



Volume 8, Issue 5, May 2021, p. 65-80

**Article Information**

***Article Type: Research Article***

***This article was checked by iThenticate.***

**Article History:**

*Received*

04/02/2021

*Received in revised form*

25/05/2021

*Available online*

28/05/2021

**FEMALE IDENTITY IN PAULA VOGEL'S *HOW I LEARNED TO DRIVE***

**Rasha Abdulmunem Azeez Al-Abdullah<sup>1</sup>**

**Abstract**

Li'l Bit is the main character of Paula Vogel's play *How I Learned to Drive* (1997). The audience witnesses in this play the formation of the female identity mainly in sexual terms. In other words, Li'l Bit forms her identity as a female through her growing body since the age of eleven. Her family mocks her growing body. There are sexual taunts made by her peers in the school as well. As Li'l Bit enters puberty, she is recognized in the school only because of her large breasts. Li'l Bit feels alienated from her body. Thus, family, culture, society, and school's abuse of her body participates in forming her identity. Vogel is expressing a public issue here about female identity formation. It is a process that is affected by various outer factors that shape Li'l Bit or any woman's identity. Although the female sexual identity defines a woman, she is not the one who defines it. The world around her defines her identity.

**Keywords:** pedophilia, molesting, taboo, traumatic past, the body.

---

<sup>1</sup> Asist. Prof. Dr. Rasha Abdulmunem Azeez Al-Abdullah, Iraq, Baghdad University/ College of Languages, [rasha.alabdullah@colang.uobaghdad.edu.iq](mailto:rasha.alabdullah@colang.uobaghdad.edu.iq).

## Introduction

Paula Vogel takes her audience on a journey of identity formation of Li'l Bit, the main character of her Pulitzer Prize-winning play *How I Learned to Drive* (1997). Li'l Bit narrates her past experience with Uncle Peck (her aunt's husband). The play is set in rural Maryland. It is a memory play that does not run chronologically. The readers first meet Li'l Bit at the age of seventeen (in 1969), then thirteen, eighteen, eleven, twenty-seven, and finally thirty-five. She reveals her sexually abusive relationship with Uncle Peck who molests her at the age of eleven while teaching her how to drive. The play is not an ordinary journey because it invites the readers to think in an inclusive way liberating them from the traditional frame of mind. It is a journey that makes even a child abuse "greyer than most would be prepared to acknowledge" (Bigsby 1999, 289). The main challenge of the play is the disorientation between molesting a child and teaching her driving lessons or life lessons. The main argument of the paper is about how Li'l Bit's female or sexual identity is formed by both her uncle's molesting and teaching.

The play opens with Li'l Bit at the age of seventeen, although her journey of identity formation starts at the age of eleven. She announces to the audience that "[s]ometimes to tell a secret, you first have to teach a lesson. We're going to start our lesson tonight on an early, warm summer evening" (Vogel 2009, 575). At the time the play opens, the relationship between Li'l Bit and Uncle Peck is in its middle way, and it is still not wholly comprehended by the readers. The readers witness formation of a female identity mainly in sexual terms. Peck is in his forties when the readers first meet him. He is an attractive man; he is kind and loved by his wife and his neighbors. He helps his wife with household chores and even Li'l Bit praises him for this spirit: "You're [Peck] the only man I know who does dishes . . . I think it's really nice" (Vogel 2009, 610). He is ready to help neighbors as well: Mary comments, "[e]veryone in the neighborhood borrows Peck . . . there's always a knock on our door for a jump start on cold mornings, when

anyone else needs a ride, or help shoveling the sidewalk” (Vogel 2009, 609). Peck decides to teach his young niece how to drive a car. It appears, however, to the audience that there are other kinds of lessons behind his teaching. The readers find out that Peck, in contrast to his nice personality, is sexually drawn to the young Li'l Bit. The very first scene of the play presents Peck desiring to spend just a second with Li'l Bit's “celestial orbs” (Vogel 2009, 577). He asks her if he can undo her and kiss her nipples. Li'l Bit seems reluctant but does not completely refuse.

