Formal Subversion in How I Learned to Drive
A Structure of Meaning
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Abstract
Paula Vogel questions whether a “structure of meaning” might be articulated for her play How I Learned to Drive. While she and David Savran have offered Russian Formalist and Brechtian theory as possible solutions, this article responds with the argument that Bakhtin’s notions of anamorphy and polyphony offer formal strategies that take into account social and ethical concerns. The article revisits Formalist positions on content and ideology as well as Bakhtin’s response to those positions. It then argues for a Bakhtinian reading of Vogel’s unique shifting of genre within the play’s structure, her polyphony of character speech, and her use of quotation and dialogism as a means to give her text added social dimension.

“How do you make a structure that is actually the meaning of How I Learned to Drive?” Paula Vogel asked this rhetorical question in an interview with David Savran (1999), and in response both she and Savran offered several suggestions. Vogel readily acknowledged Viktor Shklovsky and the Russian Formalists as one influence, another being the negative empathy and catharsis found in what she called “classic theatre.” Savran concurred and further offered a Brechtian reading of Vogel’s dramaturgy.

In the course of their conversation I am led to believe that “structure of meaning” refers, in shorthand, to the Formalist concern for the ways in which structure either creates, conveys, or supports content and meaning. By posing the question, Vogel seeks the articulation of a structural strategy that communicates the play’s thematic concerns. Therefore, while the play evinces the influences Vogel and Savran mention, I believe that they fall short of providing a comprehensive theory that describes a structural relationship to the personal and social meanings in the play, for they do not make
room for an ideology that can be considered both structural in composition and socially inclusive in its perspective. To provide such a theory, I propose an analysis of the formal devices and themes of *How I Learned to Drive* through Bakhtin's concept of “answerability” as an ethical authorial position. I argue that the ideology that informs the structure of Vogel's play is the ideology that Bakhtin attributes to the ethical dimension of polyphony.

In the play, a woman approaching middle age, named Li'l Bit, revisits her past, ostensibly, as she says, “to tell a secret” about a history of sexual abuse and her efforts to forgive and heal (1998:7). But as the audience journeys with her, it finds that the play is about many other things, like the way American culture eroticizes its children and objectifies its women, about how the individual is sexually constituted, about growth, power, loneliness, and alcoholism, as well as family dysfunction, victimization, and, in Vogel's words, how “we can receive great love from the people who harm us” (Holmberg 1998).

Structurally speaking, the most obvious characteristic of *How I Learned to Drive* is that it proceeds somewhat in reverse, jumping back and forth from the present to when Li'l Bit was a teenager to finally when she was eleven years old. Along the way, the audience witnesses the development of a relationship between her and her Uncle Peck, a man with whom she shares a meaningful and close friendship, but one in which the romantic and sexual boundaries are severely blurred. Contrasting this relationship are other relationships Li'l Bit negotiates with blood relatives and school friends — all of whom compare unfavorably with Peck.

Vogel invites the audience to empathize with Li'l Bit, and the journey becomes emotional, even cathartic, as it witnesses her breaking off her relationship with her uncle in a hotel room when she is eighteen, and as it sees her first experience of sexual abuse at the age of eleven at the hands of the same man at the end of the play. Of note, neither Vogel's play nor its heroine condemn Uncle Peck. Instead, through Li'l Bit's compassionate regard for her uncle, and Vogel's ability to let the character speak for himself, the audience understands that the villain of the play — a mixed-up and alcoholic pedophile — is also a deeply caring and thoughtful individual in need of love, understanding, and help.

This last point may be the central lesson of *How I Learned to Drive*, for it is through the perspective of a radically compassionate regard for others who hurt, and through giving those others a voice, that Vogel offers a venue to forgiveness, healing, and forward movement in life. Within the world of the play, the perspective is also profoundly ethical, for Vogel does not judge her characters, nor does she allow her audience to judge or condemn her characters either. Underlying the thematic elements of her play rests an idiol-
ogy of social concern that governs the aesthetic choices that Vogel makes, including the structural.

The discussion that follows has four parts. First, in order to frame a discussion of structure and meaning, and because Vogel claims indebtedness to Shklovsky and the Formalists, I revisit Formalist positions on the central topics of content and ideology, as well as Bakhtin's response to those positions. Then I argue for a Bakhtinian reading of Vogel's unique shifting of genre within the play's structure, her polyphony of character speech, and her use of quotation and dialogism as a means to give her text added social dimension.

