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The Meeting of Modernity and Antiquity in How I Learned to Drive

Elizabeth Milo '11

A man drops to his knee and offers a young woman a ring. Simultaneously, that young woman tells her partner that she can no longer see him. In most plays, this scene would be either the comical high point of a romantic comedy, or the touching conclusion of a dramatic love story. In Paula Vogel's *How I Learned to Drive*, however, it gives you the heebie-jeebies. This man is the young girl's uncle, and this scene is the conclusion of their seven year affair that started when she was eleven years old. By the time we get to this scene in the play, although we are repulsed by the situation, we are also strangely sympathetic to the pedophile, and drawn into this twisted relationship. The story of a young girl being sexually manipulated by a grown-man is unfortunately one that we are all familiar with, but ambiguity is the key to what makes this play unique. Paula Vogel plays with various images of modernity and antiquity to create ambiguity surrounding the relationship of Li'l Bit and Peck in her Pulitzer Prize winning play, *How I Learned to Drive*; contrasting elements of the production design are meshed together, and character motifs are juxtaposed to create a recurring pattern of antiquity and modernity clashing and resolving into an ambiguity which complicates the difficult themes of this play.

To create a tension in the theatrical design of the play, Vogel reaches back into the annals of theatrical history and pulls out the Greek Chorus to use as a device. Today, theatrical and historical scholars are still debating how the chorus was used and what its true purpose was because we have so few records about what performances were really like (Weiner 205). Some things are clear to us, though, such as the role of the Chorus in supporting the storyline. We know from the texts passed down to us that the Chorus did not create the story, but rather supported it. They were there to act as a sounding board for the characters (Arnott 27). Vogel uses the Chorus in much the same way in her play by setting up the Chorus as the body of characters surrounding Peck and Li'l Bit. The Greek Chorus, as it is called in *How I Learned to Drive*, calls for a male in his 30-40s, a woman in her 30-50s, and a teenage girl, age 21-25, who can look as young as possible. These three actors play all of the supporting parts in the show, including the mother, grandmother, grandfather, aunt, and taunting classmates. They are important because they help shape the situation, but they do not propel the story forward. Li'l Bit is responsible for the narration of the show and its progression, and the Chorus is just there to give Li'l Bit and Peck a framework.

One of the jobs of the original Greek Chorus was to announce deaths or bring in dead bodies during performances to navigate the three unities of Greek Theater. The convention of the unity of time, place, and action meant that most of the fighting, suicides, murders, and deaths that happened in Greek tragedies took place offstage and then were announced by the Chorus. For example, in *The Trojan Women*, when Andromache's son, Astyanax, is condemned to death and murdered, he is taken away, and then his body is carried back onto the stage on a shield. This convention avoided the complexity of staging deaths and theatrical events in an open arena with limited technical equipment (Arnott 12). In today's age of theatre technology, killing an entire army onstage can be done with the push of a button, but Vogel chooses instead to employ a minimalist approach and use the Greek Chorus to avoid depicting much of the graphic nature of Li'l Bit and Peck's relationship. At the very end of the play, when we finally go back to the very beginning of the molestation, the voice of young Li'l Bit is performed by the Young Female Greek Chorus member, who is much younger than the actress playing Li'l Bit. In a way, the graphic molestation of a young girl is announced by the Chorus, and all we see is two adults on stage, one of whom represents the child.

Vogel chooses to further the ambiguous feeling of the play by employing a modern, minimalist approach with the set along with her use of the Greek Chorus. The set and staging convey the sexual relationship between Li'l Bit and Peck without being overly graphic. For example, the first scene of the play is just the two characters sitting in chairs next to each other, supposedly in a parked Buick, facing forward so that all gestures are pantomimed to the front of the house. The sexual and intimate encounter taking place in the car loses much of its charge when the element of actual touch is removed. Vogel bookends the play with scenes about Li'l Bit and Peck in the car involving him touching her in some way, but the middle of the play consists of discreet encounters void of physical interaction. Certainly there is a sexual charge between the characters and sexual underpinnings in the conversation, but there is a significant lack of sexual action happening during the course of the play. By side-stepping much of the graphic nature of the relationship, Vogel casts it in an ambiguous light: we are focused on the feelings the characters have for each other because that is what we are seeing, not the inappropriate contact between an older man and a younger girl.