Teaching Li'l Bit how to drive enables Peck to meet her alone. Vogel uses the driving lessons between them as “a metaphor for sexual initiation” (Saddik 2007, 165). Peck fondles Li'l Bit during the driving lessons. She takes her first driving lesson when she is eleven. Peck asks her whether she wants to drive. She fears at the beginning, but he finally succeeds in convincing her to drive. At the first time behind the wheel, he offers to make her sit on his lap where he starts molesting the young girl.<sup>1</sup> It is indeed her first lesson in sexuality as well as in driving. Peck introduces her to sexuality by putting his hands on her breasts. First, she accepts his touch and relaxes, but then she rejects him and steps out of the car. Vogel presents this scene almost at the end of the play. Before that, the audience might have considered this relationship as a love story, in spite of age difference and family relation. Now, the audience will reconsider all the previous lessons and situations between Li'l Bit and Peck to be a pedophile; the audience will reflect on what she has been learning throughout all the previous years. Yet, why does she respond to Peck or even keep attending his driving lessons?

Li'l Bit's father left her and her mother when Li'l Bit was a child. She and her mother live with Grandmother and Grandfather. What helps Peck to be close to Li'l Bit is her family, which is characterized by bleakness. Her family offers no comfort or understanding for her. Her family is of no help for her in forming her identity as a woman. The family's speech revolves around

sexuality but a sexuality that has no connection with genuine needs. The family offers merely mocking comments uttered by Li'l Bit's grandfather on her growing body. He leads a conversation about Li'l Bit's large breasts during dinner. He says, "[i]f Li'l Bit gets any bigger, we're gonna haveta buy a wheelbarrow to carry in front of her" (Vogel 2009, 579). His remark makes her furious because she thinks that she needs privacy. Her grandfather, nonetheless, goes on commenting on her desire to study in college. In his opinion, education is useless for her. He says that "[w]hat does she need a college degree for? She's got all the credentials she'll need on her chest," (Vogel 2009, 580) and he wonders that "[h]ow is Shakespeare going to help her lie on her back in the dark?" (Vogel 2009, 580). In a later conversation with her mother and grandmother about sex, Li'l Bit gets only confusion. The mother tells her that sex is nice and does not hurt if the man and woman love each other, whereas her grandmother describes sex as something ugly and painful. Even the names and nicknames of the family are driven from their genitalia. Li'l Bit is named by her mother when she first whipped Li'l Bit's diapers and parted her legs and saw the "[j]ust a little bit" (Vogel 2009, 578) that was between her legs. Therefore, for her family, her identity as a woman lies in her sexuality, and the lack of sexual boundaries in her family fuels the action of the play (Saddik 2007, 165).

Fed up with her family, Li'l Bit resorts to Peck, who ironically is the one who understands her and offers her comfort. He is the one who is always ready to listen to her more than any other family member. He deals with her agony seriously: "[y]ou're [Peck] the only one she'll [Li'l Bit] listen to when she gets like this [angry] . . . Peck's so good with them when they get to be this age," Mary says (Vogel 2009, 580-581). And Peck tells Li'l Bit in another occasion that "[y]ou can help by just talking to me" (Vogel 2009, 610). According to Jonel Aleccia in her essay "Better Parent-Child Communication Can Prevent Child Abuse," abusers "spend considerable time and energy getting close to their victims, a process known as 'grooming'" (2008, 73). He approaches

Li'l Bit step by step in an amiable way to gain her trust and endorsement for his sexual actions. Being raised by a single parent and nontraditional family, Li'l Bit becomes vulnerable to the subculture of a sexual abuse created by her relative (Fagan 1999, 17).

Correspondingly, the outside culture or society is tainted by a sexuality that does not express real sexual needs. Li'l Bit has long suffered sexual taunts made by her peers in the school. Joanna Mansbridge indicates that Li'l Bit's family's teachings make the girl alienated from her body: "Li'l Bit's alienation from her body emerged [partly]... from the lessons taught to her by her family, her classmates, and the broader culture" (2014, 142). These lessons implicitly have a negative effect on her and her relationship to her body. As Li'l Bit enters puberty, she is recognized in the school only because of her large breasts. Her classmates make jokes and bets over her breasts. Her female classmates watch her while showering only to make sure that her breasts are real and not foam rubber. While her female classmates envy her for her body, Li'l Bit does not understand what the big deal is about having large breasts. She does not care for being noticed by male classmates in the school who like to dance with her. She tells her female classmate that:

sometimes I feel like these alien life forces, these two mounds of flesh  
have grafted themselves onto my chest, and they're using me until they can  
"prograte" and take over the world and they'll just keep growing, with a  
mind of their own until I collapse under their weight and they suck all the  
nourishment out of my body and I finally just waste away while they get  
bigger and bigger (Vogel 2009, 603).

