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**Before You Drive:
Dark Comedy and Satire in *How I Learned to Drive***

The discussion of dark comedy and its role alongside satire is a rather young one. The conversation has mostly pertained to literature and delved into film, but theatre is rarely mentioned. If it is, it is paired typically with the theatre of the absurd—a modernist aesthetic closely linked with existentialism. But what about more contemporary works? Paula Vogel’s 1997 *How I Learned to Drive* received the Pulitzer Prize for Drama and is an excellent example of a post-modern piece that deals with controversial issues of pedophilia, misogyny, and incest, yet comes with a heavy dose of comedy. *Drive* tells the story of Li'l Bit as she grows up in rural Maryland and follows the complicated, sexual relationship between her and her aunt’s husband, Uncle Peck. Though Vogel steers clear of applying many comedic elements to the topic of incest itself, she lays a heavy satirical hand on the supposedly “sacred” institutions of the 1960’s household that fail to rescue (if not exacerbate) the protagonist’s repeated molestation by her uncle. But what is the purpose of comedy in such a play whose central plot is in the realm of tragedy, and what, if any solutions are proposed by the play?

Before jumping to these discussions, it is worthwhile to look at the medium of theatre and its suitability for satire. Academic and author Matthew Hodgart said that in satire “the criticism of the world is abstracted from its ordinary setting...and transformed into a high form of ‘play,’ which gives us both the recognition of our responsibilities and the irresponsible joy of make-believe” (11). Hodgart was talking about satire in written

literature form, and though he perhaps means *play* in the sense of childlike manipulation, he unintentionally makes the case himself that a *theatrical play* is well suited for satire. It allows an audience to simply be entertained but simultaneously self-reflect and view the world in a new light.

It is common knowledge to any theatre professional that a larger audience makes for larger laughs. Comedy theorist Henri Bergson explains that humor serves a social function and usually requires an “echo” or a community (64). This also occurs in movie theaters when there is a large audience. Yet unlike in the realm of cinema, theatre is distinctive in that each audience member has a unique experience depending on where they are seated and the execution of the particular performance they attend. They are inevitably alienated and this also serves a primary service to comedy by distancing the audience from the action onstage. The ability to analyze at a distance is crucial in comedic technique and is particularly necessary for a piece such as *Drive* given the gravity of the play’s topic. Bergson explains that the recipient of a joke must have an “absence of feeling” or lack of emotional investment in the joke subject if laughter is to result, for “laughter has no greater foe than emotion” (63). This “momentary anesthesia of the heart” creates an abstraction that keeps the humor from offending the audience (64).

In sum, satire “demands a high degree both of commitment to and involvement with the painful problems of the world, and simultaneously a high degree of abstraction from the world” (Hodgart 11). The format of *Drive*, which is entirely told through the fragmented memories of Li'l Bit, creates an “element of fantasy,” which serves the dark subject matter well, according to Hodgart: “The satirist does not paint an objective

picture of the evils he describes, since pure realism would be too oppressive. Instead he usually offers us a travesty of the situation, which at once directs our attention to actuality and permits an escape from it” (12). Vogel does not use travesty, but instead gives her characters false, sexualized names and employs the use of a dream sequence-style structure, quickly and frequently changing scenes, often by introducing new scenes with segues typical in driving lesson tapes. For example, when Uncle Peck is buying a sixteen-year-old Li'l Bit her first alcoholic beverages, resulting in her becoming quite drunk, a voice interjects with: “Vehicle Failure. Even with careful maintenance and preventive operation of your automobile, it is all too common for us to experience an unexpected breakdown” (1591). By using the metaphor of driving and allowing her characters some anonymity, Vogel adds several levels of distancing from an otherwise disturbing subject.

