars. Lucretia says that the dream signifies that "no one can escape his fate," and she appeals to Orsino for help when he enters with Giacomo. Orsino suggests that they appeal to secular justice, or justice outside of papal authority, but Beatrice says that she can believe only in the justice that she chooses. Orsino suggests that Giacomo publicly denounce his father and that they employ two mute assassins to kill Cenci.

In the next scene, Orsino, Giacomo, and the assassins wait outside the fortress for Cenci and his family to cross the bridge. When the family appears, the assassins descend upon Cenci and fire two pistol shots, but they fail to kill him.

Act 4

The final act opens with Cenci ordering Lucretia to find Beatrice. Cenci withdraws, and Beatrice sends the assassins into his room with daggers. They come out and mime to Beatrice that they have failed. She calls them cowards, sending them back in again. After Cenci's death cry is heard, the assassins return to Beatrice, who gives them money and gold.

After Bernardo warns that soldiers are coming, Camillo enters telling them that he represents the Pope. When he asks to see Cenci, Lucretia and Beatrice tell him that the count is sleeping, but Camillo says that he must wake Cenci so that Cenci can be confronted with grave charges against him. After Camillo finds Cenci dead, he has his guards arrest the family. Lucretia blurts out that she is the only one with keys to Cenci's apartment, and Camillo questions Beatrice about her relationship with her father. The guards remove Bernardo from his sister, and he punches at them, screaming.

The next scene is inside a papal prison in which Beatrice is attached to a torture wheel. Bernardo laments their fate and Beatrice tells him not to despair. Camillo enters and tells Beatrice to confess, and Lucretia urges her to repent. Giacomo agrees, telling her that Orsino has escaped in disguise, and Camillo hands her a death warrant to sign. Beatrice compares the Pope's cruelty to her father's, and Camillo tells her that she is already condemned. After Camillo makes her sign the death warrant, Beatrice tells him never to mention the name of God to her again. Camillo tells Bernardo that his life is spared, and Beatrice and Lucretia alternate segments of a speech about morality, religion, destiny, and their impending deaths.



Characters

Andrea

Andrea is Cenci's servant.

Assassins

The two mute assassins employed to kill Cenci make two unsuccessful attempts before murdering the count. Orsini, who describes them as "brutish, dull-witted scoundrels who would kill a man as unthinkingly as we might tear a piece of paper in two." The reason the assassins fail twice in their attempted murder of Cenci seems to be a combination of incompetence and cowardice rather than any feelings of guilt or conscience. After Camillo catches them, they provide written confessions condemning themselves to execution.

Banquet Guests

Beatrice describes the guests at Cenci's dinner table in act 1, scene 3 as "all the chief nobility of Rome." They become increasingly horrified and afraid as the situation worsens; they ignore Beatrice's plea to protect her; and they leave as soon as Cenci bids them to do so. Prince Colonna, the only character besides Camillo who makes an attempt to face up to Cenci, is among the guests.

Camillo

A cardinal close to the Pope, Camillo is a shrewd and pragmatic figure who admits that the Catholic Church is rooted in cynicism. Although he does not have any fervent moral or religious convictions and does not believe in God, he is a figure of moral and religious authority in the play. He bargains with Cenci over his land and his criminal deeds; he nearly stands up to Cenci at dinner; he persuades Giacomo to plot against his father; and he investigates Cenci's murder, presiding over the execution of Lucretia, Beatrice, and Giacomo. Orsino calls him a "spoiled priest," and ultimately he is revealed to be a hypocrite, since he is willing to cover up a murder for a price and to urge a son to murder his father, but he is unwilling to have any mercy on Beatrice or the rest of the Cenci family for their complicity in Cenci's murder. Camillo's character can be seen to represent the corruption and power of the Catholic Church.

