

Invisible Characters as the Personification of Mid-Twentieth Century Existential Anxiety

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Drama as a Communal Literary Form

Drama is arguably the most communal literary form, and it tends to embody the social aspects, culture, and climate of the period that produces it. According to Aristotle, Greek tragedies were meant to allow the community to purge themselves of strong emotions, namely pity and fear. By vicariously experiencing these emotions in a controlled and somewhat removed situation, Aristotle believed the spectator could turn his own anxieties outward. For example, in Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*, Oedipus plucks out his own eyes to punish himself for his hubris and ignorance. The audience's resulting sympathetic identification with the suffering protagonist was seen as humanizing and healthy for the spectator.

During the Elizabethan era, Shakespearean drama was enjoyed by rich and poor alike. This was a period of economic prosperity, and as a result, the city of London experienced a population boom unlike any it had ever seen before. As the population grew, so did the potential audiences for art and theatre. The lower middle class, some of whom could not even read, would have seen the same play as Queen Elizabeth. Shakespeare used dirty humor and puns to appeal to the lower class, but because he was being paid by the nobility, most of his characters were noblemen and royalty. These characters, along with the complex themes and plots of his plays, were meant to appeal to upper class audiences. His collection of characters was also universally relatable because they were so diverse, including characters that were young and old, poor and rich, male and female. Their experiences were also common to all walks of life, such as love and marriage, dreams, religion, and war. Nobility, merchants, and yeomen could all find a personal connection within Shakespeare's plays.

It is easy to assume that the communal impact dramas such as Sophocles' and Shakespeare's had was achieved solely through the audience's personal connection to the characters they saw on stage. The onstage characters were the visible performers, and considering that drama is fiction represented through performance, it seems illogical for the driving force of the drama's action to take place offstage. The absence of a visual action or presence, however, can be

crucial to the momentum of the onstage plot. The action that takes place offstage can have an even more powerful effect than the things that happen onstage. This can be done through the use of unseen characters.

Often referred to as invisible or absent characters, unseen characters are causal figures that significantly advance the plot of the play or motivate onstage characters, but whose physical presence onstage is not necessary. In fact, it is their absence onstage that lends them greater influence and power over the events and characters on stage. Dramatists have implemented these characters as early as the Greek tragedies. These roles were filled by the gods or the invisible hand of the Fates, but they could also include human beings. For example, Jason's bride in Euripides' *Medea* serves as the driving force behind Medea's filicide. Glauce is never seen by the audience, and the excruciatingly painful circumstances surrounding her death are only heightened by the fact that she is offstage. By hearing about the poisoning that killed both Glauce and her father rather than seeing it, the intensity and gruesomeness of their deaths are embellished through the audience's imagination. What the audience can imagine is far more haunting than anything that could have been portrayed onstage.

In Elizabethan theatre, Shakespeare also utilized the unseen character in his *Romeo and Juliet* through Romeo's initial infatuation of Rosaline. The audience never sees Rosaline, so through Romeo's description alone she becomes a pure, idealized figure. Rosaline represents the attainment of happiness that Romeo and the audience both desire. Rosaline gives the audience an idea of the ideal that Romeo seeks, and the tragic fact that Juliet cannot be that for him. After she rejects him, Romeo goes to the ball to catch a glimpse of her, and this is where he first sees Juliet. The offstage presence of Rosaline causes Romeo and Juliet to cross paths. Without Romeo's initial obsession with Rosaline, we never would have heard "wherefore art thou Romeo," and the ensuing tragedy may never have occurred.

At the turn of the twentieth century, European playwrights Strindberg, Ibsen, and Chekhov used unseen characters in a new way. Before, the plays themselves embodied the cultural zeitgeist of the period, and invisible

characters simply provided dramatic embellishment. Now, playwrights began using their invisible characters to embody the anxieties and pressures of the period. These new characters embodied the lack, absence, and needs of the period. As Robert Byrd explains in his essay, "Unseen, Unheard, Inescapable: Unseen Characters in the Dramaturgy of Eugene O'Neill," these twentieth century playwrights were looking to "find new forms for a view of life that, for good or ill, was replacing nineteenth-century optimism" (20). For instance, in his play *Three Sisters*, Chekhov focused on existential themes of change, suffering, and the meaning of life. Protopopov, an unseen character who is said to be having an affair with Natasha, embodies these themes. For Natasha's husband Andrei, Protopopov embodies change and suffering. We never see Protopopov, but he has changed Andrei's life in a painful and wrenching manner.

