

Invisible Characters in Shelley, Drabble, Salinger, and Beckett

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Introduction

There exists in literature characters who do not exist – they are invisible. These are characters who, usually, have names, a physical body, and a personal history the same as the visible characters. They are spoken about and sometimes communicated with, but they do not actually appear in the book themselves. They are visible only as characters in the book relate to them. They are, as Thomas Pynchon characterizes them in *Vineland*, noticeable by their “reverse presence.” (1)

Invisible characters seem to have four major functions. They are used as sounding boards for a major character; as a means to further the plot or the development of a character; they are used much like black holes in space: the visible characters orbit around them but they are never seen. Finally, invisible characters can be used as the main purpose of existence for the main character.

Frankenstein or A Modern Prometheus.

Paradoxically, the first page of Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley’s *Frankenstein* introduces a character that never appears in the book. The first page is a letter from Robert Walton to his sister, Margaret Saville. Walton is in St. Petersburg on the first leg of his attempt to discover the North Pole. He explains how he feels about being “far north of London;” that the cold wind “fills me with delight” and his “day dreams become more fervent and vivid.” Walton is setting out to travel to the North Pole where he hopes to discover magnetism and desires to set foot on “a land never before imprinted by the foot of man.” He also explains to Margaret in this first letter that the North Pole is where “snow and frost are banished” and he will find “a land surpassing in wonders and in beauty” (2) every land thus far discovered.

Also in this first letter, Walton describes how he came to want to explore the North Pole. He writes to his sister, “you may remember” (3) that their uncle’s library consisted of many history books that recounted the voyages of discovery. He felt “great regret” when he learned that his father’s dying wish was that Walton not be allowed to become a sailor.

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“You are well acquainted with my failure,” (4) Walton writes, about his attempt at being a poet. He also mentions he inherited his cousin’s fortune and thus, no longer being financially dependent on their uncle, Walton began his career as a sailor, accompanying “the whale-fishers... to the North Sea,” studying “mathematics, the theory of medicine and those branches of physical science ... a naval adventurer” could use. He also writes that he “commenced by inuring my body to hardship.” He also tells his sister why he is exploring the North Pole. “... I preferred glory to every enticement that wealth placed in my path.” (5)

In this first letter to his sister, then, the reader learns that Walton’s family is rich, that his father died forbidding Walton’s uncle from allowing Walton to make a career of the “sea-faring life.” We also learn that Walton’s cousin died and left him enough money to live “in ease and luxury.” All of these pieces of information, perhaps except for Walton’s desire for fame over fortune, Margaret Saville, his sister, probably knew. And Walton acknowledges that Margaret knows as evidenced by the “You may remember” and “You are well acquainted with...” phrases which Walton sprinkles in his correspondence. Saville, then, is being used as a sounding board for Walton and as an invisible character by which Shelley can relay information about Walton to the reader.

The entire novel, actually, is a letter to Margaret Saville, who, by the way, has the same initials as Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley. Is *Frankenstein* an early self-conscious novel – novels that are about novels? Did Mary Shelley intend for the reader to believe that Margaret Saville was Mary Shelley and that Robert Walton was writing to his creator? In *The Self-Conscious Novel: Artifice in Fiction from Joyce to Pynchon* Brian Stonehill lists the characteristics of the self-conscious novel, among them “characters aware of their fictional status; addressing their author...” (6) Or is *Frankenstein* a “novel [is] written by the author to an audience of one, herself,” as Anne K. Mellor suggests. (7)

Margaret Saville is the device Shelley used to convey information and background about Walton and the rest of the characters in the book to the reader. Saville never replies and Walton gives us no clues as to her status, her physical description or even where she lives. She is truly invisible.

The Millstone

Margaret Saville receives but does not reply to letters, but Rosamund Stacey’s parents do. Rather, Rosamund writes letters to them and only her father replies. Her mother is as Margaret Saville: completely invisible. In *The Millstone*, Margaret Drabble uses her invisible characters as a means to develop the main character, Rosamund.

Early in *The Millstone* Rosamund states that her father, a professor of economics, had accepted a post at a new university in Africa and that her parents have allowed her to live in their apartment for the year that they will be gone. Both of her parents disapproved, like good socialists, of profiting from property. “...they could have let [their apartment] for a lot of money.” (8) Instead

they let Rosamund live in it rent-free. Rosamund also says her parents believed in independence. "They had drummed the idea of self-reliance into me so thoroughly that I believed dependence to be a fatal sin." (9)

Throughout the novel, Rosamund displays the independence that her parents have instilled in her. She also shows "...I am my parents' daughter..." (10) She chooses, for example, to practice abstinence instead of having casual sexual affairs like her friends. She also chooses to have a career as an academic (she is finishing her thesis on Elizabethan sonnets) over having a family. When she finds herself pregnant, after her first sexual encounter, she determines to have it without the aide of the child's father, her friends, or her family.

