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ENGL 281: Award-Winning Playwrights

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Gently

"In order to write whatever you think your play is about, which unfortunately is the first thing we're asked, [the idea] should never be conscious. You can do all the research in the world you want, but at some point the trick is to take this hand that has the Aristotelian element of thought, and put it behind your back, and do not look at it again… Everyone's always saying… 'Gosh, you're always doing these things that are so political.' I actually don't know it in writing. I mean, I'll finish a draft and go, 'Oh my god, I'm going to get killed.'"

—*Paula Vogel, at the 2012 Comparative Drama Conference*

How I Learned to Drive demonstrates Paula Vogel's grasp on dramatic technique, with which she is able to humanize a slew of controversial topics including incest and pedophilia. Vogel utilizes a nonlinear narrative and a central metaphor, namely driving, to soften these controversial topics in order to allow the audience to sympathize with characters that an individual may have otherwise deemed irredeemable. In *How I Learned to Drive,* we do not watch a young girl slip into the hands of a perverted uncle. No, we start after the relationship is established, and we wrestle with the same emotional ambivalences that both Li'l Bit and Uncle Peck endure as Li'l Bit's fragmented narrative jumps back and forth. Vogel takes the controversial topics of incest and pedophilia into the dramatic realm, and she frames her story in a discussion that aims to soften these delicate subjects, perhaps so that she won't get killed (in her own words).

Vogel writes *How I Learned to Drive* as if her core element of thought, which we can interpret as the illicit relationship between Li'l Bit and Uncle Peck, is invisible to her. The political "illicitness"

is second to the human tragedy between the niece and uncle. Instead of framing Uncle Peck as a villain, Vogel gently characterizes him with traits attributed to femininity at the time, which allows Peck to be both a model and an equal to Li'l Bit. Uncle Peck is, in a word, *gentle*. When Cousin Bobby cries after catching a fish, Peck comforts the boy and even reassures him that crying is okay for men (34-5). Peck again fights the male stereotype established by Big Papa when he voluntarily washes the dishes, takes out the garbage, and does the heavy lifting for his wife (66-7). Vogel writes Peck as a kind man, "despite a few problems" (4). And yet, his illicit relationship with Li'l Bit, one which is both incestuous and pedophiliac, can easily negate any innocence in Peck's nature. So, Vogel makes invisible the disturbed act, and doesn't present the situation as grimly as it may be. Even though Li'l Bit is the victim, her narrative doesn't antagonize Peck. Towards the start of the play, she humorously says, "…I was sixteen or so before I realized that pedophilia did not mean people who loved to bicycle" (14), and towards the end she empathizes with Peck and asks, "Who did it to you, Uncle Peck? How old were you? Were you eleven?" (86). In a sense, both Peck and Li'l Bit are victims of the same pedophilic crime through generations of perpetual sin. Vogel draws the cycle to a close with Li'l Bits rejection of Peck, which ultimately leads to his death (87).

Vogel continues to establish Uncle Peck as a sympathetic character through the play's fundamental metaphor of driving. By teaching Li'l Bit how to drive, Peck gives her agency to symbolically steer her way through a difficult life, the difficulties of which surpass Peck's molestation of Li'l Bit. At home, Li'l Bit has to cope with the overt sexuality and perversion of her grandfather, and as her dad is absent in the play, the only male figure standing up for her is Peck (16-8). At school, Li'l Bit has to cope with her peers, as they treat her inhumanly due to her well-endowed physique. This is apparent when the other schoolgirls trick her into dropping her towel in the shower so they can see if Li'l Bits breasts are real (54). The schoolboys act just as fiendishly, which is demonstrated when Greg tries to dance with Li'l Bit, ostensibly so that he can watch her "jiggle"

during the fast songs (56). Uncle Peck is one of a few characters that treat Li'l Bit as a friend, and he also plays the role as the only male model figure in Li'l Bit's life. Thus, by teaching her to drive, Peck gives Li'l Bit a physical manifestation of his love for her, besides the illicit desire he has. We can see that Li'l Bit retains Peck's love and driving lessons, as she frames her narrative around aspects of driving. She essentially controls her story through what Peck teaches her. We can see verbal evidence of this in Li'l Bit's final monologue when she says, "The nearest sensation I feel—of flight in the body—I guess I feel when I'm driving" (91). Peck causes Li'l Bit an enormous amount of harm, but he also guides her through her childhood and adolescence, and we are able to better sympathize with him knowing that he plays a lovingly tragic role in Li'l Bit's life.

Since Vogel describes the supporting actors as members of a Greek Chorus ("Male," "Female," and "Teenage"), it may be apt to view Uncle Peck as a tragic "hero," akin to the eponymous characters in the classic Greek tragedies *Oedipus* and *Medea*. Oedipus attempts to outrun his fate, which foretells that he will murder his father and bed his mother. Although *How I Learned to Drive* disregards most notions of murder, save for Peck's death, the incestuous comparison is worth noting. Additionally, just as Li'l Bit questions "Who did it to you, Uncle Peck?" (86), another similarity can be made between Oedipus' and perhaps Peck's predetermined fate, which is out of each individuals' control despite his best intentions. If Peck was molested as a child, then his boundaries with and expectations for kids may be perverted to the point where he is haunted by a pedophiliac lust due to his childhood trauma. Meanwhile, *Medea* focuses more on betrayal and murder, and while most comparisons to *How I Learned to Drive* may seem like a stretch, the Greek play discusses violence against children in order to take vengeance against adultery. Specifically, Medea murders her children in response to her ex-husband's betrayal of her and her family. We could skew Vogel's plot to closer match *Medea*, but the main similarity is that Peck is scarred as a child, and thus seeks "violence" against the next generation's youth. Regardless, Vogel's Greek

Chorus in *How I Learned to Drive* invites comparisons to tragic heroes, and although Peck's fall from grace is not a long drop, Vogel's characterization of Peck as a tragic individual allows the audience to more easily sympathize with him.

Although Paula Vogel insists that she doesn't realize the political nature of her works in writing, or at least she doesn't realize the extent to which they are controversial, she still crafts an experience that guides an individual gently through a cacophony. *How I Learned to Drive* is a scrapbook detailing an individual's first unfortunate sexual experiences. The play is explicit, honest, full of broken love, and somehow equally as disgusting as it is beautiful. *How I Learned to Drive* plays out tragically for both the victim and the perpetrator, and we are left blaming someone off-screen who caused this pain, but the initial evil that caused the cycle of perversion is long dead. Instead, Vogel gently takes us to the end of the road and leaves us finally to ourselves, as we look back on something wrong, illegal, tragic, and beautiful.