Later, Eugene O'Neill took these innovative European practices to the American stage. In his essay examining O'Neill's drama, Byrd cites O'Neill's dissatisfaction with the surface level of the spirit, quoting, "We have endured too much from the banality of surfaces...we have been sick with appearances and are convalescing" (25). Byrd goes on to say, "This dissatisfaction, which echoes Chekhov's, was solved in a Chekhovian manner: O'Neill used the unseen character to attain the unrealized regions" (25). He states that by engaging with an unseen character, as Eben does with Maw in *Desire Under the Elms*, the audience is pulled into an invisible world. He explains, "the invisible realm is also the hidden or mysterious part of the human mind. Here...unseen characters are not so much themselves as they are the conflicts, obsessions, fixations, transformations and devotions of the human personality" (26). Like Chekhov, Ibsen, and Strindberg, O'Neill used unseen characters to examine the human condition and to embody the existential dread and anxiety of the period.

In order to understand what pushed these later playwrights to use the traditional technique of the unseen character in new, innovative ways, it is important to understand the context of Modernism in mid-twentieth century society and individuality as well as its effect on art.

Modernism in the Mid-Twentieth Century

In his book discussing the origins of modernity in art as well as on a societal and individual level, Marshall Berman claims that Modernism can be broken into three stages. For the purpose of this paper, Berman's third stage, which spans the majority of the twentieth century, is most important. Through scientific discovery, industrialization and the invention of new technology, explosive urban growth and demographic paroxysms, and new methods of communication, the modern era saw the world simultaneously brought together and torn apart. Berman states, "Modern environments and experiences cut across all boundaries of

geography and ethnicity, of class and nationality, of religion and ideology: in this sense, modernity can be said to unite all mankind. But it is a paradoxical unity" (15). He goes on to explain that

the process of modernization expands to take in virtually the whole world, and the developing world culture of modernism achieves spectacular triumphs in art and thought. On the other hand, as the modern public expands, it shatters into a multitude of fragments, speaking incommensurable private languages; the idea of modernity conceived in numerous fragmentary ways, loses much of its vividness, resonance and depth, and loses its capacity to organize and give meaning to people's lives. (17)

In order to survive in this overstimulated environment, the individual becomes unconsciously numb and, to a certain extent, apathetic to the world around them, resulting in a loss of individual purpose.

In his discussion of modernism, Nicholls interprets this apathy as *ennui*, defining it as, "a kind of primal melancholy, a combination of apathy and boredom which, in rendering the subject claustrophobically inactive, also brings painful hypersensitivity and nervousness" (7). He goes on to explain that Modern life is an "experience of extremes" and that this experience causes mankind to both embrace and resent apathy. He describes the modern subject as, "At once vulnerable because of hypersensitivity and dangerous because of his desire for ever greater intensity of sensation" (8).

It is also important to note that American mid-twentieth century modernism specifically followed turbulent events such as the Great Depression, World War II, and the Cold War. The Second World War brought income and manufacturing jobs to America, pulling the country out of the economic depression of the 1930s. Due to poor economic conditions and rampant segregation and discrimination, many African Americans had left the rural South and traveled to urban areas in Northern states during the Great Migration of the early 1900s. During World War II, the labor force deterioration created by departing soldiers opened the workforce to many nontraditional groups such as African Americans, Mexican immigrants, and women. Ultimately, these new workers were displaced when the troops came home. New identities and a sense of purpose that had been developed during the war were suddenly stripped away. People of color were still not given equal pay, and women were expected to return to the domestic sphere.

Women were expected to relinquish their new roles in the workforce and return to their roles as housewife, mother, and wife, but gender norms also changed for men. With the development of suburbia, gone were the days of the wide open frontier and Teddy Roosevelt's strenuous life ideology.