It is noteworthy how she considers her breasts a different entity; she separates herself from her body. She further explains that "may be someone's implanted radio transmitters in my chest at a frequency I can't hear, that girls can't detect, but they're sending out these signals to men who

get mesmerized, like sirens, calling them to dash themselves on these ‘rocks’” (Vogel 2009, 603). She discerns that it is her big breasts that attract men to her as a woman. Her female classmate is surprised by Li'l Bit's speech; it sounds weird for the classmate. Li'l Bit seems not interested in her body, or she wishes to hide (or even not to have) her large breasts. During adolescence, a young girl undergoes many changes psychologically and bodily in her transformation from a girl to a woman. Thus, during adolescence, girls come into “a different and more problematic relation with themselves, with others, and with the culture(s) in which they are growing” (Tolman 2014, 121). In her transformation to a woman when breasts and hips grow, a girl (or Li'l Bit) appears or is defined as a sexual being or object in society. She submits to men's gaze, fantasy, and desire. Would she enjoy the men's gaze or loathe it? Would she enjoy being a sexually attracted being or feel alienated?

Iris Marion Young primarily discusses women's breasts in her essay “Breasted Experience: The Look and the Feeling.” In our patriarchal and “phallogocentric” culture, as Young terms it, women are evaluated in accordance with the size and contours of their breasts. Young explains, “[indeed for] . . . [a woman] and for others, [a woman's] breasts are the daily visible and tangible signifier of her womanliness, and her experience is as variable as the size and the shape of breasts themselves” (2014, 108). This explanation clarifies Li'l Bit's alienation from her body, specifically her breasts. She dislikes her male classmate's gaze on her bosom. She does not consider her bosom a sexual power. Moreover, she might even fear this gaze. She might fear it because those breasts exclusively define her identity as a female. This definition is out of her control as her breasts' shape and size are out of her control: “[i]f her energy radiates from her chest, she too often finds the rays deflected by the gaze that positions her from outside, evaluating her according to standards that she had no part in establishing and that remain outside her control” (Young 2014, 109). A woman's breasts are barely hers; they belong to others: her husband, her lover, her public, or even

her baby. Breasts are not a woman's own: it is "a natural territory" (Young 2014, 110). Women seem to be forced to accept this fact. Li'l Bit cannot escape her male classmate's focused looks on her big breasts, her female classmates' mockery, or Peck's yearning to undo her bra and touch or kiss her nipple. Actually, even when Peck first molests Li'l Bit, he starts with her breasts, according to the stage directions: "*(Peck puts his hands on Li'l Bit's breasts . . . He slips his hand under her blouse)*" (Vogel 2009, 621). Li'l Bit's breasts make her resentful; she finds them so big that they mark a noticeable change in her body. Sometimes, she feels that they are pulling her neck or back and cause her a feeling of discomfort. Young contends that a "woman does not always experience the feeling of her breasts positively," especially when they are large (2014, 110). These dubious feelings that women feel about their bodies and breasts significantly influence the formation of their identity. Mansbridge comments on this condition in reference to the play:

*Drive* shows how our sexualities and our subjectivities are not "ours," but rather the products of culture and history. It shows a culture that separates sexual and social being and teaches young women to see their sexuality as something to flaunt and also to hide, something that defines them and yet is not theirs to define. With popular images and music punctuating the playworld, we are continually reminded that this is not the private confession of an individual protagonist, but a public staging of a sexually fixated culture (2014, 124).

Vogel is expressing a public issue here about female identity formation pertaining to her sexual identity specifically. It is a process that is affected by various outer factors that shape Li'l Bit's or any woman's understanding of her sexual identity. Although the female sexual identity defines a woman, she is not necessarily the one who defines it. The world around her (men, friends, family, culture, and school) participates in forming her sexual identity. The world around her, as illustrated above, imposes on Li'l Bit the way she acknowledges and is related to her body.

Indeed, Peck nurtures Li'l Bit's alienation from her body and sexuality. She is always aware of his looks even in her imagination. When her male classmate asks her to dance, she refuses. She imagines that Peck is there looking at her; Peck's looks prevent her from dancing, although she shows some response to the boy's request. Suddenly, she sees the boy as a zombie, and she stares at her chest with horror. Li'l Bit does not behave like a normal young girl when she appears attractive to boys, like her female classmates, for example. Peck is always in her mind; Christopher Bigsby states that Peck undeniably abuses Li'l Bit (2000, 417). Peck abuses her not only because he molests her at the age of eleven, but also because he continues to molest her.

