



**PERFORMING SECRECY IN
PAULA VOGEL'S "HOW I LEARNED TO DRIVE"¹**

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***Abstract:** Paula Vogel's 1997 play charts a girl's journey reflecting the edges of nascent identity and draws her profile by gradually unveiling a secret kept for years in silence; it delineates several delicate moments when the ambivalent feelings of participating characters border on problematic behavioral patterns resulting in the unmasked identity profile of the protagonist nicknamed Li'l Bit. Haunted by the living edge of the past and situated in an indeterminate present, the play reconstructs, in cinematic flashbacks, the metaphor of the driving lessons as stages of Li'l Bit's sexual maturation and highlights her progressive awakening through the presence and subsequent absence of her hebephilic uncle Peck. I will analyze, with the theoretical help of Enikő Bollobás's theories of performing the subject, various types of real and symbolic transgressions and will highlight the function of several stage objects and settings, as well as the protagonist's relation with certain realities these suggest in constructing the thespian space of confession.*

Key words: performance, performative, perform, secret, confession, identity.

Paula Vogel's (b. 1951) play entitled *How I Learned to Drive* (written in 1997 and Pulitzer Prize winner in 1998) touches upon taboo subjects crafted into controversial allegories of incest and hebephilia, which are revealed step by step in a confessional drama that is, at the same time, a lesson in car driving. The choice of this drama for this conference talk, similar to other plays inhabiting my teaching canon of modern American drama at the University of Szeged, was first conditioned by the general marginalized position of dramas in the American literary canon even in the third millennium. As Susan Harris Smith wrote in *American Drama. The Bastard Art*, until the 1980s American drama was considered an "unwanted bastard child" among other literary genres, with a strong academic and critical bias in "anthologies and literary histories, college texts and curricula, literary magazines, scholarly journals and critical histories," with the genre itself almost "written out of the American literary canon" because of the "culturally dominant puritan distaste for and suspicion of the theater," while successful and in many

¹ This is a revised, expanded version of a previous study on Edward Albee's and Paula Vogel's characters and identities from the chapter "Identity at Thresholds" in "How I Learned to Drive" and "The Goat or Who Is Sylvia" from *Cultural Vistas and Sites of Identity. Essays on Literature, Film, and American Studies* (Szeged: AMERICAN eBooks, 2011).



cases even box-office hits of various drama performances in the US highlighted unseen facets of identity presented through a “complicated genre that was and is socially created, distributed, experienced, and shared in a multiplicity of ways” (Harris Smith, 2006). Secondly, the introspection into the identity profiles of modern and contemporary characters at thresholds is best at home within the thespian genre, the most democratic form of literary arts. Thirdly, dramatic texts have an increased potential for the interaction of identities mainly by disclosing secrets untold for many years, decades or even centuries and given that dramas are written primarily to be performed these performances, the plays become adapted ‘responses’ contextualized within specific circumstances. Last but not least, Vogel’s *How I Learned to Drive* belongs to the category of plays interrogating “perverse behavior” identities which, according to Shelley Fisher Fishkin, disrupt celebratory national narratives (Fisher Fishkin, 2005) or mainstream plots and add other possible ways of identity expression to the repertoire of culturally taboo subjects.

Contemporary American dramas focus predominantly on the collapse of the nuclear family by exposing non-traditional family forms (Cristian, 2006), as well as confused relationships between spouses and among family members; besides, more recently, many plays offer close introspection into the taboo topics of pornography, prostitution, AIDS, homosexuality, sexual abuse, incest, bestiality, etc. This is what Christopher Bigsby calls the “theater of transformation” (Bigsby, 2004), an exquisite form of theater in which identity is ensconced under the mask of ‘normality’ and stereotypes with the aim of showing how the pressure of tradition and social prejudice shapes individuals and the subsequent social performances of the subject. These types of plays depend on the very system they oppose; therefore, they become essentially rebellious (Bigsby, 2004) and, as such, have a substantial potential for change.