Now, men had to prove their masculinity by buying the nicest and latest cars, houses, and appliances, showing that they could provide for their families.

While it led to the Baby Boom and the creation of suburbia, the euphoric victory of World War II was swiftly followed by the tension and dread of the Cold War. With the invention of nuclear weapons and the tense standoff between the United States and the Soviet Union, there was the common belief that the world could end at any time. Children were taught ineffective duck-and-cover drills in school in order to subdue mass panic and anxiety, but with the looming threat of global annihilation, no citizen ever felt completely safe. Displacement, anxiety, and discrimination all contributed to the environment of change and extremes described by Berman and Nicholls, and heavily influenced the art and writing of this period.

Influence Over On Stage Characters

The onstage characters I examine here all feel the pressures and anxieties of the mid-twentieth century, but it is the unseen characters and their embodiment of mid-twentieth century existentialism and turmoil that drive the onstage characters and the plot. Whether this tension is tied to a sense of existential ennui, the overwhelming anticipation of personal desires left unfulfilled, or racial constraints and pressures, each onstage character is symptomatic of the anxieties of the period. The unseen characters either offer them a sense of purpose, motivation, or escape from those anxieties and pressures. In this paper, I will examine the invisible characters in Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, Tennessee Williams's *The Glass Menagerie*, and August Wilson's *Fences* and argue how they embody the social ills, anxieties and struggles of the mid-twentieth century, and therefore fuel the motion of the plot and motivate the onstage characters.

Invisible Characters and Their Embodiment of Mid-Twentieth Century Anxiety

In Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, the two characters Vladimir and Estragon are stuck in perpetual monotony waiting for the mysterious and elusive Godot, who never appears. Vladimir and Estragon are unsure of everything about their existence other than the fact that they are waiting for Godot. They do not know what day it is, if they are in the correct place, or even if the nearby plant is a bush or a willow tree. Early in the play they say:

Vladimir: He said by the tree. [*They look at the tree.*]

Do you see any others?

Estragon: What is it?

Vladimir: I don't know. A willow.

Estragon: Where are the leaves?

Vladimir: It must be dead.

Estragon: No more weeping.

Vladimir: Or perhaps it is not the season.

Estragon: Looks to me more like a bush.

Vladimir: A shrub.

Estragon: A— What are you insinuating? That we've come to the wrong place? (6)

Their sense of time, where they are, and even their conversations are convoluted and confusing, but they know that they are waiting for Godot. The promised meeting with Godot is the only thing that is clear to them, but they do not know anything definite or certain about him.

Many critics have interpreted Godot as a Beckettian God-figure. Due to the establishment of the Irish Free State in 1922 and the subsequent separation from the Church of England, the Church of Ireland became a minority church in the United Kingdom. In the following years, church membership drastically declined. Beckett would have been aware of this decline, and at close to the same time he was exposed to Nietzsche's proclamation of "God is dead" in Germany. Even with this decline in religious attendance and the prevalence of nihilism, Beckett never expressed a clear religious stance. In her article, "Beckett's Godot: Nietzsche Defied," Mary Massoud states, "It is important to note that although Beckett attacked institutional religion..., he always denied being an atheist. When in 1937, he was asked at a defense counsel... whether he was a Christian, Jew or atheist, he replied, 'None of the three'" (44).

During a period of spiritual decline and crises of faith, Beckett still recognized the importance of believing in something. While Beckett never claimed that he intended for Godot to serve as a religious God-like figure, he does appear to function as a source of faith and hope for Vladimir and Estragon. Just the possibility that Godot might show up gives them a reason to continue living. At one point they discuss a joint suicide, saying:

Estragon: What about hanging ourselves?

Vladimir: Hmm. It'd give us an erection.

Estragon: [*highly excited*] An erection!

Vladimir: With all that follows. Where it falls mandrakes grow. That's why they shriek when you pull them up. Did you not know that?