Upon initial analysis, it is assumed that comedy such as this only serves the purpose of comedic relief in the midst of a tragic story. But is there a larger purpose to dark comedy than distracting us from unpleasant thoughts? Author and academic Lisa Colletta writes in her book on dark humor and social satire, “comedy is used to make sense out of an increasingly senseless world...it presents violent or traumatic events and questions the values and perceptions of its readers as it represents, simultaneously, the horrifying and the humorous” (*Dark Humor* 2-3). This questioning of values and perceptions is exemplified through the common dark humor elements of ambivalence, confused chronology, and an unreliable narrative stance. All three are used continuously throughout the play, jumping back and forth through Li'l Bit's past and even allowing her the liberty of distorting memories if she prefers not to think about them. For example, in a scene that has escalated to Li'l Bit's mother and grandparents shouting at each other, the

latter telling the former that they hold her responsible for being impregnated by Li'l Bit's father (a hauntingly similar dialogue occurring later between Li'l Bit and her mother in regards to Uncle Peck), Li'l Bit "freezes" the other characters, exclaiming to the audience, "Oh, please! I still can't bear to listen to it after all these years." Suddenly, the characters unfreeze and break out into a Motown song, transitioning into the radio music of the next scene (1595). Distortion is a common comedic technique, though rarely with such a literal translation. Li'l Bit's ability to alter the story to suit her own needs emphasizes the dark humor of the piece, forcing the audience to question the realism of their perceptions and further distance them from our woeful protagonist.

Li'l Bit consistently falls victim to the conflicting philosophies of her family throughout the play. There is not a single scene between Li'l Bit and her family members that does not cast an exposing and unflattering light on the conventions of family. This is a common theme in black humor, which "bitterly ridicules institutions, value systems, and traditions" (Pratt xix). This particular form of humor, where we watch as a young girl is manipulated by her elders, pulled in two opposing directions, is reminiscent of Bergson's theory of a "dancing jack" (111). Bergson himself says, "all that is serious in life comes from our freedom...all that comes from us and is our very own, these are the things that give life its oftentimes dramatic and generally grave aspect" (111-112). Bergson points out that comedy surrounding the revocation of free will is apropos for dark humor and that is precisely what we see in the family's treatment of Li'l Bit.

Vogel takes this theme in stride during the aforementioned scene in which Li'l Bit is drinking for the first time. As the scene continues, a memory of her mother chimes in sporadically, reciting "A Mother's Guide to Social Drinking" (1589). The monologue

starts out virtuous enough, urging that a lady is wise to never leave her drink unattended. But as Li'l Bit's sobriety decreases, so does her mother's. It isn't long before she is giving tips on how to invoke one's own gag reflexes and refresh oneself afterward ("Don't be afraid to dunk your head if necessary. A wet woman is still less conspicuous than a drunk woman") (1590). The ironic disunity of the format (a mother's practical advice for women of class) and the content (unsophisticated and absurd advice) makes for a satisfying piece of satire, highlighting the unreliability of Li'l Bit's mother.

Her grandparents are no better, as they are consistently debasing marriage, love, and family traditions in the eyes of their young granddaughter. The latter occurs in an early scene:

LI'L BIT: Now my grandmother believed in all the sacraments of the church, to the day she died. She believed in Santa Claus and the Easter Bunny until she was fifteen. But she didn't believe in—
TEENAGE GREEK CHORUS (*as Grandmother*): —Orgasm!
(1592)

The humor of this passage stems from Vogel's use of zeugma, or the structural equating of things of greatly differing value. By comparing sex to Christian practices, Vogel humorously demeans the sacred institution of familial customs in the eyes of Li'l Bit. Her grandfather, who is clearly sexist, describes the day he took his wife to be his child-bride like something out of a National Geographic magazine:

MALE GREEK CHORUS (*as Grandfather*): —I picked your grandmother out of that herd of sisters just like a lion chooses the gazelle—the plump, slow, flaky gazelle dawdling at the edge of the herd—your sisters were too smart and too fast and too scrawny— (1593)

Though humorous to imagine, his description debases marriage and love to an animalistic and barbaric science. With examples like these to follow, it's no wonder Li'l Bit ends up looking for love and affection in the wrong place.