The Formalists never elucidated an ethical ideology of their critical approaches. Instead, at the inception of their work, the Formalists attempted to practice a critical approach to literature along empirical lines. Inspired by the Futurists' radical experiments with form and skeptical of the Symbolist belief in the metaphysical dimension of literature, the Formalists focused their investigations primarily on structural devices as means to convey content. Their initial reticence in approaching meaning or ideology stemmed from a recognition of the critic's subjective, and therefore potentially faulty, view of those subjects, whereas they believed the critic could maintain an objective view of form given its concrete nature. Shortly after their foundation, the Formalists battled the institutionalization of Marxism as Bolshevik and then Communist Party ideology, and therefore they were pressured to maintain a limit to their investigations to what they variously called literary technology or the conventionality of art, that is, those studies that by necessity stopped short of questions of social and ethical criticism. As Boris Eikhenbaum wrote in defense of the formalist method against various criticisms in 1924,

The formal school studies literature as a category of specific phenomena and constructs a history of literature as the specific, concrete evolution of literary forms and traditions. The question of the genesis of literary phenomena (their connection with the facts of everyday life and economics, with the individual psychology or physiology of the author, and so on, ad infinitum) is consciously put aside, not because it is generally unimportant, but because it clarifies nothing within the limits of this single category [1979:59].

Of the Russian Formalists, Viktor Shklovsky may have been the most disposed towards ideology and ethics. While the majority of Formalists, like Eikhenbaum, limited their studies to formal devices, Shklovsky maintained a commitment to social justice, as evidenced by his writing for Maxim Gorky's Moscow journals (Thompson 1971:27–28). The social dimension of his aesthetics was presaged in his first essay, "The Resurrection of the
"Word" (1914), in which he advocates the necessity for artists and individuals to not simply "recognize" things in the world but to actually "see" them. In a passage well known to students of Brechtian alienation, Shklovsky writes, "When words are being used by our thought-processes in place of general concepts, and serve, so to speak, as algebraic symbols, and must needs be devoid of imagery, when they are used in everyday speech and are not completely enunciated or completely heard, then they have become familiar, and their internal (image) and external (sound) forms have ceased to be sensed. We do not sense the familiar, we do not see it, but recognise it" (1973:41–42). He praises the Futurist practices of creating new words and making common or everyday words strange, two strategies that he would later develop into his idea of defamiliarization, which he would define in "Art as Device" (1917). In that essay, Shklovsky invests defamiliarization with aspects of social criticism when he laments the "automatization" of living to which mere recognition dooms us as opposed to real seeing which restores, in Ewa Thompson’s words, “authentic contact with the outside world.” Shklovsky believes that art helps people attend to objects and ideas, and to enter into active contact with them (Thompson 1971:67–68). Victor Erlich imparts to this process a “therapeutic value for creative deformation,” and by doing so grants a cathartic dimension to structural experimentation (1981:180). As Shklovsky put it in a rather jubilant phrase that closes “The Resurrection and the Word,” “Only the creation of new forms of art can restore to man sensation of the world, can resurrect things and kill pessimism” (1973:46).

As a contemporary of the Formalists, Mikhail Bakhtin took exception with them for their preoccupation with form at the expense of any consideration of a social dimension in the composition of literature. Gary Saul Morson and Caryl Emerson note that, in contrast to the Formalists, two of Bakhtin’s lifelong critical preoccupations were “the dynamics of the creative process and the nature of ethics” (1990:10). As evidenced from his earliest works, produced during the Formalist heyday of the 1920s, Bakhtin believed that art and life had to be united by what he called “answerability,” or what might be understood as an author’s ethical responsibility to the autonomous individuals portrayed in literature (Bakhtin 1990:2). He stresses that art is not supposed to exist solely within its own aesthetic bubble; it should be a vehicle that allows the individual to shift focus from the self to an engagement with one’s community. He writes,

Art gives me the possibility of experiencing not just one but several lives, and this enables me to enrich the accumulated experience of my own actual life. It gives me the possibility, that is, of partaking, from within, in a different life for the sake of that life in itself, for the sake of its remarkable significance qua life (1990:8).
But Bakhtin hesitated to propose a system of ethics (literary or otherwise) because he recognized the particularity of specific ethical dilemmas. Philosophy and theory have their limitations because they attempt to deduce codes and formulas from the brilliant cacophony and mess of life, and hence they are practices that naively, and yet unjustly, totalize and finalize the unfinalizable—that is, they attempt to summarize, define, and explain aspects of life that can never be summarized, defined, and explained. Hence, Bakhtin preferred a study of literary forms that justly portray particular examples of lived experience, including crises and moral debate, and his sense of ethics as an aesthetic act finds expression in his critical studies (Morson 1990:26–7). Two of his concepts which have gained currency in literary analysis, and which are evidenced in Vogel’s play, are polyphony and dialogism.