Estragon: Let's hang ourselves immediately! (9)

The thinking appears to be that killing themselves would add some excitement to their listless, dull existence. Peter

Nicholls claimed that Modernism was a state of continuous ennui fighting with the human desire for stimulation and excitement, and it appears that these are exactly the emotions that Vladimir and Estragon grapple with in this scene. Killing themselves would be a release from the tedium they have created for themselves.

In her article contrasting Beckett's play with Nietzsche's theory that "God is dead," Massoud says, "If God is really dead, as Nietzsche says, then what actually follows is not the wonderful freedom which Nietzsche and his 'happy atheists' are celebrating, but the terrible bondage pictured so vividly in Beckett's play. The two characters, Vladimir and Estragon, have been helplessly trapped together in a meaningless existence for fifty years. When they think of suicide as a way out, what stops them is the fear that while one of them may die, the other might live on" (45). But what stops Didi and Gogo from attempting suicide is not only the fact that one of them might be left alone, but the fact that Godot may finally arrive after they have committed the act. So instead, they remain in this languid, uncertain state of waiting. Massoud explains their choice, stating, "That Vladimir and Estragon cannot give up waiting for Godot, despite an inward feeling that he will never come, goes to show that when belief in God is discarded, man will still be tied to the old beliefs, but now these beliefs are empty and meaningless" (46). At the end of the play they even say:

Vladimir: We'll hang ourselves tomorrow. [*Pause.*]

Unless Godot comes.

Estragon: And if he comes?

Vladimir: We'll be saved (84).

Instead of finding liberation in the absence or death of God, as Nietzsche theorized, *Waiting for Godot* shows that mankind will simply waste away and long for something bigger than themselves to cling to. In the play, that something is the visit from Godot, and as Sharma explains, "The long waiting for Godot who does not appear throughout the play, and Vladimir and Estragon's hoping against hope that "he will come tomorrow," confirm once again the contention of Kierkegaard that existence does involve the future; one exists in a process of becoming by facing a future. The play unfolds in waiting for an experience of the fullness of man's personal and impersonal reality" (277). Vladimir and Estragon's purgatorial life is an example of the Modern existence that Nicholls described as a blend of apathy, boredom, hypersensitivity, and nervousness. While Godot is the only thing that convinces them to continue living, he is also the force behind their perpetual ennui. Godot serves as a warning against the mid-twentieth century population's tendency to retreat into themselves.

For the entirety of the play, the audience is led to believe that Godot will eventually appear. Instead, characters

like Lucky and Pozzo make strange debuts, and Vladimir and Estragon are still left waiting. While meeting Godot would solve much of Vladimir and Estragon's ennui and suffering, it is Godot's absence, not necessarily the interactions on stage, that furthers the plot. Without the promise that he will eventually show, Vladimir and Estragon's lives would have no purpose. The hope that Godot will come gives them something to cling to and orient themselves with. If Godot were to eventually appear, Vladimir and Estragon's purpose would unavoidably shift or vanish entirely. In his article discussing *Waiting for Godot* as a counterfoil to Kierkegaardian philosophy, Anurag Sharma explains,

Right from the very beginning of the play, the impression given to the audience is that Godot is the person/thing the whole play is about, not a threat or a menace but something/ someone who even in its/his absence is most welcome. His unseen presence throughout the play is referentially humanized and so he becomes a participant, one of the dramatis personae in the play. With a masterstroke of irony, Beckett makes Vladimir and Estragon realize the objective reality of Godot subjectively. (276)

He goes on to explain that Kierkegaardian theology says that mankind realizes through their own creation. Based on this argument, the God-like figure of Godot created by Vladimir and Estragon is their path to understanding and realizing their own existence, and therefore Godot is the entire reason anything at all is happening on stage.