Beatrice Cenci

Beatrice is Cenci's daughter, and the play centers on her torture, rape, and execution. Because her father reduces her to desperate circumstances, she abandons her



relationship with Orsino and places her duty to her family as her top priority. She refuses to trust secular or religious justice to deal with her cruel father, and this decision is justified by the fact that the religious and civil figures of power at Cenci's banquet fail to protect her in any way. Beatrice therefore conspires to have her father assassinated, and for this she is imprisoned and executed. She never comes to feel guilt or regret and she never repents for her actions, which is why Camillo has her tortured before she is executed.

One of Beatrice's defining characteristics is her sense of spirituality, which Orsino calls "intolerable mysticism." She is able to anticipate future events, based on her understanding of her father's character but also based on what appears to be a kind of psychic foreknowledge. Beatrice's attitude toward religion changes and evolves throughout the play; at first she is convinced that God would not allow Cenci's crimes to happen, but she comes to rebel against all kinds of authority, including God, since she tells Camillo never to mention God's name to her again.

Beatrice considers her duty to her family her most important value, but it later becomes clear that this is somewhat at odds with her rejection of tyrannical authority figures such as her father. By the end of the play, after her recognition that no one, including herself, has chosen between good and evil, Beatrice says that she fears that she has ended by resembling her father. This idea is particularly intriguing given that she appears to be so virtuous while Cenci appears to be so evil, and it reinforces the sense of moral upheaval in the play.

Bernardo Cenci

Bernardo is Cenci's youngest son, whom Cenci calls womanish and plans to leave alive so that he can bemoan the rest of his family. He is extremely close to Beatrice and attempts to protect and defend her as far as he is able. When he is taken away from his sister by Camillo's guards after Cenci's death, he reacts violently, screaming, "They have sacrificed my soul," and in prison, he kisses Beatrice and clings to her desperately. Despite the fact that Bernardo is involved in the murder plot, Camillo spares his life because he is too young. When he hears that he will survive, Bernardo despairs that he must live when the "flame which lit [his] life," or Beatrice, is about to die.

Count Cenci

Cenci is the villain of the play, intent on torturing and destroying his family. He continually desires to be shocking and cruel, and his mission in life is to commit evil crimes. He glories in the deaths of two of his sons, terrifies the guests at his banquet, antagonizes Lucretia, harasses Bernardo, disinherits Giacomo, and rapes Beatrice. Although he is powerful and well connected, he does not seem to have any friends or allies, and he believes that his family is plotting against him even before they begin the plot to assassinate him. He is murdered on the third attempt by the assassins who Orsino has located for the family.



A master at horrifying others, Cenci seems to feel alive only when he is engaging in a form of cruelty. Although the reasons behind this cruelty remain somewhat unclear, he stresses that his impulses stretch to the root of his soul and character. He is not religious, but he believes that he is a force of destiny and nature, an ultimate figure of authority, power, and subjugation.

To understand Cenci's character, it is important to remember that Artaud's convention in *The Cenci* is that characters say whatever they feel, and often go beyond what they would realistically realize about themselves. Therefore, the vividness and extremity of Cenci's cruelty, as he expresses it in language, is intended to be a reflection of his true nature more so than it is intended to reproduce a realistic character's speech. Cenci is a bitter and vicious old father figure, and it is likely that he is a representation of the essential nature of paternal, civil, and financial authority. If this is the case, he shows no remorse and no restraint, because he embodies a power structure and a moral system that Artaud considers fundamentally tyrannical, arbitrary, and unjust.

Giacomo Cenci

One of Cenci's older sons, Giacomo is involved in the plot to murder his father. He is angry at his father because the count has disinherited him, and he agrees to plot against Cenci after he hears that his father is torturing Beatrice and Lucretia. During his conversation with Camillo, Giacomo reveals his distaste for the Catholic Church and for what he calls its faithless cynicism, but he heeds the cardinal's advice to plot against Cenci. Convinced by Orsino, he goes along with the scheme despite a comment at the end of act 3 that reveals his disillusionment with Beatrice's notion of personal justice: "Family, gold, justice: I despise them all."