The transgression of secrecy in *How I Learned to Drive* can be best surveyed through the figure of the play’s protagonist. Vogel’s main character, Li’l Bit, is victimized by an incestuous desire and the play focuses on the behavioral uncertainties and on the sense of ambiguity resulting from an early sexual abuse that haunts the central character. The play charts a girl’s journey through time that reflects the edges of her nascent identity and draws her profile through certain situations by delineating several delicate moments when the ambivalent feelings of the participating characters (including Uncle Peck with whom she has an odd kinship), bordering on problematic behavioral patterns that result in an unmasked identity profile. Li’l Bit is transgressing of her own secrecy by *performing* her own role through the memory games she plays out of Li’l Bit.

As Enikő Bollobás writes in *They Aren’t Until I Call Them. Performing the Subject in American Literature*, performativity “has the ability to signal the borderline, ambivalent and receding between the text and outside it” significantly contributing “to the understanding of the constructedness of the real and the reality of the constructed world and how we can know, if at all, where the boundaries are” (Bollobás, 2010). Performativity, as described by Bollobás, has two facets: *performance* (with the last syllable italicized), which reflects “a particular mode of performativity, characterized by a mimetic replaying



of norms and the replaying of ruling ideologies when constructing the subject” that is intrinsically connected with the *performative* aspect (with its last syllable italicized) of identity construction that “refers to another mode of performativity characterized by a resistance to ruling ideologies and the bringing about of new discursive entities in subject construction” (Bollobás, 2010). These two aspects highlighting the performativity of a literary subject merge into a fully “usable theory” leading to an efficient critical strategy defined as “performative constructionism” (Bollobás, 2010). Li’l Bit’s performative constructionism through her *performance* and her *performative* aspects charts for the attentive seeker a life full of secrets and takes off the veil from well-kept, unknown private stories masked, in most cases, under the disguise of accepted social norms.

Launched in an indeterminate present, *How I Learned to Drive* is constructed in cinematic flashbacks which gradually present—through the metaphor of driving lessons and gear positions—the stages of sexual maturation and the progressive awakening of a the main character with a hypocoristic double nickname, who is the protagonist of the drama and the narrating voice-over, the *performative* figure and the one marking the *performance*, too. Uncle Peck, the antagonist, is a former WWII veteran, who is obsessed with his young relative, whom he teaches to drive in rural Maryland. He tries to keep up the appearance of a happy marriage with Li’l Bit’s aunt despite the fact that he is irresistibly drawn to his child-niece.

The disturbing hebephilic plot of this drama follows the route of Li’l Bit’s puberty years and maps the points of her identity crisis revealed through several driving lessons the main character recalls later during her adult years. In an interview with Elizabeth Farnsworth in 1998, Vogel commented about the stir the play had produced after its premiere at Off-Broadway’s Vineyard Theater by emphasizing that her drama was not only about the traumatic motifs of the Lolita syndrome but also about the ways in which the acts of remembering and the voicing different moments of crisis can pave the way to solutions for traumas and stressed the importance of “healing, forgiving and moving on” (qtd. in Farnsworth, 1998); all therapeutic strategies similar to Freud’s chimney-sweeping talking cure.

The play’s bittersweet tone and style as well as the open treatment of sexuality and the informal air of naivety recalling the innocent spirit of an Eden-like mythic space of encounter neighbors on the comic terrains of contemporary talk shows and television sit-coms. Nevertheless, this comic switch is deadly serious—as happens in most jokes. The naming of the characters in *How I Learned to Drive* is the first indication of the distress that lies at the bottom of the plot and indeed, the protagonist points out to its potential damage for everyone involved:

“LI’L BIT. In my family, folks tend to get nicknamed for their genitalia. Uncle Peck for example. My mama’s adage was “the tittles wonder.” [...] Even with my family background, I was sixteen or so before I realized that pedophilia did not mean people who loved to bicycle.” (Vogel, 1998)



The adult Li'l Bit relocates the objects and the movements of her own car that connect her to the traumatic, past stories behind each item. The automobile radio, the fuel tank, the tires, the doors, the key, the seatbelt, the dashboard, the side, and especially the rearview mirror, are all checkpoints, borders, milestones of her identity construction. Li'l Bit's sexuality is symbolically located between gear shifts and speed limits; she extracts her behavioral patterns from driving rules and makes up new signifying practices in a drama of her own, where Uncle Peck becomes a passive observer and, finally, a victim of his own desires. The material inventory of the car is both a psychic projection and a landmark of Li'l Bit's development; she shapes her identity by remembering, reassessing, in a performative act, these objects and the function they have. Among the most traumatic ones is the radio through which she evokes the music she used to hear while learning to drive.