Bakhtin never explicitly defines polyphony, although he does describe it as the presence within a text of “a plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses ... with equal rights and each with his own world” (1984:6). These voices are not consumed by an author’s world view—what Bakhtin calls “monologizing discourse”—which forces all of the voices to recognize the author’s ideology as dominant. One trait of polyphony is that all of the characters are free to express “their own directly signifying discourse” reflective of their own ideologies. The author’s voice, when it becomes present (and it must), is one amongst many. The author places herself on an equal footing with her characters. The term “dialogism” signifies the quality of expression of multiple voices inhabiting and expressing themselves within a single text. A text that is dialogic differs from a work that employs dialogues, for dialogues between characters can still reflect a single authorial point of view or reach finitude. Dialogism represents a type of discourse that does not seek closure or consensus. Dialogism resembles a world in which people use speech mainly as a form of interaction with others, not necessarily to engage in argument or debate but as a means to explore one’s environment, one’s ever-evolving thoughts, as well as the thoughts of others. For Bakhtin, Plato’s Socratic dialogues are not dialogic at all, but monological forms of one author’s (Plato’s) conclusions (Morson 1990:60). Bakhtin states that a polyphonic work “tends towards dialogue, toward a dialogic opposition” (1984:252). Morson and Emerson affirm the close relation of polyphony and dialogism when they write, “A ‘dialogic sense of truth’ is absolutely constitutive of polyphony” (1990:232).

Polyphony is more than mere artistic style or choice and more than just one approach to structuring a work. Polyphony reflects an author’s ethical regard for her subjects. Believing in their autonomy and in their right to embrace a point of view different from her own, the author approaches her art with an aim to grant her subjects freedom. Bakhtin’s arguments reflect
his belief that to create a polyphonic work is to engage the world responsibly (Morson 1990: 257), and the engagement results in a specific use of literary form. Polyphony coupled with Bakhtin's sense of ethics articulates an ideology of the creative enterprise.

Bakhtin and Shklovsky share a similar idealism in that in polyphonic works readers and audiences should sense authentic contact with the world. But Bakhtin's ideology surpasses that of Shklovsky because the latter's notion of reifying the subject through literary devices (defamiliarization and so forth) could still reduce the subject to the author's world view—as it would in Brechtian dramaturgy. Vogel is a polyphonic author precisely because she imparts to her characters a sense of freedom that surpasses ideological constraints. The ideology that shapes her drama constantly has as its aim the ethical desire to liberate characters from all totalizing discourses, including the formal constraints of narrative, genre, and style.

In the first scene of the play, Li'l Bit, described in the list of characters as "a woman who ages forty-something to eleven years old" (4) and written to be played by a woman in her late thirties to forties, addresses the audience in a monologue that serves to frame the play. She promises to "tell a secret" by first "teaching a lesson," and to do this she proposes to take the audience back in time (7). Generically, the play is immediately marked as a memory play, written from the first-person perspective of the lead character, but the secret and lesson also raise the possibility that the play is in parts both a mystery and morality tale. After it begins in the present (1990s), the play goes back to the summer of 1969, where the audience witnesses a seventeen-year-old Li'l Bit in a car with a married man more than twice her age (8). They engage in sexual banter and the tone is at first light and humorous. The two seem quite comfortable together. Then subtle changes take place. A proposal of eventual intercourse follows, but the audience is left with the impression that the two have not yet slept together. Li'l Bit grows uncomfortable as the man, in pantomime, fondles her breasts. Only at the end of the scene does Vogel reveal the man to be Li'l Bit's uncle, married to her biological Aunt Mary. Throughout, the scene has been difficult to gauge. It was at times funny, but there was an undertone of pathos and tension; it is neither comedy nor drama, yet both. And at moments Li'l Bit actually seemed to enjoy the sexual camaraderie with her uncle, despite the incestuous circumstance.

