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Kristie S. Fleckenstein
Universit of Missouri-Kansas City

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Emotional Implication: Performing Within Emotional Gaps

Cover Page Footnote

Kristie S. Fleckenstein teaches composition at University of Missouri-Kansas City. Her research interests include the function of affect and imagery in reading and writing processes.

Emotional Implication:
Performing Within Emotional Gaps

Kristie Fleckenstein

W riting is a process in which an author cannot be divorced from a reader any
more than he or she can be severed from a text: We are always writing
something for someone. In addition, the *we* and the *someone* exist in a mutually
defining relationship. Writers do not merely have readers; they also transact
ecologically (Rosenblatt, 1978), with one inscribing the other. It is Buber's (1970)
I and Thou, a fluid process of becoming in which the writer exists dynamically in
relationship to an "other" by means of a "between" called the text world
(LeFevre, 1987).

Dialectic is the term we use to describe this fusion of writer and reader at the
heart of composing. But dialectic may be too limiting a concept. Authors transact
with more than their readers. In the act of composing, they constitute not only
their readers and their text worlds, but also themselves. A primary means for
enacting this fluid performance is through emotional implication, a term I use to
describe the process by which writers create emotional gaps that they expect read-
ers to infuse with feelings, attitudes, intentions, and motives—that loose aggre-
gate we call affect (Aylwin, 1985). The sense of shared presence occurs when
readers perform the role of the emotionally implicated other invited by the gaps
writers create in their text worlds (Barthes, 1967/1992, 1977/1992; Iser, 1974).

To gain a clearer sense of this performance, I became part of the efforts of a
published author to create a science fiction short story. The author providing the
data for this exploratory study was Gail Wickman, a freelancer who writes short
stories, especially science fiction, children's stories, and poetry. As part of a
description of my methodology, I wish to explain my relationship with Gail since
it inevitably permeates my reading of her texts: protocol text and story text. Gail
and I met six years ago when I was soliciting volunteers to serve as case study
subjects for my dissertation. Gail, at that time a master's candidate at a large
Mid-western university, volunteered because she was curious about all the
jargon I used in my written solicitation. During the ensuing years, we have formed
a close friendship that has extended over a 700-mile separation, 4 pregnancies
(2 hers, 2 mine), innumerable protocols, and endless sessions responding to and
discussing our writing, our children, and our lives.

We wandered almost casually into the joint venture of intermittently
studying her writing and reading practices. Thus far, in addition to regular
conversations and manuscript reviews, Gail has generated over 45 hours of

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talk-aloud protocols, recorded as she wrote journal entries, essays, poetry, and short stories. Together we have taped many hours of conversations discussing our composing practices and our evolving texts. Initially, I assumed a detached stance, believing I could use the protocols to understand the interaction of cognitive and affective processes in Gail's writing without the intrusion of myself as reader. Although the illusion of detachment lasted throughout my dissertation, my belief in that detachment disappeared midway. Now I view our multi-layered conversations as a process of mutual inscription, similar to that which we engage in as readers and writers. Thus, my insights resulting from my research grow out of my participatory stance. As friend, as critical reader, as inquirer, I am both participant and researcher, inscribed and inscriber. The protocol transcripts and my interpretations thus reflect our multi-dimensional flow of expectations and response, offering opportunities to examine the "authoring" of writers, readers, texts, and participant-researchers.

For this portion of our study, Gail provided 9 hours of think-aloud protocols in which she talked through her first and second drafts of a 3000-word science fiction short story called "The Brother." In addition to the protocols that recorded some of Gail's thoughts and reactions as she wrote "The Brother," Gail and I discussed her experiences in informal sessions sometimes many days after she completed her protocols. Finally, just as we discussed various permutations and combinations of elements as "The Brother" evolved, so did we review ideas and drafts for this article.

Briefly, Gail's story involves Kerek, a young man struggling against his assigned role within a culture dominated by a priest-led religion. Religious ceremonies culminate every generation in a ritual sacrifice of a young man designated as "The God Made Flesh." Kerek, son of the high priest and brother to the sacrificial victim, struggles to escape a marriage arranged by his father without endangering his position as the next high priest.

I transcribed Gail's protocols—five hours of drafting, four hours of revision—parsing the transcripts into clauses, identifying each clause as an ideational unit. As I analyzed those units, working between generated text and protocol text, I identified a contrast between an absence or gap in the story text— especially an emotional one—and the presence of a comment filling that gap in the protocol text.