Lucretia Cenci

Lucretia is Cenci's somewhat-timid second wife. She loves Cenci's children despite the fact that she is not their biological mother, and she tries to calm Cenci and maintain peace in the household. While comforting Bernardo, she reveals that she has suffered in her life and is a sensitive woman. She is a devout Christian throughout the play, often referring to God and making the sign of the cross. Unlike Beatrice, she does not seem to anticipate Cenci's evil actions, although she does come to recognize the full extent of his cruelty and she participates in the plot to kill him. She foolishly confirms Camillo's suspicions about the family's involvement in Cenci's murder by saying that she alone has the keys to his apartment and that no one could have entered without her knowledge. This contributes to her imprisonment and execution.

Prince Colonna

See Banquet Guests



Orsino

Beatrice's lover at the beginning of the play, Orsino was ordained as a priest but is willing to break his vows out of love for her. After Beatrice informs him that her duty to her family takes precedence over their love, and after he is shocked by Cenci's actions, Orsino turns against the family and does what he can to help them destroy each other. In act 2, scene 2, Orsino describes Beatrice as brooding in an "intolerable mysticism," referring in part to her foresight of the horrific events of the play, and he proposes that Giacomo defy the law and act against Cenci's tyranny. His motive, as he reveals in this scene, is simply to see the family ruined, and toward this end, he provides two mute assassins to allow Beatrice and the others to have Cenci killed. In Percy Bysshe Shelley's version of the story, Orsino plots to have Cenci killed so that he can win and marry Beatrice, but in Artaud's version, Orsino seems interested only in the destruction of the entire family. After Cenci's death, Orsino manages to escape, disguised as a charcoal seller, and at the end of the play he is presumably still fleeing from the Pope's soldiers.



Themes

Morality and Religion

One of the intriguing and potentially confusing aspects of Artaud's play is its treatment of religion and morality. It is important to recognize that *The Cenci* is largely absent of religious and moral values in the sense that they control the actions of the characters. Some characters, such as Beatrice and Lucretia, believe in God and cling to a conventionally moralistic view of the world, but their basic moral values and religious convictions begin to erode once they are exposed to the full extent of Cenci's tyranny. Artaud is concerned with the eruption of fundamental, amoral forces in the play, in accordance with his philosophy about the Theatre of Cruelty and its guidelines for shocking the audience and capturing its imagination.

In a sense, therefore, the play portrays the Catholic Church less as a faith-based organization than as an institution of cynical and amoral power. This is why neither Camillo nor the Pope is particularly concerned with God or with divine justice. Similarly, the moral beliefs of characters such as Cenci or even Beatrice are not organized into a wider philosophy, but are expressions of the most fundamental aspects of their characters and the natural forces behind them. Cenci, Beatrice, and Orsino have no interest in civil justice, and they all decide to take matters into their own hands. Even the representatives of civil authority, the guests at Cenci's dinner banquet, are unconcerned with saving Beatrice or punishing Cenci; like Camillo, they seem to care only about saving themselves and increasing their own power.

The amoral and irreligious atmosphere of the play allows Artaud to more fully explore the basic and natural elements of human ethics and theology. In a sense, Artaud is able to reveal the true nature of his characters by putting aside their social and personal value systems, and in another sense, he is able to examine the nonhuman, or superhuman, forces that he sees in the world, since the characters of *The Cenci* are intended to represent natural forces more than realistic individuals. However, Artaud may also be suggesting that Christianity and Western moral philosophy lack truth and conviction, which is why they have no place in his play.

Tyranny and Authority

The central action in *The Cenci* is found in the cruel actions of authority figures. Artaud examines the fundamental nature of power, particularly the power of the father, as it is unleashed on its subjects and as they respond to it. The conflict between Cenci and his family is the chief example of this theme; the count's entire life is based on torturing his family, and the events of the play follow the family's violent reaction to this behavior. Camillo, and by extension the Pope and the Catholic Church, are also important examples of authoritative power. Artaud broadens his exploration of the themes of



authority, tyranny, and rebellion by examining the struggle between the Church and Cenci, as well as the Church's imposition of its moral sentence over Cenci's family.