Contrasting humorous moments like these are disturbing scenes including the amateur Playboy photography shoot of a thirteen year old Li'l Bit in Uncle Peck's basement, and the initial molestation when she is only eleven years old. In theory, the quick transitions from laugh-out-loud funny to visceral horror would seem disjointed and out of place. But Terry Heller argues, "The purpose of juxtaposing humor and pathos is to create emotional tension or frustration. By repeatedly calling upon the reader to shift his interpretation of the incident, to laugh only to weep only to laugh only to weep again, [the author] suspends the reader between two poles. The reader desires to react, to release his accumulating emotional energies in some clear direction" (201). A clear example of this occurs in a scene reflecting on a memory in Li'l Bit's later years as a 27-year-old woman. She describes her seduction of a high school boy in a tongue-in-cheek manner, referring to it in terms of the story arc of a play:

And dramaturgically speaking, after the faltering and slightly comical "first act," there was the very briefest of intermissions, and an extremely capable and forceful and *sustained* second act. And after the second act climax and a gentle denouement—before the post-play discussion—I lay on my back in the dark and I thought about you, Uncle Peck. Oh. Oh—this is the allure. Being older. Being the first. Being the translator, the teacher, the epicure, the already jaded. This is how the giver gets taken. (1594)

This self-referential humor is a perfect example of post-modern irony ("Political Satire" 856). By comparing theatre to sex and poking fun at it's own medium, Vogel is able to evoke humor before swiftly transitioning into a more serious tone as Li'l Bit has her epiphany and understands her molester, finding herself in his shoes now. It's a dark

moment, but it is intensified even more by the “reversal from humor to horror” (Heller 212). This intensity can be used in two ways. According to Heller, “An author may wish to leave the reader in suspension, a useful technique in satire” (201). This technique is used in the aforementioned scenes between Li'l Bit and her family's unsavory childrearing, as they are never truly resolved; Li'l Bit never clearly comes to the conclusion that her family is the source of her problems. Again, the attack towards familial institutions is not the primary theme of the play. Satire is a way of reading and this is the case in *Drive*. Depending on how the show is directed, an audience may need to watch the play with a satirical attitude; otherwise the commentary will be lost (“Political Satire” 863).

But there is a second option for the use of juxtaposing humor and horror: “An author may wish to channel the emotional energy aroused by this frustration of response to produce commitment to some idea, either for its own sake or for the sake of some character” (Heller 201). Paula Vogel uses both of these techniques in *Drive*. The smaller scenes satirize the role of family, but the overall use of dark humor channels this emotional energy to drive the play to its end as well as to the catharsis of both Li'l Bit and her audience. It is not until the end of the play, after the growing tension created by the frustration of humor versus horror, that Li'l Bit comes to terms with her past and forgives both Uncle Peck and herself.

It was once thought that “black humor offers neither explicit nor implicit proposals for improving, reforming, or changing the painful realities on which it focuses” (Pratt xix). This is a dated belief, for, when paired with satire, dark humor can highlight what is wrong with society, implying potential corrections. *Drive's* entire structure

revolves around highlighting pivotal moments that led to Li'l Bit's demise and using the metaphor of the power that comes with driving. In one of her greatest moments of dark irony, Vogel gives this "helpful hint" through the driving instructor Voice:

Before You Drive. Always check under your car for obstructions—broken bottles, fallen tree branches, and the bodies of small children. Each year hundreds of children are crushed beneath the wheels of unwary drivers in their own driveways. Children depend on you to watch them." (1595)

In this moment of scathing satire, Vogel urges families to watch over their children, to protect them and save them from the dangers of the world—especially those dangers that may be lurking in one's own family. It is through Vogel's excellent use of dark comedy that she is able to satirize the inability of a young girl's family to raise her with the morals and sound judgment to avoid a tragedy that continues to haunt her for the next twenty-three years of her life.