At the age of thirteen, Li'l Bit is convinced by Peck to come to his studio and let him take some provocative photographs of her. He makes her show partial nudity. He allows himself (although asexually) to unbutton her blouse and run his hands over her flesh. Li'l Bit responds to his instructions to make some poses. It is noticeable that the photo shoot itself takes place against a background of other pictures from Playboy and Calvin Klein ads and the image of Carroll's Alice Liddell (Vogel 2009, 606). Bigsby finds that there is "a context for the eroticization of children no less than of women, a legitimizing in cultural terms for what, on an individual level, is seen as deeply suspect" (1999, 325). Vogel wants to reveal how children become aware of sex, or being introduced to sex. She seeks to emphasize the role of images and ads in acquiring the sexual information in a culture. These images hold the moments when innocence turns to experience (Bigsby 1999, 325). For Bigsby, Peck's camera and driving lessons reveal gradually the physical reality of his actions and lead to the core of his guilt (2000, 417). Later, Bigsby describes this physical reality more intensely. He says, "[t]here is exploitation here, selfishness, a disregard for consequence; there is emotional damage, desolation, despair as well as a fever of expectation, consolation and transfiguring emotion" (1999, 328). Sometimes culture and media, as outer factors, contribute unfavorably in constructing the sexual identity. Photographers, including Peck



in this scene, painters, and advertisers selfishly exploit children, specifically girls, to serve their interests. These photographers or advertisers seek good, charming shoots even if they purposefully erotize or sexualize little children. Peck permits himself to touch Li'l Bit's body in order to get alluring poses, ignoring the fact that she is only thirteen and she is building her sexual identity. She is receiving the tools from Peck with which to build her identity. However, Peck provides her, simultaneously, with other tools to build her understanding of life.

Vogel admits that Peck gives Li'l Bit the tools that help her to grow up and to learn life. He teaches her "ego formation" (Bigsby 1999, 321). Peck tells her in a driving lesson that "[t]hose are your two hands. When you are driving, your life is in your own two hands. Understand?" (Vogel 2009, 599). This is a lesson on holding control on one's life, being careful, and being decisive. He continues his lesson, "[t]here's something about driving—when you're in control of the car, just you and the machine and the road—that nobody can take from you. A power. I feel more myself in my car than anywhere else. And that's what I want to give to you" (Vogel 2009, 599). He teaches her how to take responsibility and recognize her strength. Through driving, he is teaching her "power," or what Bigsby terms "autonomy" (1999, 323). Peck warns her against other drivers in the road, and he teaches her the necessity to be aggressive in driving to survive any accident. This is an implied warning against his own actions, and the danger that he poses to her (Bigsby 2000, 416). At these moments of honesty, Vogel finds Peck "heroic" (Bigsby 1999, 321). He can be seen partly as a hero because he never forces himself on Li'l Bit in spite of his seductive language and sexual needs: "I'm not gonna do anything you don't want me to do . . . Have I forced you to do anything? . . . Nothing is going to happen until you want it to" (Vogel 2009, 576, 588). He is not evil or villain. In fact, Peck is admired for his dignity and courage in facing or holding his feelings and struggles in his love for Li'l Bit. He is a lonely person, and Vogel means to make the readers look at him with compassion (Saddik 2007, 165-166).

Peck has some past, traumatic experience that is not revealed in the play. The readers learn that Peck used to be a marine, and he participated in the World War II. He has troubles during the time of the war, but he dislikes speaking about it: “I served in the Pacific Theater. It’s really nothing interesting to talk about” (Vogel 2009, 585). His wife does not contain duly his loneliness or despair; she offers him a routine life that increases his frustration. His emotional and sexual needs drive him to offer Li’l Bit gentleness and real love. Li’l Bit reacts responsively to Peck’s emotional and sexual needs, but she is always aware that this will hurt her aunt. She tells him, “[w]hat we are doing. It’s wrong. It’s very wrong” (Vogel 2009, 588). At the age of eighteen, during their final meeting, Peck proposes to her. He decides to divorce Mary and marry Li’l Bit. The latter is about to soften and kiss him, but she turns away at the last moment: “(*Li’l Bit rises above her uncle and looks at his mouth; she starts to lower herself to kiss him—and wrenches herself free. She gets up from the bed*)” (Vogel 2009, 617). She lies and says that she feels nothing towards Peck just because she does not want to hurt her aunt. Eventually, she, out of her free will and from a position of control, rejects the proposal, decides to end their relation, and concludes their meetings for ever. It is the control and power that Peck himself teaches her. It is the play’s most poignant irony that Peck teaches her how to protect herself even from the harm that he imposes on her. It is he who teaches her this confidence, and not the society, family, or culture. In comparison, she is taught by family and society lessons of feminine passivity and shame (Mansbridge 2014, 382).