Authority is always cruel, tyrannical, and unjust in this play, and Artaud seems to be suggesting that these characteristics are inevitable in any institution of power. As discussed above, the characters of *The Cenci* are not bound by conventional morality, and figures of power, such as Cenci, go to extremes that do not seem possible or comprehensible for a real person. However, Cenci stresses early in the play that his desire for annihilation comes from his fundamental nature, as if it is inevitable in the idea of authority and he has merely decided to suppress it no longer. Perhaps this is why Orsino, with his treachery against Beatrice, and Camillo, with his cynical and hypocritical cruelty, are capable of slightly more realistic versions of treachery; the play may be an effort to bring to light the cruelty that is fundamental to all power. This reading of the play would also help explain Beatrice's assertion in the play's final line that she has ended by resembling her father; her imposition of power by having her father assassinated is similar to the tyrannical violence and cruelty that Cenci inflicted upon her.

Style

Style

Myth and the Superhuman

Although it may not appear to be much like what is commonly thought of as myth, *The Cenci* is intended to follow the tradition of ancient Greek and Roman mythology. Artaud's play does not provide an explanation or a justification of a natural event, such as why there are seasons or rainbows, but it does attempt to make insights into the fundamental aspects of nature, humanity, and existence. It can therefore be considered a myth in the sense that it identifies natural, universal forces such as cruelty and rebellion, and dramatizes their effects on a particular situation.

Like a Greek myth, Artaud's play includes characters that can be considered superhuman, or at least nonhuman in the sense that they do not have entirely realistic personalities and do not express themselves in ordinary language. Instead, Artaud's characters act as though powerful and fundamental forces are working through them, and they often speak in a hyperconscious manner that reveals what is at the base of their desires. Artaud believed that this format was an important aspect of the Theatre of Cruelty, allowing the characters to express their true feelings and desires much more fully than is possible in normal human speech. Thus, for example, Cenci refers to the "myth" of himself and says unreservedly that he must allow the evil at the root of his soul to manifest itself. Although it is implausible that a real person would act or speak in this way, Artaud's characterization of Cenci in these terms allows the character to more fully express the pure and universal force of tyranny.

Gesture, Light, and Sound

Artaud believed that his stage directions about gesture, light, and sound were as critical as the dialogue in *The Cenci* because the all-sensory experience of the audience is of chief importance in the Theatre of Cruelty. It is therefore important to pay close attention to these directions in an analysis of the play's style. For example, when Beatrice and Cenci interact physically or exchange a glance, it raises the stakes of the situation and is as important in the development of their relationship as an entire speech. Other sounds, images, and dances, such as the armor-clad men moving slowly "like the figures on the face of the great clock of Strasbourg Cathedral," enhance the atmosphere of the scene, while at the same time determining its meaning and context. Perhaps the most important reason that Artaud uses elaborate and flashy gestures, light, and sound in his play, however, is to overwhelm the audience and shock it out of its preconceptions.



Historical Context

French Culture in the 1920s and 1930s

French literary and artistic culture went through dramatic and marked changes in the early twentieth century. Inspired by drastic and even cataclysmic events such as World War I, writers and artists entered new modes and broke ties with the past. A number of movements and philosophies were founded in the postwar years, including Dadaism. An artistic movement based on irrationality, cynicism, and the rejection of conventional aesthetics, Dadaism lost its impetus by the beginning of the 1930s. Many former Dadaists became involved in the surrealist movement, which was led by the influential poet and literary critic André Breton. Surrealism dismissed rationality and incorporated elements of fantasy and the supernatural into art, literature, and drama, in order to construct a positive and absolute reality, or a superreality.

By the early 1920s, Artaud had become a prominent figure in the surrealist movement, contributing vigorously to the debate about what constituted the surrealist way of thinking. In 1926, however, he was expelled from the movement, ostensibly as a result of his attempt to launch a commercial theatre, at a time when Breton's surrealist movement had recently become explicitly communist. An equally, or perhaps more important, reason for Artaud's expulsion may have been that Artaud's work was always somewhat more violent, alienated, and negativistic than that of Breton and the other central figures.