Before the audience can piece together a secret tale of pedophilia or sexual coercion that Uncle Peck and Li'l Bit hide, the next scene introduces Li'l Bit's dysfunctional family, a mother, grandmother, and grandfather, who are played by an ensemble of three actors who also play all of the other characters in the play. But the characters in this scene do not resemble the realis-
tic characters presented in Li'l Bit and Peck. Because the ensemble portrays at least three different characters each, they cannot be cast close to type. Instead, the family members are personified through a minimal use of stage signifiers — properties, behavior, and the like — that indicate a character type, even stereotype. Her grandfather, Big Papa, played by the male member of the ensemble, resembles an opinionated misogynist who ridicules Li'l Bit's body and intelligence while her mother and grandmother, played by the two female members of the ensemble, sit by laughing and mocking her sensitivity. The family's ribald hilarity signals a generic shift to the farcical. Li'l Bit, who in the scene is seventeen, will at times address the audience as an adult and comment on the characters and situation. Ironically, Peck is the only family member who treats Li'l Bit with respect and compassion. The mistreatment Li'l Bit receives from her biological family members in this scene severely tempers the question of Peck's sexual predation raised in the previous scene.

Several devices and styles are at work already three scenes into the play. As the rest of the play confirms, all of the scenes with Li'l Bit and Peck are presented in the style of Stanislavskian realism. Both characters pay attention to given circumstances of place and time, engage in active listening and response to each other, and a palpable emotional subtext underlies their relationship. Li'l Bit does not break the veneer of illusion with Peck and comment as an adult. In contrast, all of the other scenes and characters are interpreted by the ensemble, which Vogel calls a "Greek Chorus." The scenes resemble Brechtian epic stagecraft in that the actors do not strive to create fully realized and detailed characters but rely instead on an identification of character that resemble Brecht's use of "quotation." That is, the addition of iconic clothing or a change in voice that signal "grandmother" or "schoolboy" readily identifies the characters as types. Li'l Bit drops in and out of these scenes to offer commentary or reflective thoughts from the hindsight of her adulthood. In so doing she facilitates one of Brecht's aims, the breaking of stage illusion in order to establish direct communication or dialogue between performer and audience. Indulging as they do in vulgar jokes often at Li'l Bit's expense, most of the ensemble scenes are farcical; the farce further disrupts an illusion of realism and sentiment, and instead affords the audience the kind of critical distance that Brecht valued. The two types of styles also reflect separate generic moods: the realistic scenes with Peck are, for the most part, serious and dramatic; the ensemble scenes are comedic.

Evident also are two Formalist devices defined by Shklovsky. First, Vogel employs defacilitation in that the play progresses in a backwards order (although there are exceptions to this device as well) and the scenes jump between styles and moods. Thompson describes defacilitation as relating "to
the effort to arrange artistic elements in an intricate and difficult way, so that we have to attend to them more than if we met them in everyday life" (1971:27). With the jumps in time and place the audience cannot rest on the cognitive comfort that a linear narrative provides. The changes demand from the audience a heightened attentiveness to circumstances and character. Second, Vogel employs Shklovsky's defamiliarization in regard to Uncle Peck. She readily admits in interviews that with her portrayal of Peck she attempts to challenge the public imagination's view of the pedophile as trench-coated and sleazy. Vogel defamiliarizes such an image with her portrayal of Uncle Peck as a warm and caring individual who is also one of the family: a man who shares the dinner table, takes out the garbage, and looks after the kids. Vogel's sense of ethics dictates that all individuals should be seen in their complexity and not as projections of societal fears. Although an audience views him engaged in what North American culture deems a morally inappropriate relationship with his niece, he is the only one in her family who treats her with compassion. Comparing Peck to her abusive family, anyone asked to identify the greater of two threats and abuses could not point easily to the pedophile.

As a mystery play Drive seems to reveal a secret history of sexual abuse as well as a secret of care and mutual need shared between Li'l Bit and Peck. But what could be the lesson that Li'l Bit mentions at the start? As in a mystery, the audience might indeed visit a crime scene. But if a crime has taken place, whose crime is it: Peck's, Li'l Bit's, or Li'l Bit's family's? Vogel aptly labels her ensemble a Greek Chorus, but the allusion is subtle, given that the chorus is never identified as such in the play's dialogue, and the only way an audience would be aware of this designation is by reading a playbill or script. Nonetheless, with their presence Vogel links Drive with the Greek tragedies in which someone is on trial. In doing so she creates a rational dialectic, and Peck, Li'l Bit, her family, and ultimately North American society are on trial, with the audience in the tenuous position of judge. But the shifts in genre, style, mood, and character, in addition to the defamiliarization, obscure authorial intention and hinder the audience reception of a clear judgment or critical position. No monologizing discourse provides the conclusions one must by necessity draw were one watching either classical or Brechtian drama.