"LI'L BIT. [...] The nearest sensation I feel—of flight in the body—I guess I feel when I'm driving. [...] I filled the tank last night, and had the oil checked. Checked the tires, too. You've got to treat her... with respect. Then I get in the car. [...] I lock the doors. And turn the key. Then I adjust the most important control on the dashboard—the radio— [...] I adjust my seat. Fasten my seatbelt. Then I check the right side mirror—check the left side." (Vogel, 1998)

She is able to build and rebuild her identity later only in relation to these objects, first, through a process of mimesis and then by confining to the norms her society imposed upon her, by living as she was expected to behave; this is the *performance* of Li'l Bit as an obeying eleven-year-old child. When she grows up from her double diminutive, and learns her lesson not only in driving but also in living on her own, the protagonist turns these acts of compulsory behavior (found in the so-called "IDLING IN THE NEUTRAL GEAR," "DRIVING IN THE FIRST GEAR," "IMPLIED CONSENT," etc. scenes of the play) into verbal plots of resistance and subversive speech acts, into her *performative* new life, and so she finally can reveal her burdening secrets (as, for example, in the "DRIVING IN TODAY'S WORLD" scene). As an adult person, the protagonist is aware of the cause of her present identity problems and manages to acknowledge herself as a woman in full control of not only the car she drives but also of her body and life.

However, it takes a long time and a series of *performances* to understand and bridge past things; Li'l Bit is already thirty-five-years-old when she starts recalling her first driving lessons, which took place when she was ten. The protagonist-narrator remembers the seducer-victim set-up of her driving hours and by remembering it she acknowledges its traumatic content. "That day was the last day I lived in my body," Li'l Bit says, emphasizing that afterwards she "retreated above the neck," and lived inside the "fire" in her head ever since (Vogel, 1998). Since she has 'lost' the innocence of her body, the protagonist substitutes it with an external object, *a* car that becomes, for a while, her



secret bodily projection. The automobile she drives as an adult, in turn, becomes the metaphor of her symbolically mutilated body that cannot 'live' any more below the neck. Similar to the role of a character in a drama, the Buick model she drives (denoting the oldest active American car brand alluding to the country's mainstream car culture, the status symbol for adult Americans in the sixties) represents not only an empty carcass of her past (a *form*) but also the instrument of her future liberation (an act, a process). Her past identity-performance contains the main character's future performative capacities as well, all embodied, transposed and transgressed in a metaphorical vehicle, in the form of the car she drives. Li'l Bit voices in the last scene of the play ("DRIVING IN TODAY'S WORLD") the determination to have respect for her newly found self (performative) by transposing the secrets of her youth (performance) into that of the car she drives as an adult, her own car now:

"(Li'l Bit *moves to the car with pleasure*) [...] You've got to treat her... with respect." This form of transgressing bodies through performative investment I call per/form. Li'l Bit thus per/forms when she says in the last scene that "[t]he nearest sensation I feel—of flight in the body—I guess I feel when I'm driving." (Vogel, 1998)

At the end of the drama, what Li'l Bit sees in the rearview mirror of her automobile is not the lingering history of a guilty distress, a well-kept secret that haunts her into continuously looking back but rather an objective past she finally understands and which she has actively used to gain her own corporeal and mental freedom. By talking about her escapades with Uncle Peck there is also an additional release of tension: the glimpse back becomes a memory of learning, a form of understanding rather than a(nother) traumatic episode. Through it, the protagonist learns ways in which she can relate her body to the pleasures of driving rather than that of (former) sexual assault. The secret is finally expelled – as the car's exhaust gas – and she reaches the safe boundaries of her newly per/formed identity: the new woman now knows how to protect herself by fastening the seat belt and adjusting not only the driver's seat but also her entire self into a position that shifts from that of the learner to that of the power holder, to finally floor the throttle in a redefined version of the automobile as a conscious woman's free body.

