

Sarah Gompper

The “Skelf” of Existence in *Hotel World*

In remembering a past romance with a man named Ade, Else realizes that she can remember kissing him better than she can remember Ade himself.¹ Else reflects: “A whole time can be reduced down to a single taste, a moment. A whole person down to the skelf of a self.”² The primary definition of the word “skelf” is a “sliver or splinter”; however, colloquially it is also used to describe a small person, or a person who is a nuisance.³ Ultimately, Else’s passing, witty play on words is not just a phrase. While Else is talking immediately about Ade, through her actions she reveals that she too is a “skelf of a self.” Else lives on the street, where people “don’t see” her, “or decide not to.”⁴ Else is usually invisible to those around her; when people do acknowledge her, it is often only as “scum” that needs to be moved (43). Ali Smith portrays Else as a skelf of her former self by showing that she is smart and well-read, but also slowly forgetting basic things, such as how to tell time (45, 50). Else even forces herself to become a skelf of her true self by stopping herself from thinking and laughing, as she is scared of the cough that she has developed (41). Else figures that she “is going to have to stop thinking. She’s going to have to stop using her/ (Spr sm. Chn.)/ imagination” (41). This act of dissolving and forgetting, unseen by the outside world, not only defines Else’s character, but also finds its complement in Smith’s characterizations of Sara’s ghost, Penny, Lise, and Clare. The idea of “the skelf of a self” signifies the major theme of confronting invisibility that connects all of the main characters and the setting of Smith’s *Hotel World*.

¹ Ali Smith, *Hotel World* (New York: Anchor Books, 2001), 37.

² *Ibid.*, 37-38.

³ Oxford Dictionaries, s.v. “skelf,” accessed November 6, 2016, <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/242209>

⁴ Ali Smith, *Hotel World*, 39. All subsequent citations are from this edition and will appear parenthetically.

Like Else, Sara's ghost is a skelf of her former self, invisible to those around her. Sara's ghost tries desperately to interact with the outside world; however, her efforts are futile because she is slowly disappearing, losing both her senses and her ability to appear to living people (5, 30). The ghost notes the little things that she misses about being alive, attesting that she could "give anything... To taste just dust" (5). Penny is also lonely, invisible, and desperate to connect with people. She talks and tells stories to fictional people as she imagines their responses and wishes that the conversations were really taking place (132-133). In her effort to help Clare open up the dumbwaiter shaft, Penny imagines that she could be the "heroine," eager to win the appreciation of others; however, the other characters regard her as a mere nuisance (139). Lise has become a skelf of herself in a similar way to both Else and the ghost, as forgets little things that "she used to know, to just know, like people just know things" (81). She is also completely ignored by, shut off from, and unable to communicate with the outside world; she wants to engage with people but she is unable to do so because of her chronic illness (83, 100). Finally, Clare is a skelf of herself in that she has become deeply isolated and obsessive after her sister's death (142, 186). Furthermore, Clare reflects Else's original meaning of the phrase "skelf of a self" as Else used it to describe forgetting Ade (201): she rationalizes how her sister's ghost stopped appearing to her, explaining that she "stopped being able to do that making her up" and "all that was left was the bits of her," or slivers of her, "coming by themselves" as if Clare couldn't remember her sister in her entirety (201).

Else's phrase, "skelf of a self," even defines the setting of *Hotel World*. Throughout the book, the hotel acts as a microcosm, or a skelf, of the outside world, as reflected in its title. Though the hotel is only a sliver of the world, it gives meaning to the lives of each of the main characters, each of whom is battling invisibility as a fragment of her former self. For Else, "the

hotel wall behind her... hold[s] her up” when she is on the street (40). When Lise, whose entire world is wrapped up in the hotel, invites Else to stay the night in a room, Else does not believe at first that she is “welcome” there because she has so rarely been welcome anywhere else (57). Finally, as Clare explains, even if the hotel was demolished, the place where Sara had died “would still somehow be there” (200). That enduring empty space, or nothingness, is an unseen skelf of the hotel that symbolizes each woman’s fight for visibility.

Bibliography:

Smith, Ali. *Hotel World*. 2001. New York: Anchor Books.