At this stage, Li’l Bit gets enough capability to control her life. She understands the power that she has in relation to a man to whom she is emotionally drawn (Bigsby 2000, 417). After their final meeting, Peck spends many years drinking. Subsequently, he loses his job, his wife, and finally his driving license. He dies after seven years when he falls down in his house’s basement. During these seven years, Peck does not try to meet Li’l Bit. He, ultimately, accepts the price of his actions, and he never tries to justify or excuse these actions. On the other hand, Li’l Bit

“acknowledges her necessary cruelty in abandoning a man whose decline and death she thereby made inevitable” (Biggsby 1999, 327). Li'l Bit does not seem to regret her decision; the seriousness of the situation entails her firmness with Peck. Strikingly, however, she spends the rest of her life remembering her experience with Peck.

The process of reciting her memories helps her to accept them. The process of remembering and examining the imprints of the past helps Li'l Bit to reflect on her present, and to continually reshape, revise, and construct present meanings, perspectives, and subjectivities (Mansbridge 2014, 124). In other words, looking back at her memories helps in building her identity and building an understanding, and even forgiveness, for herself and for Peck. Recalling her memories before the audience, also, helps the audience themselves to understand how Li'l Bit develops her identity. Reciting her story not in a chronological order enables the audience to see the cause then the effect (Biggsby 1999, 321). The readers see the result of Peck's effect on Li'l Bit's life or identity before seeing the process that leads to that result. Vogel intends, purposefully, to make the readers understand the relationship between Peck and Li'l Bit as a give-and-take relationship: Peck's driving lessons take from her something and give her something in return. The readers witness what Li'l Bit gets, and then what she has given or lost. Annette Saddik explains this reverse more significantly in the sense that “[making] use of anti-realistic vision that distorts and moves past superficial appearance in order to access a truth beyond what ordinary experience tells us” (2007, 166). If the readers met Li'l Bit at the age of eleven first, they would interpret the whole process of teaching as merely incestuous or pedophilic activity. Vogel insists that she did not have pedophile in mind while writing the play (Biggsby 1999, 320). She means to give Peck's and Li'l Bit's relationship a broader context or understanding. Peck abuses Li'l Bit or at least causes her some uncomfortable feeling at an early age, but he also grants her the love and the care that she needs at the time. He listens and talks to her patiently. Their love does not end with consummation

but with sacrifice. Vogel neither simplifies their relationship to be within the norms nor allows the moral absolute of the audience (or society in general) to prevent the examination of the needs and despair that shape the identity of Li'l Bit (Bigsby 1999, 329). These needs are not only the needs of Peck but of Li'l Bit as well.

Li'l Bit recognizes her own needs when she speaks about her experience at the age of twenty-seven with a high school boy in a bus. She seduces that boy in the same way that Peck seduces her. She explains to the audience how the need “generates such actions, the sexual contact being only a manifestation of that need” (Bigsby 2000, 417). It is the outer world or experience that creates these needs. She seduces the boy because she wants to identify herself with Peck and understands or practices the authority that Peck exalts in his driving lessons. She becomes the abuser this time. She does not blame Peck for turning her into an abuser, though. She says at the end of the play, “[n]ow 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 2009, 619). She is admitting that Peck himself was abused. Research and data reveal that most of the victims of abuse will themselves become abusers as adults (Dudley 2008, 66). Vogel leads the story of Li'l Bit’s damage “little by little, into the heart of darkness, a darkness which Li'l Bit herself, however, eventually begins to understand or at least to find echoed in her own experience” (Bigsby 1999, 323). Ostensibly, Li'l Bit’s damage is caused by Peck’s damage; however, it is not only Peck. The incident (s) and the person(s) that had raised the damage in Peck himself in turn are responsible as well: “All of them molested [Li'l Bit] . . . [we cannot blame] a storm on itself, without including the climate that produced it” (Goldenflame 2008, 99, 100). It is not the guilt of Peck; it is the guilt of whatever or whoever makes Peck an abuser. It could be the traumatic experience of the war, or it could be a person who had molested Peck at the age of eleven or so. In this sense a society is guilty or holds responsibility. Thereupon, it is a cycle of situations and