Artaud never reconciled with the surrealists, and between 1927 and 1931, he experimented with varying theories and philosophies, becoming more involved in the cinema and the theatre. In 1931, he saw a performance of Balinese dance theatre—a form of theatre in which gesture is extremely important to the expression of supernatural and philosophical themes. This experience inspired Artaud to develop the Theatre of Cruelty, which provides the theoretical foundation for *The Cenci* and is described in a series of Artaud's articles from the early 1930s that later were published collectively as *The Theatre and Its Double*.

Late-Sixteenth-Century Rome and the Cenci Family

The storyline of Artaud's play is based in part on the powerful Roman nobleman, Francesco Cenci, and his family. Cenci was known for his cruelty, particularly toward his twelve children, and after a violent quarrel in 1595, he locked Beatrice Cenci and her stepmother in a remote castle between Rome and Naples. Beatrice tried unsuccessfully to escape; began a relationship with the keeper of the castle; and eventually conspired with her lover, her stepmother, and two of her brothers to murder Cenci. When the plotters were discovered, all of them confessed under torture and were condemned to death by a papal court. Their story became famous and has been the subject of plays, paintings, and prose.



All of these events took place during what is known as the counterreformation movement, a response by the Roman Catholic Church to the Protestant Reformation and to the liberal ideas of humanism. Revolutionary ideas about religion and morality spread rapidly through Europe in the early sixteenth century, and the Catholic Church began to organize a number of efforts to reassert its dominance. Implemented chiefly by the Council of Trent (1545—1563) and popes through the early seventeenth century, proponents of the counterreformation spread conservative ideas; combated Protestantism; and burnt heretics at the stake. Rome itself, which was and is the home of the Catholic Church, was a prosperous city at the end of the sixteenth century, although its nobility was often in conflict with papal authority over legal rights and ownership.

Critical Overview

Although Artaud was periodically in vogue with various artistic and intellectual groups, he was never widely accepted or understood during his lifetime. *The Cenci* was one of his great disappointments, attacked and reviled by the critical community. As Naomi Greene writes in her book *Antonin Artaud: Poet without Words*, "The critical reviews were harsh, with the notable exception of Pierre Jean Jouve, who believed that *Les Cenci* had greatly affected its audience." Produced five years after the failure of Artaud's theatre company Théâtre Alfred Jarry, *The Cenci* closed after just seventeen performances, and its harsh reviews helped to drive Artaud from the theatre for the rest of his life.

Since Artaud's death in 1948, *The Cenci* has become increasingly well regarded among critics. It is his only play to espouse the philosophy of the Theatre of Cruelty, which he established in his most famous work, *The Theatre and Its Double*. By the 1960s, the critical community generally viewed *The Cenci* as a work of major importance in the development of modern drama. Critics, such as Martin Esslin in his study *Antonin Artaud: The Man and His Work*, helped to reestablish Artaud's reputation and place *The Cenci* into the context of his overall life and career, while critics such as Jacques Derrida have discussed how Artaud's work relates to later developments in poststructuralist theory.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1



Critical Essay #1

Trudell is an independent scholar with a bachelor's degree in English literature. In the following essay, Trudell discusses how the overwhelming sensory experience of The Cenci challenges its audience's moral convictions.

The Cenci is clearly intended to be a shocking play. Artaud chooses a horrific story for his subject and, unlike Percy Bysshe Shelley in his version of the story, includes no condemnation of the immorality of the characters. In fact, Artaud emphasizes that Beatrice, Camillo, Orsino, and the other characters are much more similar to Cenci than they first appear, since none of them are bound by any system of moral rules. In accordance with Artaud's theory of the Theatre of Cruelty, they are like universal forces acting on the basis of fundamental convictions and desires, and they pay no heed to any moral or religious guidelines. The play creates an atmosphere in which morals do not exist, partly in order to dismiss the distracting human constructs of ethics and religion so it is possible to examine more closely the basic realities of the world.