Gail would create a scene or an interaction, select a name, or plot a sequence without articulating the affective matrix out of which all these elements evolved. Instead, she would leave spaces that she expected her readers to infuse with the same feelings that guided Gail's creation of that text world. As Gail described in one of our innumerable conversations about "The Brother": "I figure out what I want the reader to feel and try to create elements that invite that response."

I call this process of creating emotional spaces emotional implication. Through those gaps—an absence that elicits a presence—Gail engaged in a dialectic that mutually evoked her reader, her evolving text world, and, more significantly, herself. Let me explain in more detail this concept of emotional implication, then describe the ways in which such spaces allowed Gail to establish and maintain a three-part flow of becoming.

Emotional implication might be a more familiar concept if we examine it

from the angle of a reader, and, instead of implication, we talk of making
inferences (Flood, 1981). Inferring is the act of supplying information not pro-
vided by the situation or text itself. An inference is a type of "inheritance" in
which a single instance inherits all the characteristics of its class (Beaugrande &
Dressler, 1981). For instance, no situation is fully fleshed, neither one we create
cued by an author nor one we author ourselves. Rather, it is adumbrated, and we
supply the lack through our inferences. Similarly, the powerful role of the absent
signifier has been amply demonstrated by Lacan (1972/1987) in "The Seminar
on the 'Purloined Letter.'" Derrida (1976) in *Of Grammatology* also asserts the
essential interplay of absence and presence in signification. What is not said
exercises a greater power than what is said. Absence both constructs and
deconstructs the presence of the text world.

Such inferential spaces are emotional as well as informational. Emotional
implication occurs when the author implies without specifically delineating the
emotional tonality (such as the intentions, motives, attitudes, and/or feelings)
that gives rise to an experience or is engendered by one. The author does not
tell, does not show; he or she expects. A variety of scholars—from Vygotsky
(1962) and Bates (1979) to Bartlett (1932) and Aylwin (1985)—contend that lan-
guage and thought are affectively based. Emotional implication draws on that
affective foundation or matrix. When authors leave an emotional gap, they re-
quire us to perform emotionally, to inscribe responses, feelings, motives, and
intentions. It is within these emotional spaces that Gail invites her readers, her-
self, and her text world to become.

Inscribing the Reader, Creating the Writer

Dialectic has been traditionally used to describe a reader-writer relationship;
thus, I would first like to examine the ways in which Gail uses emotional
implication to create her readers and her persona as author. According to Gail,
the following example from the story text was designed to evoke emotions she
believed readers possessed concerning particular gender interactions. In "The
Brother," an opening scene involves the protagonist, Kerek, repudiating his
intended wife, Dayca. At one point Dayca falls to her knees, clasping Kerek's
legs. He kicks her away. The actual text of the short story describes the visual
dynamics of the scene, but nowhere does the wording explicitly delineate Gail's
expectations of her reader's responses.

However, as she creates this scene, Gail comments in her protocol text that
the spatial arrangement of Kerek towering over Dayca will evoke a sense of pity
in her readers: "Okay, so he's standing before her. So she's going to look up.
That's gonna make her pitiful looking." Since in the story text Gail never uses
the term "pitiful" or a synonym, she expects the reader to fill this emotional gap,
to inscribe the presence of a particular emotion within the textual space.

As the scene continues through both dialogue and physical action, Kerek
repeatedly rejects Dayca, who asserts she is pregnant with his child. Again, as
Gail creates this cycle of assertion-rejection, she intersperses protocol comments
articulating emotions that she expects her readers to inscribe as part of their text
world experience. For instance, after designing Dayca's plea for an early mar-

riage, Gail comments, first, "Kerek, being the asshole he is." Then she composes a description of Kerek's state as one of exultation at Dayca's imminent dishonor. The story text, however, does not include descriptions either of Kerek's character or of his state of mind. Thus, for the scene to function as an effective part of Gail's intended plot, the reader must fill the textual gaps with emotional inferences that Gail articulates only in her protocol comments.

Based on her protocol comments, then, Gail creates an emotional space that invites a particular kind of play with particular players. Gail designs a readerly presence as well as an emotional presence within the textual absence. This reader is one who will visualize a scene involving inequitable power lines between a man and a woman; it is a reader who can cast the woman as victim, sympathize with her, and condemn the man, perhaps even stigmatizing him with the epithet "asshole," "jerk," "fink," or "bastard," all terms Gail uses to describe Kerek in her protocols. At one point in her protocol comments, Gail responds to a situation she created involving Kerek by asking: "Is Kerek a bastard? He just wants to. Well, yeah he is. He is." For the text world to function as she has planned, Gail expects her readers to infuse the Kerek-Dayca interaction with the same emotional resonance, thus evoking their attitudes and feelings on gender relationships. If these expectations concerning emotional implication are not met, the reader-writer dialectic is disrupted, and the text world may career out of the author's control.