Similar to Godot, the absent father in Williams's *The Glass Menagerie* also presents Tom with a potential escape route from what he views as an oppressive and uninspiring life. Arguably, Tom is the only character in the play, since all of the others that we see are from his memory. In his introductory monologue, he says, "But I am the opposite of a stage musician. He gives you illusion that has the appearance of truth. I give you truth in the pleasant disguise of illusion.... The play is memory. Being a memory play, it is dimly lighted, it is sentimental, it is not realistic" (4-5). Told as a memory play, *The Glass Menagerie* is narrated by Tom and focuses on his life with his mother, Amanda, and his sister, Laura, in the late 1930s. Tom wants to be a writer and travel the world, but instead he is stuck working in a warehouse to provide for his family and living with his mother who gives him no privacy or peace. Because it is told through the lens of Tom's memory, it is clear that he is trying to disguise his misery and guilt through humor and irony. He feels trapped by this memory, and the guilt and pain of his past prevent him from moving on and living his life.

As Tom explains early in the play, "There is a fifth character in the play who doesn't appear except in this larger-than-life-size photograph over the mantel. This is our father,

who left us a long time ago. He was a telephone man who fell in love with long distances; he gave up his job with the telephone company and skipped the light fantastic out of town..." (5). The portrait of the father acts as a constant reminder of the family's past happiness as well as their disappointment and feelings of abandonment. The presence of the portrait highlights the father's literal absence. In his article, "Irony and Distance in "The Glass Menagerie,"" Thomas King states:

...but then he remembers another member of the family, the father, and that hurts too much to give in to so he shakes off the reverie and returns once more to irony. The irony is no longer the playful irony of the interlocutor before the audience, but an irony which protects him from the painful memories of the past, that allows him to rise superior to the "father who left us" and to get a laugh from the audience.... The chuckle may be good-natured, but the humor is not; it is gallows humor in which the condemned man asserts himself before a crowd in relation to which he is horribly disadvantaged by making it laugh. (211)

Here we realize the source of Tom's guilt. As can be seen by his Merchant Marine uniform, Tom has abandoned his mother and sister, shamefully following his father's example of desertion. This escape, however, comes with moral and sentimental apprehension. When his father left, the responsibility to provide for Amanda and Laura fell to Tom, and he feels smothered by this responsibility and consequently shameful of his bitterness and desire to be free.

Tom resists leaving his family for a long time due to this feeling of responsibility, and ultimately leaving provides him no relief. While he was away, Laura died, and as he narrates the play, he shows that he feels responsible for what happened to her, even though he was not present. In his absence, he feels that he caused her harm, much like their father did when he left them.

Amanda only ever speaks kindly of her children's father, but his abandonment of the family is partially why she is so desperate to find a husband for Laura. Tom sees this frantic search for a gentleman caller as frivolous and irritating, but Amanda's search for a potential match for Laura is her only way to provide for both her children. She sees any prospective gentleman caller as a way to provide for Laura as well as a way to allow Tom to live a life of his own. Since their father is not around to take care of Laura, that responsibility would fall to either Tom or Laura's future husband. Amanda is not oblivious to her son's desire to leave, and ultimately she wants only to make sure that both of her children are happy and comfortable. For her especially, the father's portrait is a reminder of security, happiness, and youthful beauty.

Unfortunately, Amanda's fervent hovering and micromanagement of Laura's life has not left the young lady much room to grow and learn to be independent. She is neurotic to the point that she cannot cope with the outside world, and since Amanda's over-attentiveness is caused by the father's abandonment, her neurosis can also be blamed on the absence of her father. In scene two, her teacher reveals the extent of her crippling anxiety, saying, "Her hands shook so that she couldn't hit the right keys! The first time we gave a speed test, she broke down completely—was sick at the stomach and almost had to be carried into the wash room!" (14). It is reasonable to assume that had their father been present, Amanda would not have felt the need to smother her children in the way that she did, and they both could have lived happier lives free from obligatory familial responsibility and disabling anxiety.

Arguably, however, the father in *The Glass Menagerie* represents the repetitiveness and anxiety that this family and people of the mid-twentieth century were coping with. While the symptoms of neurosis are most obvious in the character Laura, the entire family suffers from an ever-looming pressure and anxiety. For Amanda, it is the fear that her daughter will not be provided for whenever she is gone. When Tom tells her that he has finally found a gentleman caller to come to dinner the next day, she says:

Amanda: But, Tom!

Tom: Yes, Mother?

Amanda: Tomorrow gives me no time!