When she writes to her sister about the pregnancy it is only after she has gone to get her first pre-natal exam and arranged for a female friend to live in her apartment as a way of saving money. She is writing her sister not so much as a plead for help but for sympathy. Rosamund is quite "proud of the way I had managed" (11) to organize her life around her pregnancy.

However, she does not write to her parents. Even after her child, Octavia, requires an operation, she does not write to them. Her father, however, writes to her to say that he and his wife will not be returning to London but will be working in India. Then, he adds: "I had a letter from our old friend Dick Protheroe [Rosamund's gynecologist] last week, who says he has been seeing something of you." (12) This is his way of letting Rosamund know that he is aware she has had a child. This is also the only occurrence in which either of Rosamund's parents communicate directly with her. Her mother remains invisible, her father exists in the novel in only this one quoted line.

Drabble, however, as sprinkled Rosamund's parents throughout the book in such details as mentioned earlier ('I am my parents' daughter,' etc.) Through these details the reader can more fully understand Rosamund and her character. Drabble has used her invisible characters as a way to develop her main character.

Raise High the Roof Beams, Carpenters and Seymour: An Introduction

"Presence" is the fourth word in J.D. Salinger's *Seymour: An Introduction*. But the most common word in this story is "I." The narrator, Buddy Glass, 40, is a professional writer and English professor at a women's college where he teaches poetry ("...Shelley was all for free love, and had one wife who wrote 'Frankenstein' and another who drowned herself." (13)). He is ostensibly writing a memoir about his brother, Seymour, who committed suicide some ten years earlier, but the real subject of the memoir is not so much Seymour as the narrator himself. He starts by talking directly to the reader who he calls "my old fair-weather friend" and looks on as "my last deeply contemporary confidant..." (14). After setting up his relationship with the reader, Glass then begins to talk about his own state of mind. "I'm an ecstatically happy man. I've never been before." (15) He repeats this several times throughout the short story and this makes the reader wonder if Glass is a bit touched in the head. However, Glass himself states, "divine or not,

a seizure's a seizure." (16)

Glass mentions that he once wrote a short story about Seymour's wedding in which Seymour was the main character but never appeared in the story; much as J.D. Salinger wrote "Raise High the Roof Beam, Carpenters" in which Seymour is the main topic of discussion but does not appear. Glass also says he wrote a story about Seymour's suicide, much like Salinger's "A Perfect Day For Bananafish."

Buddy cannot picture Seymour as a static object but as:

a vivid-type picture, all right, but in it he appears before me simultaneously at the ages of, approximately, eight, eighteen, and twenty-eight, with a full head of hair and getting very bald... (17)

Buddy can also not picture Seymour without picturing himself. His description of Seymour's nose, for example, begins: "Noses, however, we emphatically had, and they were close to being identical..." (18) When he describes Seymour's eyes, Glass writes, "...his eyes were similar to mine..." (19) Even when he talks about the kind of clothes Seymour wore, Buddy includes himself: "As older boys, both S. and I were terrible dressers." (20) While the reader gets a very detailed and exacting description of Seymour, it is always connected in some way with the narrator. Even when Seymour is quoted – "If you hit him when you aim, it'll just be luck." (21) – he is talking to Buddy and it is Buddy who is doing most of the action (playing marbles.).

The reader may get a detailed description of Seymour at eight, eighteen, and twenty-eight but the overall impression from "Seymour: An Introduction" is about the narrator, Buddy Glass. Seymour remains aloof, as he was, according to Buddy, in 'life.' Seymour, then, is used by Salinger as a means to describe and show the reader Buddy. Through Buddy's descriptions of Seymour we get an accurate picture of Buddy. At the end of the story Buddy confesses as much by writing:

I can't finish writing a description of Seymour– even a bad description, even one where my ego, my perpetual lust to share top billing with him, is all over the place – without being conscious of the good, the real. (22)

Waiting For Godot

The Patriarch of all invisible characters – patriarch in scope of influence and fame if not in age – is one Mr. Godot, for whom Vladimir and Estragon wait for two acts. While Seymour never appears in Salinger's short work, and Margaret Saville never responds to her brother's letters, Godot not only never appears but is seldom even talked about. Towards the very end of the play (on page 106 of a 109-page play) the Boy appears to tell Vladimir and Estragon that Godot will not be appearing, again. Vladimir asks "Has he a beard, Mr. Godot?" The Boy answers that he does.

Vladimir asks “Fair or...or black?” The Boy responds that Godot’s beard is white. This is the first, and last, piece of physical description of Godot and it comes three pages before the ending.