The minimalist set also opens up the opportunity for the technical design of the show to become a more important aspect of the production. In her script, Vogel includes stage directions about music, projection slides, traffic signs, and overhead announcements that all go against any suggestion of a standard set construct. In her production notes, she encourages that the Greek Chorus be used as part of the environment for the show, and that technology be played with as much as possible. It seems at first that incorporating these very modern and almost avant-garde theatrical elements

would clash too much with the traditional Greek Chorus, but in a way the bare, traditional Greek approach to theater has become the new, modern vision by deconstructing sets and veering away from the realistic. Most scholars agree that the original Greek Chorus was intended to be an ensemble that sang and danced, although how and to what extent no one knows (Weiner 205). But no matter how they were dancing, it is obvious the point of their theatrics was to set different emotional tones for different parts of the play. Their singing and dancing was a break from the monotony of long, dramatic monologues, and created an interlude during which the audience could rest. The chorus created a feeling for the audience through their performance that enhanced the audience's experience of the actors' performances (Kitto 7). In much the same way, Vogel's Chorus, combined with modern effects such as music and slideshows, creates an ambiguous feeling in the play due to this clash of modernity and antiquity. The historic theatrical device of using a Greek chorus is used in tandem with a modern approach to staging, sound, and technical design to create an uncomfortable environment for a very uncomfortable story.

This modern approach to portraying a story about one of the oldest problems in human history sheds a new light on an all too familiar situation. By positioning the characters in a set that allows for them to show the intricacies of their relationship through means other than physical interaction, we see the ambiguity of the situation emerge. In a way, it is this very ambiguity and lack of graphic visuals that makes us feel the most uncomfortable about *How I Learned to Drive*. There is a part of us that wants Peck to be happy, and wants the love story to have a happy ending, but we recognize the repulsiveness of that idea at the same time. It becomes far too easy at time to forget that this play is about pedophilia and incest, two of the biggest taboos in our culture (Coen 30). This momentary hesitation to condemn Uncle Peck that we experience is the most unsettling thing about this play.

Vogel further propels the theme of antiquity versus modernity through her representation of Peck and Li'l Bit with symbols and motifs. The most conspicuous motif throughout the play is the recurring references to driving. Written into the script are numerous allusions to cars and driving, and Vogel suggests that signs and music be used that will evoke such memories. She creates a rhythm in the play by interspersing two different patterns of vocalizations throughout the play in a back-and-forth system. The story is punctuated by the regular interruption of the Voice making reminders about safe driving tips, and this is balanced by the narration by Li'l Bit of where we are going in time. This lurching back and forth immediately puts one to mind of driving in a stick-shift.

The symbol of the car does not only represent Li'l Bit's position in time, but also represents her. When Peck first begins to legitimately teach Li'l Bit how to drive, he insists that she learn to drive like a man. The subtext of his speech is "the best offense is a good defense," and "there's no

crying in baseball." The ambiguity of their relationship is played up in this scene because Li'l Bit begins to flirt with her uncle, and he gently chastises her, explaining that it is important for her to pay attention to the task at hand. The wildness of the car and the giddiness of Li'l Bit make for a nice parallel, but the metaphor goes beyond their temperaments and extends into how Peck views them. When Li'l Bit asks Peck why the car is a she, he says:

Good question. It doesn't have to be a "she"—but when you close your eyes and think of someone who responds to your touch—someone who performs just for you and gives you what you ask for—I guess I always see a "she." You can call her what you like. (Vogel 34)

This is blatant evidence of the way Peck views both women and Li'l Bit, but what is particularly interesting is that Li'l Bit replies (to us), "I closed my eyes—and decided not to change the gender" (Vogel 35). She internalizes what Peck says so deeply that she views not only herself but all other feminine things as malleable and susceptible to the will of others. Looking back at Peck's answer a second time, however, brings out a few more points of interest. He begins by disarming her with a compliment and praise for her intelligence, and by admitting he could be wrong. After he explains his reasoning, he gives Li'l Bit the option to choose her own pronoun for the car, but phrases it in a way that reinforces his decision to call it a she. Peck manipulates Li'l Bit in that situation in the same way that he describes manipulating the car, thus putting Li'l Bit and the car on the same level.

In a more positive way, Li'l Bit equates herself with the car, bringing up Vogel's recurring theme of modernity. The car is meant to be something new, exciting, and youthful in this play. At the end, Peck buys a new Cadillac El Dorado as a gift for Li'l Bit, but it is also for himself, both as something he has always wanted, and as a way to get her to go driving with him. The car is Peck's offering to Li'l Bit, and his way of keeping her reigned in, but in the end, she reclaims the car as a symbol for herself and her freedom. All of the cars in this play are described as capable, fast, steady, not old clunkers that are about to fall apart. In the end, Li'l Bit says that after her uncle first molested her, she retreated from her body and into her head, but she says, "The nearest sensation I feel—of flight in the body—I guess I feel when I'm driving" (Vogel 57). Her description of driving in the car at the end of the play involves crisp weather, a radio, highways and, in general, a very modern image of travel. The car continues to be an image of modernity and allows Li'l Bit to hold on to some of the youth she lost by being in such an unhealthy relationship with her uncle. It gives her the opportunity to drive away.