Tom: Time for what?

Amanda: Preparations! Why didn't you phone me at once, as soon as you asked him, the minute that he accepted? Then, don't you see, I could have been getting ready! (42).

She then goes into a frantic state, wondering what clothes they should wear, what needs to be cooked for dinner, and what kind of man Mr. O'Connor is. While these are reasonable questions for a mother to have when hosting a guest, Amanda's agitated and frenzied state would generally be unwarranted. Due to Amanda's need to overcompensate for the father's absence, the anxiety and pressure of the situation are heightened. Amanda and Laura share what Nicholls would again refer to as "painful hypersensitivity and nervousness" (7).

Amanda's insistence that Laura find a husband to provide for her is caused by the expectations and standards of the period. During the 1930s, a traditional Southern home had a male head of household, ideally the husband or father. In *The Glass Menagerie*, the absence of the father emphasizes the immense power that the absence of a male head of

household can have over the lives of traditional Southern women. In his introductory monologue Tom explains the importance of the gentleman caller to the audience, saying, "He is the most realistic character in the play, being an emissary from a world of reality that we were somehow set apart from.... I am using this character also as a symbol; he is the long-delayed but always expected something that we live for" (5). The gentleman caller represents comfort and release for every member of the family. For Tom he symbolizes freedom, while for Laura he is the promise of security and an absence of anxiety. Amanda in particular is stuck with mindset that success and happiness rely on gentleman callers and marriage. She romanticizes and idealizes her own youth in a conversation with her children:

Amanda [*crossing out to the kitchenette, airily*]:
sometimes they come when they are least expected!

Why, I remember one Sunday afternoon in Blue Mountain—

Tom: I know what's coming!

Laura: Yes. But let her tell it.

Tom: Again?

Laura: She loves to tell it.

Amanda: One Sunday afternoon in Blue Mountain—
your mother received—*seventeen!*—gentlemen
callers! Why, sometimes there weren't chairs enough
to accommodate them all. We had to send the (*slur*)
over to bring in the folding chairs from the parish
house. (7-8)

It is clear that Amanda has told her how children this story more than once, and Laura's insistence that she be allowed to tell it again shows important Amanda considered this period of her life. Amanda cannot conceive of herself outside of the context of the Southern woman with a strong male presence, and as a result she idealizes the potential of the gentleman caller to fill the void left by her husband.

Consequently, the gentleman caller's tragic failure underscores the awful power of the father's absence. The anxiety and grief brought on by the combination of Jim's rejection of her and Tom's desertion turn out to be too much for Laura to bear. When Jim informs her that he is engaged to someone else, she is visibly affected. The stage directions say, "Laura sways slightly forward and grips the arm of the sofa.... Leaning stiffly forward, clutching the arm of the sofa, Laura struggles visibly with her storm.... The holy candles on the altar of Laura's face have been snuffed out" (90). By the

end of the play she has died, presumably killed by this same stress and pain, and Tom is left with suffocating and immobilizing guilt as a result.

It can be argued that the family's collective neuroses would not have been eliminated if the father had played an active role in *The Glass Menagerie*. Even with an active male head of household, there would still be the outside societal pressures and expectations of the Modern era. As a man, Tom would still be obligated to help provide for the family to some extent. When the father inevitably died or was unable to do the physical or mental labor required to provide for Amanda and Laura, Tom would be duty-bound to take up the slack. Laura would still be expected to find a husband, again because a father cannot be expected to live forever. In a world where the man is supposed to provide for the family and the woman is limited to the domestic sphere, Laura would not have been encouraged to make an independent life for herself. The father's absence on stage, however, intensifies already present tension, anxiety, and expectations. His abandonment of the family places additional stress on each member of his family. Tom is not permitted even temporary freedom from familial obligations, Laura feels heightened pressure to find a husband, and in her attempt to compensate for their lack of a father Amanda essentially smothers and hobbles her children.