experiences that shapes one's needs and, hence, one's identity. Vogel wants the audience to comprehend this cycle or this darkness just as Li'l Bit does.

Nonetheless, Vogel does not consider Li'l Bit a victim. Peck gives her "agency" (Mansbridge 2014, 142). Peck gives her enough agency even to reject him. She is now driving her own car alone. Peck's spirit appears in her car at the end of the play, but it is in the back seat this time, not in the front seat. Her attempt to go back throughout her life is a way to acknowledge the lessons. Furthermore, it is an attempt to reflect and admit the "unpredictable ways in which we learn who we are, how we desire, and how our growth is built on loss" (qtd. in Mensbridge 2014, 144). Li'l Bit learns to accept her life and everything that has happened to her. She does not try to accuse or blame even herself. She wants to understand her life so that she can live it without regret. Thus, she starts to believe in forgiveness: "[a]nd before you [the audience] know it, I'll be thirty-five. That's getting up there for a woman. And I find myself believing in things that a younger self vowed never to believe in. Things like family and forgiveness" (Vogel 2009, 622). In Bigsby's perspective, the play ends with "a note of reconciliation," and he believes that Li'l Bit survives (1999, 326-327). She embraces the past troubles and she anticipates future problems the same way she expects road accidents, as Peck instructs her. She tries to resist any kind of damage. Vogel indicates, "[t]he fact that Peck doesn't get out of it doesn't mean that [Li'l Bit] doesn't" (Bigsby 1999, 327). In the last scene, Li'l Bit drives off after checking her car and adjusting her seat and mirrors. Similarly, her memory lessons help her to adjust herself to her life. Ending the play with driving is affirmative.<sup>2</sup>

For Li'l Bit, driving is the only thing that gives her the feeling of a "flight in the body" (Vogel 2009, 622). As Mansbridge puts it, "[d]riving allows Li'l Bit imaginatively to transform her feelings of isolation into an experience of mobility and control" (2014, 140). Li'l Bit succeeds

by the end of the play in reconciling with herself and overcoming the feeling that she explains directly to the audience after reciting her first lesson of driving: she says, “[t]hat day was the last day I lived in my body. I retreated above the neck, and I’ve lived inside the ‘fire’ in my head ever since. And now that seems like a long, long time ago. When we were both very young” (Vogel 2009, 621). As there is a loss in the play, there is a pain. It is a growing pain that continues through Li’l Bit’s teenage years. It is the growing pain of developing strength in character and becoming an adult (Saddik 2007, 164). Without loss, there is no learning; without pain, there is no survival.

Li’l Bit starts *How I Learned to Drive* by telling the audience that she will reveal a secret. She concludes the play addressing the audience, again, showing that the lesson is the secret or “the lure to look at sexuality in a different, more difficult way” (Mansbridge 2014, 142). Bigsby indicates that Vogel will take the reader on an unusual journey. Indeed, it is not an expected journey. It goes beyond “the labels, the categories which do little to explain ourselves to ourselves” (1999, 328). However, it is a journey to education: a journey that educates the audience to know that society itself is confused about the role of sexuality. The audience should admit that there are subjects in the culture that are taboo, but they are prevalent and affective (Bigsby 1999, 290). If abuse is a cycle and damaged people are everywhere, and if the identity formation is affected by them, what is the role of society to end this cycle? Jake Goldenflame discusses in his essay “Child Predators Need Both Punishment and Treatment” that there is no cure or complete treatment for the child abusers, yet there is limitation and control: “train offenders to reduce exposure to situations that place them at risk for reoffense” (qtd. in 2008, 94). Goldenflame further illustrates that punishment is not the ideal method to end the abuse or a successful cure for abusers. Putting them in prison for life, for instance, is not the solution. Punishment will not help abusers get back their mental health or their life again: “If we, as a people, cannot see those who obviously need treatment as deserving of the same, then we are spiritually ill, for we have lost our connection to