The Cenci does not sidestep a moral debate, however; it challenges its audiences' morals very directly and asks them to reevaluate their assumptions about what, for example, cruelty, evil, innocence, and goodness actually are. Artaud criticizes and attacks the moral codes of a variety of institutions and personalities, including the Catholic Church, civil authority, rebellious and self-righteous youth, and bitter lovers. In fact, his play implicitly condemns as absurd all forms of moral conventionality. The audience of *The Cenci* is left with a sense that ethical systems are simply arbitrary rules based on the whims of those in power. With a variety of techniques fashioned to overwhelm his audience and force them to look at the roots of the convictions that they take for granted, Artaud suggests that human ethics is a fundamentally unjustified endeavor with no basis in universal truth.

One of the most important methods by which Artaud establishes this view is his unique and innovative dramatic style, rooted in his theory of the Theatre of Cruelty. *The Cenci* may be a difficult play to enjoy or appreciate because at first it seems rather unrealistic, with characters speaking lines that make them sound very little like actual people and acting in extremes implausible for ordinary people. The intention of Artaud's play, however, is not just to be real, but hyper-real, or super-real—to go beyond what is normally considered reality by transcending the ordinary and the realistic. Artaud was a firm believer in the idea that the theatre should not be weighed down by the constraints of everyday reality, and he worked hard to create a raw and extreme world that is not fantastical or artificial at all.

The Theatre of Cruelty brings this super-reality to the audience is its call for extreme and brutal dramatic action. The evils and horrors that occur in the play are larger than life; they are outside the normal realm of human experience and yet, like the events of an ancient Greek tragedy, they are meant to display the roots of human psychology. This is why Cenci self-consciously characterizes his evil plots as an intrusion into real



life, as if he realizes that he a character in a play and is stating his intention to break this barrier. Cenci states:

The great difference between the villainies committed in real life and the villainies acted out on the stage is that in real life we do more and say less, while in the theater we talk endlessly and accomplish very little. Well, I shall restore the balance, and I shall restore it at the expense of real life.

This quote emphasizes that Artaud will go to great lengths to come closer to reality than is possible in more conventional forms of drama. In his article "What the tragedy *The Cenci* at the Folies-Wagram will be about," reprinted in the 1970 Grove Press edition of the play, Artaud describes his style as a response to the tendency of his era "to forget to wake up." Artaud writes: "I have attempted to give a jolt to this hypnotic sleep by direct physical means. Which is why everything in my play turns, and why each character has his particular cry." This hypnotic sleep, Artaud implies, is a moral and ethical sleep, since earlier in the article he refers to the "pettifogging [insignificant quibbling] human distinctions between good and evil" and he contrasts this moral pettiness with the "fabulous amorality" of the ancient Greek and Roman gods. *The Cenci* attempts to shock audiences out of their ethical complacency, something that Artaud disdained and despised, by overwhelming them with the primeval and brutal amorality of the world.

Artaud accomplishes this goal not just by dramatizing an extreme and violent plot, but by stressing the amorality of all of his characters. Cenci is the most extreme character in pursuing his personal and amoral will, but as the play progresses it becomes clear that all of the major characters allow their basic, fundamental desires to overcome conventional moral rules. This is why Beatrice has no interest in prosecuting Cenci under civil law; why she utters the key phrase, "From now on I can believe only in the justice I myself shall choose"; and why in the final lines of the play she reveals that "I fear that death may teach me that I have ended by resembling him." It is also why Orsino can suddenly shift from loving Beatrice to desiring to destroy her and her family, and it is why Camillo, a cardinal very close to the Pope, can say that he does not believe in God. These are characters defined not by social, religious, or ethical codes, but by basic, amoral impulses.