In Wilson's *Fences*, the main character, Troy Maxson, also carries the weight of familial responsibilities, but at the same time he has to battle racial inequality. In her article "Putting Black Culture on Stage: August Wilson's Pittsburgh Cycle," Patricia Gantt explains that "By the 1950s, the setting of Wilson's play, *Fences*, the Great Migration, had ended, leaving blacks in northern cities much busier coping with the challenges of everyday living than their parents had hoped when they began the move out of the South" (9). In the introduction to the play, Wilson details the racial divide in the American Dream, saying, "For the immigrants of Europe, a dream dared and won true. The descendants of African slaves were offered no such welcome or participation.... The city rejected them..., and in quiet desperation and vengeful pride, they stole, and lived in pursuit of their own dream. That they could breathe free" (944).

During this time, life was considerably more difficult for African Americans than it was for white Americans. The former were often forced to work the jobs that no one else wanted, such as garbage collection, and they were not offered the equal opportunities for advancement or pay in these jobs. As a result, they lived in poorer neighborhoods and had fewer health benefits. In his comparison of Willy Loman in *Death of a Salesman* and Troy Maxson, Walton explains that "Willy Loman was a descendent of what August Wilson describes in the opening of *Fences* as the 'destitute of Europe.' His ancestors were 'devoured' by the city. They found immediate welcome and acceptance.... No such silver spoon was extended to Troy" (60). Because of this racial inequality,

there is not much in life that Troy has been able to call his own.

While the reason that Troy was not chosen to play major league baseball actually was because he was too old, he is not entirely incorrect when he claims that he was denied an opportunity because of his race. By the time integration started, he was too old to be considered. If they had integrated sooner, then he would have been a prime candidate. It is clear that Troy feels the sting of this injustice when his friend Bono tells him that he came along too early. He says, "There ought not never have been no time called too early!" (947). He was also skipped over for promotions at work where he was a garbage collector. The only people who were chosen to be drivers, the better paying, easier job, were the white employees. African American employees were stuck with the dirty, tiring task of loading the garbage onto the truck. In order to secure a promotion for himself, Troy had to file a formal complaint. Otherwise he would have been continually passed over.

Troy has the pressure not only of being a black man in America, but also of being a providing husband, brother, and father. Every week he gives his paycheck to his wife, Rose, in order to pay the bills and provide for the family. He has two sons that he tries to protect and provide for, as well as his brother, Gabriel, who suffered a head injury in the war. He says multiple times that he gives and gives to his family. By providing the family with money to put a roof over their heads and food on the table and by attempting to steer his son away from mistakes and heartbreak similar to his own, Troy feels that he gives and everyone else takes. He feels particularly trapped by Rose. It exhausts him, and he feels stuck in his role as provider.

The only person who has provided him any relief from these constraints is his mistress, Alberta, who lives and dies entirely offstage. As Troy confesses to Rose, "She gives me a different idea..., a different understanding about myself. I can step out of this house and get away from the pressures and problems..., be a different man. I ain't got to wonder how I'm gonna pay the bills or get the roof fixed. I can just be a part of myself that I ain't never been" (962). Unwilling to give up his relationship with Alberta, especially after he learns that she is pregnant with his child, her offstage presence puts a heavier strain on his other relationships.

When he tells Rose about the affair and how he refuses to give it up, she insists that he should have stayed faithful to her, saying, "Don't you think I ever wanted other things? Don't you think I had dreams and hopes.... But I held onto you, Troy. I took all my feelings, my wants, my needs, my dreams..., and I buried them inside you.... You always talking about what you give...and what you don't have to give. But you take too. You take...and don't even know nobody's giving" (963). As Gantt explains in her article, "The irony in Rose's life is that the more she subsumes her own personality in Troy's, the more resentment he feels about the

responsibilities she embodies and wants to escape her. They never truly understand one another" (11). Both of them feel as if they are the one giving, and that the other has never been equally giving back. It is not until the unseen presence of Alberta arises that they are able to verbalize these feelings to one another. After Alberta's death, Rose agrees to raise Alberta's daughter as her own, but her relationship to Troy will never be the same. She says, "This child got a mother. But you a womanless man" (965). The wealth of warmth and affection she felt towards him is now completely extinguished.