the human heart” (2008, 98). Vogel in this play highlights treatment rather than punishment, treatment in the sense of control. Vogel suggests that society needs to contain the abusers and understand the complexities that create them and the culture that fosters their desires. It is to end a cycle of violence and abuse. Vogel is not admitting that this task is easy, particularly for the abused who has lost a life in the body and precious formative years that can never be re-lived. This task, if achieved, is a radical, noble gesture (Kimbrough 2002, 57-58). This is the gesture that Vogel hopes to achieve in individuals as well as in society. Li'l Bit explains ending this cycle, as the play closes, in a fabulous way: “[s]ometimes I think of my uncle as a kind of Flying Dutchman. In the opera, the Dutchman is doomed to wander the sea; but every seven years he can come ashore, and if he finds a maiden who will love him of her own free will—he will be released” (Vogel 2009, 619). Obviously, the Dutchman is the abuser and the maiden is the society that will understand or guide the abusers. Vogel also provides the abused with a resolution that is mainly to deal with traumatic past, abuse, and self-alienation with a bold eye, and to be confident, take a lesson, and go on living as Li'l Bit.

### Notes :

- 1- As a term, this is called Pedophilia. It is “having sex with a minor, someone under the age of consent” (Kimbrough, 2014, p.58). It is also defined by the World Health Organization as a “sexual preference for children, boys or girls or both, usually of prepubertal or early pubertal age” (qtd. in Moen 2015, 111).
- 2- Paula Vogel states pertaining to the end of *Drive*: “I think that the ending of *How I Learned to Drive* came very much as a response to some of my students being crushed by the ending of *Hot 'N' Throbbing* [in which the heroine is murdered by her husband]. *How I Learned to Drive* was a response to this young woman who just sat and cried in my office. This time there is a way out” (Bigsby 1999, 327).

## References :

- 1- Aleccia, Jonel. 2008. "Better Parent-Child Communication Can Prevent Child Abuse." In *Child Abuse*, ed. William Dudley, 71-75. New York: Greenhaven Press.
- 2- Bigsby, C. W. E. 1999. *Contemporary American Playwrights*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- 3- --- . 2000. *Modern American Drama 1945-2000*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- 4- Dudley, William. 2008. "Social and Education Programs Can Prevent Child Abuse." In *Child Abuse*, ed. William Dudley, 65-70. New York: Greenhaven Press.
- 5- Fagan, Patrick F. 1999. "The Disintegration of Family Values is Responsibility for Child Abuse." In *Child Abuse*, ed. Jennifer Hurley, 17-26. New York: Greenhaven Press.
- 6- Goldenflame, Jake. 2008. "Child Predators Need Both Punishment and Treatment." In *Child Abuse*, ed. William Dudley, 92-100. New York: Greenhaven Press.
- 7- Kimbrough, Andrew. 2002. "The Pedophile in Me: The Ethics of *How I Learned to Drive*." *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism* 16: 47-65.
- 8- Mansbridge, Joanna. 2014. *Paula Vogel*. Michigan: The University of Michigan Press.
- 9- ---. 2014. "Paula Vogel." In *The Methuen Drama Guide to Contemporary American Playwright*, eds. Martin Middeke, Peter Paul Schnierer, Christopher Innes, and Matthew C. Roudané, 179-196. London: Bloomsbury.
- 10- Moen, Ole Martin. 2015. "The Ethics of Pedophilia." *Nordic Journal of Applied Ethics* 9: 111-124.
- 11- Saddik, Annette J. 2007. *Contemporary American Drama*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- 12- Tolman, Deborah L. 2014. "Daring to Desire: Culture and the Bodies of Adolescent Girls." In *The Politics of Women's Bodies: Sexuality, Appearance, and Behavior*, eds. Rose Weitz and Samantha Kwan, 120-142. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- 13- Vogel, Paula. 2009. *How I Learned to Drive*. In *Drama Essentials: An Anthology of Plays*, ed. Matthew Roudané, 573-622. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
- 14- Young, Iris Marion. 2014. "Breasted Experience: The Look and the Feeling." In *The Politics of Women's Bodies: Sexuality, Appearance, and Behavior*, eds. Rose Weitz and Samantha Kwan, 107-199. Oxford: Oxford University Press.