Moreover, in the "SHIFTING FORWARD FROM THIRD TO FOURTH GEAR" scene, the protagonist seeks to go beyond her own secrets by finding out why her uncle became the way he was; as an adult, Li'l Bit suspects that Peck's hebephilic drives might have been rooted in his own childhood in an abuse he never talked of but which was somehow always lurking in his deeds, an abuse that was secretly and permanently haunting him. "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, 1998)—she finally asks (Uncle) Peck, even though only after he dies. Li'l Bit will never find an answer to her shocking and sudden inquiry but by asking these



daringly intimate questions she becomes, through voicing Peck's possible childhood traumas, more and more in control of her own past—by trying to understand Uncle Peck's unusual behavior as an adult. Her ambiguous compassion at this point, however, does not show any identification with Uncle Peck as victim; on the contrary, this *performative* act distances Li'l Bit from her own sexually saturated circumstances to objectively see her own past through another's abused position.

Li'l Bit's personality undergoes several changes as she grows from the stage of innocence symbolized by the learner status during years of driving lessons to conscious adulthood, as a mature driver. The demarcation lines between the stages of this symbolic progress are compared to gear changes showing the stages of the protagonist's development at the threshold of childhood and maturity, at the rough edges of delicate questions and even more delicate answers. Gradually peeling away the masks of her juvenile secrets, she goes from first to second and third gear, then to the reverse gear and neutral gear until she reaches full maturity, represented in the play by the grown-up woman's use of the automatic gear. In Vogel's surrealist approach, the protagonist undergoes a transformative process of telling-acting-living, a complex transgression to the stage of her *per/formed* identity liberating Li'l Bit from the tyranny of the untold secrets. She finally finds her voice and builds her new, *per/formed* identity out of various taboos and silenced issues. Talking of this vital transformation, Ann Pellegrini said that Vogel's Li'l Bit cannot and is not even willing to escape her memories and her past that are, at the same time, her burden but also her greatest gift (Pellegrini, 2005); she molds her *performance* with *performative* acts that result in her *per/formed* identity as an adult. With this *per/formed* position she takes up an unusual thespian position: that of an almost omniscient narrator endowed with an authoritative voice in a plot that otherwise would have only victimized her character.

Vogel makes not only her protagonist but also the audience subject to what Bigsby saw as a "constant reassessment of their attitude towards the characters" and, by doing so, the playwright disturbs "earlier assumptions and make[s] the observer aware of his or her shifting moral perspective" (Bigsby, 2004). With this particular drama, Vogel performs a morally challenging journey, too; she explores and integrates lives that are "tangential to the thrust of her society" (Bigsby, 2004) and exposes problematic edges of identity by making visible the volatile nature of compulsory lines drawn by the society and the unforeseen effects these metaphorical frontiers might involve. According to Howard Sherman, Vogel does not write, nor intends to create thesis plays; for her, theater is a place of public discourse, a threshold ground where maverick voices must be made heard (Sherman, 2004). Theater, Sherman continues, is in Vogel's opinion about confronting serious issues, especially if those go astray from the main borders of social discourses and that is why she prefers writing plays that are upsetting and disturbing (Sherman, 2004).

And indeed, Vogel's work exhibits traumatic experiences, uncovers silences and secrets and portrays an unusual character profile through a mode of transgressive writing



generating a threshold territory of creative energies, a no man's land of unusual identity constructions where figural or real borders are made arbitrary. Through *How I Leant to Drive*, Vogel interrogate facets of complex and sometimes extremely difficult questions concerning identities and identity crises present in contemporary American culture and society and beyond it as well but without imposing any value judgments or creating any moralizing conclusions. This play, among similar modern and contemporary American dramas, is probably among the best contemporary dramas to expose those special cultural signs that echo the arbitrariness of certain limitations by depicting problematic identity positions. If seen in a larger frame, this play is, as many other important episodes in the development of a culture, a truly authentic representative act dramatizing inherent possibilities in a given cultural situation.

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