Before his affair, Troy already had a strained relationship with his son, Cory. Trying to protect Cory from suffering disappointment and a hard life like his own, Troy is very strict with his son. He is allowed to play football only if he helps Troy build the fence and keeps his job at the A&P. When he finds out that Cory has not been working and has been sneaking off to practice, Troy tells the coach that Cory is no longer allowed to play and has his boss at the A&P give him all of his hours back. This ruins any chance Cory has of being scouted and recruited to a college where he could have received an education further than what either of his parents had. Troy is trying to prevent Cory from having to deal with the same racial discrimination that he faced as a young man, but Cory resents his father for ruining his chances.

Until he finds out about Troy's affair, Cory is respectful towards, or at least scared of, his father. After he learns about the affair, however, he loses any respect that he once had for him, and Cory's long pent-up resentment floods out. In an altercation with his father, he says, "You don't count around here anymore.... You ain't never gave me nothing! You ain't never done nothing but hold me back. Afraid I was gonna be better than you. All you ever did was try and make me scared of you. I used to tremble every time you called my name" (966). Eventually the fight comes to blows, and by the end of the scene, Cory runs away from home to join the army. A few years later, he even struggles to bring himself to attend his father's funeral.

For Troy, Alberta is the embodiment of the self that he could never be, but for Cory, she represents the absence of the father that he wants and needs. While Troy attempts to take care of Cory and the family in the best way he knows how, it is not in the way that Cory needs. When Troy is with Alberta, he is able to let go of the pressures and responsibilities that he feels in his everyday life. Without these anxieties pushing him to do more and to do it better, he would be more receptive to dreams and possibilities. Instead of the dictatorial, heavy-handed authority that Troy enforces, Cory needs a father who encourages his dreams and helps him achieve them. Troy was too old to play in the major leagues by the time they were integrated, but Cory could have reasonably received a full scholarship for college by playing ball. Alberta represents a Troy free from the bitterness of his past and the pressure to provide.

By the end of the play, Troy has died alone. His relationship with Alberta ostracizes him from his family and friends, and even after her death, they are never able to fully welcome him back into their lives. Troy's best friend, Bono, seems uncomfortable coming to the same porch where he used to have a drink every night. Because he is so close to both Troy and Rose, he feels a loyalty towards her after Troy cheats on her. While Rose defends Troy after his death, saying that he meant to do better and did the best he could, their relationship is still never the same. She is a mother to his and Alberta's daughter, Raynell, but she cannot be the same wife to him that she was before. Cory is barely able to make himself attend his father's funeral, and it is clear that he has not been home for a number of years.

If Alberta had made an appearance on stage, then the conflict among the various characters would have distracted from Troy's sense of isolation. The focus would shift to the family members' conflicts with Alberta rather than with Troy. As an unseen character, however, she functions as the embodiment of absence and isolation. For Troy she represents the self that he could never be, but ultimately she symbolizes Troy's absence in his family members' lives as well as his sense of isolation from the rest of the world. The feeling of isolation due to anxiety and overstimulation is a Modern sensation. As Berman says in his book, "If we think of Modernism as a struggle to make ourselves at home in a constantly changing world, we will realize that no mode of modernism can ever be definitive. Our most creative constructions and achievements are bound to turn into prisons and whited sepulchers that we, or our children, will have to escape or transform if life is to go on" (6). He goes on to explain, "Subjectivity and inwardness have become at once richer and more intensely developed, and more lonely and entrapped, than they ever were before" (8). While modernity unites all of humanity, it also contributes to feelings of disconnection and solitude.

The life that Troy has built for himself has become a prison rather than a safe haven. As a result, he feels isolated from his family and the world around him, unable to connect with anything outside of himself. Alberta offers him temporary relief from this feeling of disassociation, but she also isolates him further from his life.

Conclusion

Invisible characters are by no means a new phenomenon. Dramatists have always used invisible characters to further the plot and motivate on-stage characters, but the modern era saw them reflecting specifically modern anxieties. By embodying the anxieties and expectations of the period, these unseen characters influence the plot and on stage characters to represent the modern era for both contemporary audiences as well as those who came afterwards.

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