What Vladimir and Estragon know of Godot can be summed up in this conversation between Vladimir, Estragon, and Pozzo after the two mistake Pozzo for Godot:

- Pozzo: Who is he?
 Vladimir: Oh he’s...he’s a kind of acquaintance.
 Estragon: Nothing of the kind, we hardly know him.
 Vladimir: True...we don’t know him very well...but all the same...
 Estragon: Personally I wouldn’t even know him if I saw him.
 Pozzo: You took me for him. (23)

After this conversation the topic of Godot is not again breached by the pair until 30 pages later. Pozzo and Lucky have exited and Estragon suggests that he and Vladimir leave. Vladimir replies “We can’t.” (24) When Estragon asks why they can’t, Vladimir merely states, “We’re waiting for Godot.” (25)

Shortly thereafter a Boy appears with a message from Godot: he won’t be coming. Vladimir and Estragon then quiz the Boy about Godot: Is he good to you? He doesn’t beat you? Does he feed you well? The Boy usually answers with a Yes, sir or a No, sir. The first act ends with the two not going.

In the first 20 pages of the play Godot is mentioned less than 40 times, usually in quick references such as “If he came yesterday and we weren’t here you may be sure he won’t come again to-day.” (26) But his invisible presence floats over everything about Vladimir and Estragon. Why don’t they leave? They are waiting. Why do they wait? They must. What are they waiting for? At the very end of the play comes this conversation:

- Vladimir: We’ll hang ourselves tomorrow. (Pause) Unless Godot comes.
 Estragon: And if he comes?
 Vladimir: We’ll be saved. (27)

States states that Vladimir and Estragon are the “...primary ‘carriers’ of what we might call the two thieves principle...” (28) The two characters can be viewed either as two comedians, or as the two thieves crucified with Christ. If looked on as the two thieves it is apparent they cannot leave because they are waiting for Christ –or God– to save them. Their nicknames, Didi and Gogo, correspond with “Dysmas and Gestas, the names given to the two thieves in the Middle Ages.” (29) If they are the two thieves it is apparent they cannot leave because they are tied to each other (they agree to separate several times but never do.), and to Godot as shown in this exchange:

Estragon: I'm asking you if we're tied.
 Vladimir: Tied?
 Estragon: Ti-ed.
 Vladimir: How do you mean tied?
 Estragon: Down.
 Vladimir: But to whom? By whom?
 Estragon: To your man.
 Vladimir: To Godot? Tied to Godot! What an idea. No question of it.
 (Pause) For the moment. (30)

They are, of course, very much tied to Godot. Without Godot they would cease to exist and become, themselves, invisible characters. For Didi and Gogo, Godot is a black hole around which their universe – a barren tree and a blank stage – turns.

Conclusion

The nature of the reverse presence, or invisibility, of certain characters in the works discussed is, then, of four parts. First, as Shelley uses Mrs. Saville, as a sounding board for a major character. The novel *Frankenstein* is, in one way, a letter from Walton to his sister. Second, as a means to develop a character as Drabble did with Rosamund's parents. Without references to her parents Rosamund would appear to be set apart from her own history; a parent-less mother. Third, Salinger's invisible character is an excuse for the writer Buddy Glass to write about himself. Finally, as a purpose for existence for the other characters as demonstrated by Beckett's manipulation of Vladimir and Estragon.

Footnotes

1. *Vineland*, Thomas Pynchon, Boston: Little, Brown, 1990. p.58.
2. *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus*, Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley, 1818. Edited by J. Paul Hunter; Norton Critical edition, W.W. Norton & Company, 1996, p.78.
3. Shelley, p.8.
4. Shelley, p.8.
5. Shelley, p.9.
6. *The Self-Conscious Novel: Artifice in Fiction from Joyce to Pynchon*, Brian Stonehill, Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania Press, 1988. p.31.
7. *Mary Shelley: Her Life, Her Fiction, Her Monsters*, Anne K. Mellor, London: Routledge, 1989. p.54.
8. *The Millstone*, Margaret Drabble, London: Penguin Books, 1965. p.9.
9. Drabble, p.9.
10. Drabble, p.50.
11. Drabble, p.77.
12. Drabble, p.144.
13. *Seymour: an Introduction*, J.D. Salinger, 1963. Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1986. p.106.
14. Salinger, p.75.
15. Salinger, p.77.
16. Salinger, p.77.

17. Salinger, p.132.
18. Salinger, p.131.
19. Salinger, p.138.
20. Salinger, p.127.
21. Salinger, p.149.
22. Salinger, p.156.
23. *Waiting for Godot*, Samuel Beckett, New York: Grove Press, 1954. p.20.
24. Beckett, p.50.
25. Beckett, p.50.
26. Beckett, p.10.
27. Beckett, p.109.
28. *The Shape of Paradox*, Bert O. States, Berkeley: U of California Press, 1978. p.17.
29. States, fn., p.17.
30. Beckett, p.17.

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