If Gail inscribes her readers through her expectations regarding emotional implication, she is also inscribing herself. She does so in two ways. The first and most obvious way is through her very expectations of a reader's responses. She expects her "other" to react with a particular emotion because that is one Gail experiences in response to this evolving text world. During the initial confrontation between Kerek and Dayca, Gail creates a scene of unequal power. In doing so, she defines her own sense of equitable power lines between genders, then negates and unravels it. She expects her reader to view Dayca as pitiful (or later in the protocol Gail describes her as "sweet"), because that is how Gail initially sees her, thereby constituting through that revelation her sense of power in gender relationships. Thus, by the protocol comments reflecting her expectations of her reader's emotional responses, Gail also reveals the expectations that drive her own responses.

Second, Gail defines who she is by her unacknowledged emotional gaps, unacknowledged because they are accepted as already filled space. It is not what she comments on in her protocols that is so significant; it is what she does not comment on. Thus, just as gaps in the story text are important in tracing the presence of reader and emotion, so are gaps in the protocol text important for tracing the creation of authorial presence. And it is within these gaps that I, as the participant-researcher, enact my performance. For instance, because I am actively responding to absences in the protocol comments, I infer that Gail has automatically inscribed her presence within that textual absence, an absence that exists several levels below those that "exist" within her story text. In this "taken-for-granted" emotional space, I read her as unknowingly inscribing the emotional truths that define her life, the default options that guide her unconsciously. Perhaps the most dramatic example of this array of layered gaps is that of the father

in Gail's story text.

Within the short story, Kerek and Taret's father, the current high priest, appears as a physical presence only in the final sacrificial scene of the story. Yet he is a powerful and controlling, albeit absent, force in the story. For example, the father betroths Dayca to Kerek against Kerek's protests; the father raises Kerek to spy on the populace; the father chooses Taret to live and die as the god-made-flesh; the father perpetuates the status quo. The father is the main mover and shaker in the story, not Kerek who dominates physically. Yet no where in her protocol comments, barring a question in her first draft about elaborating on the father as a force of nature or evil, does Gail comment on responses she expects the characterization of the father to evoke. Commenting is unnecessary because these emotional gaps are automatically filled by a culturally conditioned presence. For instance, in Western liberal society husbands do not sacrifice their wives; fathers do not cut the heart out of their sons, either psychologically or physically; fathers do not impregnate their son's bride; nor choose as their son's bride a woman whom the father has impregnated. Therefore, any father who behaves as such is reprehensible and should be the subject of negative responses. No protocol or story text comment is necessary, and, within this unacknowledged and unfilled space, I "read" Gail as inscribing herself in terms of her truths about a father-child relationship. The same point can be made about the father's physical absence within the story: fathers in our culture are absent, but controlling forces (Luepnitz, 1988).

Inscribing the Text World, Creating the Writer

Finally, Gail defines and is defined by her evolving text world through the very emotional gaps she creates as a means to inscribe her reader. The characters acquire a life and force of their own, acting, then, as a force on Gail. Perhaps the best example of this is the change that occurs within Kerek during the course of the story. In the first scene, Gail attempts to establish Kerek as, in her words, "cruel" and "malicious," a "fink." The emotional gaps she creates are almost gleefully filled with protocol comments highlighting Kerek's less than admirable character. However, when Kerek begins to interact with his older brother, Taret, he starts slipping away from this negative representation.

Gail runs into difficulty when she tries to fill the emotional gaps caused by creating a close sibling relationship. As she constructs Kerek and Taret's interactions, she infuses Kerek with feelings and motivations she can identify positively with, particularly brother love. For instance, at one point Gail puzzles: "Kerek is stuck between Scylla and Charybdis but that doesn't mean he loves his brother any less; he's really torn up by the whole idea. So how's he going to react when his brother says, I'm glad I'm going to get to be in your wedding before I die."

Gradually, the change in Kerek, even while created by Gail, creates her as well. The search for motives and feelings to justify Kerek's reactions inscribes a tension in Gail that she is unable to resolve. By the end of the first draft, Gail admits that Kerek has "over time has gotten nicer," while Dayca has gotten "nasty." She asserted within her final drafting protocol that "there's no reason for this

change; I've got to figure other ways for this to make sense because I don't want to change it." In the process of creating a character who deeply loved a brother, Gail was unable to cast that same character as repudiating, without some cause, a female with whom he was physically intimate. She was in essence defined by this conflict within the text world. During a discussion session between drafts, Gail said that she discovered that she couldn't write about a "bastard." The very process of inscribing a character thus created a backlash that forced her to re-define who she was in this context.