Cenci is the only character, however, with the possible exception of Camillo, who is completely amoral throughout the play and who experiences no profound change in his attitude toward morality. Characters such as Beatrice and Lucretia go through a process of disillusionment and evolution before they abandon their previous ideas of morality and justice and resort to basic amoral impulses to govern their actions. Lucretia's struggle is one of purposeful self-deception, by which she refuses to believe that Cenci is as cruel as evidence has proven him to be. Like Beatrice, she believes in the religious morality of God's justice; both of them frequently invoke God's name and ask for God's help at the beginning of the play, as when Beatrice says to Cenci at the banquet, "No one can defy God's justice with impunity." Their faith begins to erode as the amorality of the world becomes clearer and clearer, however, and by the end of the play, Beatrice tells Camillo, "Let no one ever dare mention the name of God to me again."



Artaud intends for the audience to go through a similar religious disillusionment and to identify with Beatrice as a forthright character with whom they can share the journey to an acknowledgement of the fact that the world is Godless and amoral. She makes an effective protagonist because, unlike her father, she clearly has good reason to turn away from the conventional religious moral code. Thus she is a useful tool for expressing Artaud's amoral vision of the world, and she helps to add a dimension of atheism and anti-Catholic sentiment to the play.

Also important in this regard are the character of Camillo and Artaud's direct references to the Catholic Church. Beginning with the first scene of the play, when Camillo attempts to blackmail Cenci, Artaud attacks the Church as a faithless and hypocritical institution without substance or meaning. Camillo and the Pope have no moral or theological basis for their judgments; they care only about preserving and expanding their power and influence in a cynical and practical manner. This is an important and marked change from Shelley's drama, in which Camillo's character has great sympathy for Beatrice and vehemently argues her case before the Pope. In Artaud's version, Beatrice is completely abandoned by both civil and religious authority, as well as by her lover, and is left to suffer in a world where no benevolent morality exists.

Artaud's final touch in imposing his amoral worldview on the audience, and shaking them out of their ethical sleep so that they understand the meaninglessness of their moral systems, is the overwhelming confluence of sound, light, and movement that Artaud calls for in an authentic production of *The Cenci*. Artaud hoped that this shocking atmosphere would make the audience participate in the play through their nerves; he wanted to involve and implicate them in its events so that they would go through a similar moral breakdown as that of Beatrice. The style of the play is affronting enough to parallel Beatrice's violation by her father, which ultimately and ironically succeeds in convincing her of Cenci's worldview. Like Beatrice, the audience is intended to reject God and morality because Artaud, who played the role of Cenci in the original production, is violating them in a physical and oppressive manner. This agenda may make *The Cenci* difficult to appreciate or enjoy, but it forces its viewer to absorb Artaud's dark glimpse of the amoral reality at the root of the world.

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Source: Scott Trudell, Critical Essay on *The Cenci*, in *Drama for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2006.

Topics for Further Study

Discuss *The Cenci* in terms of the emotional response of its audience. In what ways is the play shocking? How do you think Artaud intended his audience to react to the play? How does he go about inspiring this response? In what ways does he succeed, and in what ways does he fail? Describe your reaction to the play, paying particular attention to how it shocked or disturbed you, and compare it with the reaction of your peers.

There are many myths and idealizations about Artaud's life. Research his biography, including his early life and his long battle with mental illness, and compare fact with fiction. How and why were the myths about Artaud developed? How did Artaud's health impact his artistic career? How was he perceived by his contemporaries and how has he been perceived by subsequent generations?

Read Artaud's famous book *The Theatre and Its Double* and research the Theatre of Cruelty that Artaud establishes in this work. What do you think of this theory? In what ways could *The Cenci* be considered an example of the Theatre of Cruelty? In what ways does it differ from the theory? How did Artaud's prominence as a theorist affect his work and how has it affected the response to his work?

Research the history of the real Cenci family. What is known about Francesco Cenci's personality and the personality of his daughter Beatrice? Why and how did they become famous? What were the conditions of sixteenth-century Rome? How is the history reflected accurately and how is it falsified or embellished in Artaud's play?

Research the theatrical elements of Artaud's original production of *The Cenci*. What did the set look like? What did he use to make the sounds? How did his emphasis on gesture, light, and sound come to fruition? Describe the experience of the performance and what it would have been like in the original audience. Discuss why you think audiences and critics, in general, originally had such an adverse reaction to the play.