If Li'l Bit is representative of the future, the car, and modernity, then Peck is obviously the foil to that, representing age and antiquity. He lusts after the car in the same that he lusts after Li'l Bit, hoping that she will make him younger. In fact, the play begins with a monologue from Li'l Bit describing the night air as "the kind of night that makes a middle-aged man

with a mortgage feel like a country boy again" (Vogel 9). Peck tries to position his age as maturity, and hide his advances behind a pretense of Southern charm. In some ways, though, he really is stuck in the past. Multiple times throughout the play Peck refers to the way things used to be, and a desire for the good old days. He even becomes nostalgic about a time and place that is only reminiscent to where he grew up. When Li'l Bit and Peck go out to celebrate her getting her driver's license, he says, "This establishment reminds me a lot of places back home" (Vogel 17). Peck makes a big show out of telling Li'l Bit the history of the town and the restaurant, and ordering her a drink. He further embeds himself in the past and antiquity by explaining the gentleman's code:

In South Carolina, like here on the Eastern Shore, they're—"European." Not so puritanical. And very understanding if gentlemen wish to escort very attractive young ladies who might want a before-dinner cocktail. If you want one, I'll order one (Vogel 18).

Peck is nostalgic for a time and a system that would have been accepting of his relationship with Li'l Bit and condone his behavior publicly. However, by always looking back, he is not allowing himself to see the troubled relationship that is in front of him.

By always playing the Southern gentleman, Peck puts up a shield from others accusing him of being too forceful, or perhaps to keep himself from being too forceful. His mask of propriety is something he really believes in, which complicates the situation because it keeps him from seeing that what he is doing is wrong. Over and over, Peck reminds Li'l Bit that they will only go as far as she is willing or comfortable to go. He tells her that if she is not ready for something, they will not do it and, in his defense, he keeps his word—at least as far as we see. Through the entire play, we do not see any of those things happening between Li'l Bit and Peck, which adds to the ambiguity and the tension of the play. This is undercut, however, by the end when we see their first car ride together, and see some kind of molestation take place. We also see Li'l Bit's mother warn her about her uncle, but Li'l Bit insists on going to the beach with him. This kind of back and forth volley is repeated over and over throughout the play, not only in the dialogue, but also in the themes the reader and audience see recurring. For example, when Li'l Bit confronts Peck about his drinking, she offers spending time with her as a reward for his not drinking anymore. But by offering such a gift, she puts a lot of power in his hands that he could hold over her head—she is now constantly faced with the threat of his beginning to drink again. This constant undercutting is the ambiguity that Paula Vogel so painstakingly creates through the tension between modernity and antiquity in the relationship between Li'l Bit and Peck.

We see this back and forth pattern played out on a larger scale through the scenes of the play. For example, the scene where Li'l Bit gets drunk and Peck takes care of her is directly followed by the scene where

Peck goes fishing with Bobby, which is directly followed by the scene where the family has a conversation about orgasms and Grandfather chasing Grandmother around. There is a rhythm to the order of these scenes: dialogue, monologue, dialogue; but beyond the pacing there is a pattern in the degree of sexual tension in each scene. The first scene seems to end well with Peck saying he will respect Li'l Bit even when she is drunk, but then during the one-sided conversation with Bobby things become more and more uncomfortable until, as Ben Brantley puts it, "[It] is an act of mercy...that the scene ends just as he begins to stroke Bobby's head" ("Pedophile"). The current of sexual innuendos and underpinnings lightens up when the play switches back to the scene with the family discussing orgasms. This constant tension reinforces the ambiguity and uncertainty that the audience feels about what is happening in the relationship between Peck and Li'l Bit.

After maintaining such tension for the entire play, it is kind of Paula Vogel to write a conclusion that offers some resolution. With the same care that she showed in walking the line by writing a sympathetic story about a pedophile, she allows Li'l Bit—and us—to forgive Peck for what he did. With age, Li'l Bit gains wisdom and insight into what made her uncle do the things he did: "Now that I'm old enough, there are some questions I would have liked to have asked him. Who did it to you, Uncle Peck? How old were you? Were you eleven?" (Vogel 54). We feel like it is okay to pity him because of his sad demise and, more importantly, because Li'l Bit forgives him. With amazing composure, Li'l Bit comes to terms with the fact that she loved her uncle, but that what they did was wrong, and then she moves on from it. If Peck really was a victim of abuse as a child, then Li'l Bit learns to end the cycle with forgiveness. The clashing chord of modernity and antiquity finds a resolution at the end of the play, so that the ambiguity fades away, and Li'l Bit is left on a good note. This unconventional play approaches a delicate subject with great skill and a small degree of trepidation, but thankfully, in the end, there is peace.

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