Inscribing a Text, Creating More Text

So who creates whom? My answer resembles the progressive song, "This Is the House that Jack Built," so popular with small children: Presences are inscribed in the emotional gaps of a story text that writers create for readers to fill; the play within spaces boomerangs to create the writers who carry within themselves their own unacknowledged gaps. Like a progressive song, the performance tumbles forward. Writers and readers are inscribed even as they inscribe, and, on an equally important level, so are the participant-researchers who perform with them. The chain that links Poe, Lacan, Derrida, and Johnson (1978/1987) suggests the infinite regress of performance within gaps. No real end, no real beginning, just the ebb and flow of expectation and response, absence and presence. Within this flow, however, we are left with some interesting observations concerning the reader-writer-text world transaction.

First, reading and writing may be a product of emotional as well as ideational coherence. For instance, the very act of emotional implication seems to be built on the belief that an imagined reader will attempt to empathize with an author's vision of the text world, not an unexpected conclusion concerning poetic writing given the wealth of research on emotional involvement in aesthetic reading. Not only do proficient pleasure readers suspend disbelief, but they also actively attempt to identify emotionally with a text world. If the reading process goes awry—if, for instance, no empathy or no engagement occurs or if an unexpected perhaps inappropriate response takes control—we might wish to examine the territory of emotional gaps. How was an absence perceived, if at all? How was a presence infused? The construction (and the deconstruction) of a text world is an emotional as well as an intellectual endeavor; therefore, unexpected turns may be the result of affective factors. Burke (as cited in Foss, Foss, & Trapp, 1985) describes coherence as the arousing and fulfilling of desires. If the arousing and fulfilling of emotional expectations derails, a type of emotional incoherence could result, holding as much potential for disruption as ideational incoherence.

In the same vein, a writer may be the victim of her own emotional incoherence. For instance, if the trail of absences goes awry for the writer, as it does for Gail with Kerek and Dayca, perhaps the place to begin investigation is not with the concept of ideational coherence but with interpersonal coherence. The emotional relationship between reader, writer, and text, may have derailed, yielding a sense of fragmented meaning. Coherence, an unimpeded flow of expectation and response, is as much a product of the heart as it is of the head. Gail explained in a conversation following a protocol session that she "gets into an

emotion" and writes from that basis. However, she added that she couldn't "think about the emotion [because] it interferes." Such interference of the heart with the head, or the reverse, offers a new view of writer-based prose.

A second observation arising from studying emotional gaps involves socio-cultural factors. Inscribing a presence within an absence, as we do with emotional gaps, inevitably evokes patterns of socio-cultural practices. The site of an emotional absence and the infusion of an emotional "something" offers a fruitful area for examining cultural codes. A problem in both cultural studies and writing research is that cultural codes tend to be treated as blueprints or molds that exist prior to and determine individual development. But cultural codes, like linguistic codes, like schemata, are not deep structures but active processes traceable only in an action, such as the creation of meaning (Turner & Bruner, 1986). The process of filling an emotional gap is a point of emergent meaning and thus a moment during which we can "freeze" those cultural codes and examine their influence in inscribing identity: self, other, and text world. For instance, not all cultures would infuse a scene in which a woman kneels weeping at a man's feet with negative emotions: pity and distress for the woman, condemnation and dislike for the man. Thus, the flow of implication and inference can be examined from the perspective of cultural influences.

My tentative conclusion on the basis of this study is that dialectic, especially reader-writer dialectic, is too restrictive, perhaps even inappropriate. Dialectic, with its implication of duality—even a mutually defining duality—is misleading. Gail constituted not only herself as a writer and perhaps even herself as other—the reader—but also her text world in a three–part relationship: an I and Thou and This. In addition, as the participant-researcher in this performance, I, too, was invited to inscribe myself as I inscribed Gail. What replayed itself through her protocols and our collaboration was a intricate play of evolving writer, reader, researcher, and text worlds as we performed within the space of emotional gaps. Identities merged, shifted, transformed, and reconstituted themselves throughout these instances of meaning-making. I'm not sure what term or metaphor best captures this fluid shift of absence and presence that yields so many inseparable identities. But regardless of the terminology, as we examine the emotional dimension of the writer-reader performance, we must also factor in the impinging plane of the text worlds, no small task.

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