Compare and Contrast

1590s: The Roman Catholic Church operates under the ordinances established at the Council of Trent. It is one of the most influential bodies in Europe and regains much of the power that it was in danger of losing during the Protestant Reformation.

1930s: Still working under essentially the same theological bases established at the Council of Trent, the Catholic Church is a powerful international organization, but it has much less direct political influence than it did in the sixteenth century.

Today: The Catholic Church continues to wield considerable influence across the globe and finds a growing membership in third-world countries.

1590s: Rome is again a prosperous and cosmopolitan city, having recovered from its sacking by Emperor Charles V in 1527.

1930s: Benito Mussolini's fascist government is centered in Rome, and he drastically rebuilds the city, damaging much of its architectural heritage.

Today: Still the capitol of Italy and the base of the Catholic Church, Rome is a unique and cosmopolitan city.

1590s: European theatre is considerably less prominent than it was during the Renaissance period, particularly in cities such as Rome and Paris where the Catholic Church determines what is morally acceptable.

1930s: The European theatre is undergoing major and important changes, particularly in Paris, as new theories about drama gain influence.

Today: Theatre remains an important part of European artistic and intellectual life, although, as in the United States, cinema draws larger crowds and is responsible for the most popular artistic innovations.

What Do I Read Next?

The Cenci (1819), Percy Bysshe Shelley's dramatization of the tragic fate of the Cenci family, is a masterful romantic play in blank verse, which influenced Artaud's version of the story.

André Breton's 1924 *Manifeste du surréalisme* (Surrealist Manifesto) is the seminal work on the surrealist movement, of which Artaud was a key member until he was expelled in 1926.

Heliogabale; ou, l'anarchiste couronné (Heliogabalus; or, The Anarchist Crowned) is Artaud's 1934 historical novel about the violent Roman emperor Heliogabalus. Some critics maintain that it exemplifies the ideals of the Theatre of Cruelty more fully than does *The Cenci*.

Samuel Beckett's fascinating play *Waiting for Godot* (1953), which seems to have no dramatic conflict or plot, is perhaps the most famous example of the Theatre of the Absurd, a dramatic movement that was influenced by Artaud's Theatre of Cruelty.

For Further Reading

Brustein, Robert, "Antonin Artaud and Jean Genet: The Theatre of Cruelty," in *The Theatre of Revolt: An Approach to Modern Drama*, Atlantic Little, Brown, 1964, pp. 361—412.

Brustein discusses Artaud's seminal work *The Theatre and Its Double*, which provides the philosophical and theoretical groundwork behind *The Cenci*.

Plunka, Gene A., ed., *Antonin Artaud and the Modern Theatre*, Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1994.

Plunka provides insight into Artaud's life and theories, then explores how Artaud's work relates to a variety of other twentieth-century dramatists.

Savarese, Nicola, "Antonin Artaud Sees Balinese Theatre at the Paris Colonial Exposition," in *TDR: The Drama Review*, Vol. 45, No. 3, pp. 51—77.

Savarese describes the Balinese dance theatre performed in Paris in 1931 and discusses Artaud's reaction to it. The performance was crucial to inspiring Artaud to establish his theory of the Theatre of Cruelty and to write *The Cenci*.

Sellin, Eric, *The Dramatic Concepts of Antonin Artaud*, University of Chicago Press, 1975.

After a brief sketch of Artaud's life, Sellin provides an explanation of Artaud's dramatic theory and influences, discussing at length the visual and auditory spectacle that Artaud developed in the original version of *The Cenci*.

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Artaud, Antonin, "What the Tragedy *The Cenci* at the Folies-Wagram Will Be About," in *The Cenci*, by Antonin Artaud, translated by Simon Watson-Taylor, Grove Press, 1970, pp. x—xii; originally published in *Le Figaro*, May 5, 1935.

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Greene, Naomi, *Antonin Artaud: Poet without Words*, Simon and Schuster, 1970, pp. 38—39.