Although Bakhtin describes polyphony as the presence within a text of many autonomous character voices that are free to express their own ideologies, I propose that Vogel treats dramatic form as polyphonic. She employs tragedy, comedy, realism, and epic stagecraft in different scenes for purposes of audience affect, but she does not allow one style or genre to dominate the form of the play or to completely shape audience perspective. If, as Bakhtin
believed, genres are really forms of thinking that shape ideology (Morson 1990:280–282), then a logical step towards subverting ideology or thematic reception is to subvert genre. In applying defamiliarization to genre, Vogel succeeds in creating polyphony of dramatic form.

The juxtaposition of styles and genres serve additional purposes. First, the play’s structure reflects in part Li’l Bit’s memory. She views her childhood memories of school and home as extremely unpleasant, and therefore Vogel gives the school and home scenes an exaggerated, nonrealistic quality, albeit farcical. On the other hand, Li’l Bit remembers Peck rather fondly, and his scenes are saturated with an alluring realism. Second, the contrast of realism with epic stagecraft assists in defamiliarizing Peck’s status as sexual deviant and allows him to be seen as a compassionate and complex man rather than a one-dimensional villain. Third, in a similar way, the farcical portrayals of family members and school friends are absurd to the point of comedy; the comedy thus diffuses audience judgment and thereby provides leverage for audience empathy for people Li’l Bit considers neglectful or hurtful. Fourth, as Vogel veers between extremes of comedy and tragic pathos, she affords herself the opportunity to ask her audience how they feel about what they see. The dialectic that Brecht considered vital to theatre becomes manifest. But by undermining an audience’s emotional expectation, Vogel also creates a greater potential for empathetic and emotional audience response, something Brecht sought to thwart. As she notes in the Holmberg interview, she believes that while watching a tragedy, an audience prepares for the worst, whereas comedy “defuses that vigilance” and keeps an audience unprepared for surprises and shocks (1998). Expanding upon the dialectic, Vogel provides an experience of her play that is both intellectual and emotional.

As the play moves back in time, Vogel reveals information about the characters that makes initial judgments difficult to maintain. In regards to Peck, in the restaurant scene in which he and Li’l Bit celebrate her receiving a driver’s license, he obliquely infers that he was raised in an atmosphere of neglect and that he has difficulty talking about his experience fighting in World War II (26–28). In terms of Li’l Bit, even though Peck may victimize her within a relationship in which viewers are led to believe incest has not yet been consummated, there is still an unhealthy incest dynamic within which Li’l Bit consciously (though naively) participates. In terms of her extended family, audiences find out that Li’l Bit’s grandmother was an unwilling child bride who still believed in the Easter Bunny and Santa Claus at fourteen while her older husband forced her to have sex at least three times a day (36). Sexual repression was nonetheless so strong in the house that Lucy became a pregnant teenager forced to marry a dead-beat Dad who ended up
leaving his family after a year (44). By providing the characters with complicated pasts, Vogel highlights the questionable and relative nature of facts and memory. Because it seems everyone in the play is at fault for some form of misdeed or another, judgment or blame cannot be neatly placed on any one person in particular.

Keeping in mind that the entire play is told from Li’l Bit’s perspective and framed as her memory, however, the equivocal nature of the evidence may be moot. One might argue that the entire play is still biased, relying as it does on one character’s point of view. But Vogel is aware that for one character to speak on behalf of others is an act of injustice — what Bakhtin calls a “secondhand, finalizing cognitive process.” One person can never fully and justly speak for others because, as he puts it, “in a human being there is always something that only he himself can reveal, in a free act of self-consciousness and discourse, something that does not submit to an externalizing second-hand definition” (1984:58). Authorial answerability dictates that the characters be allowed to speak for themselves. Therefore Vogel subverts the formal construction of the memory play by employing polyphony and allowing several of her characters to speak on their own behalf.

In the first instance, Li’l Bit sleeps in the car after the restaurant scene and Uncle Peck delivers a monologue to which only the audience is privy. During the monologue, entitled “Uncle Peck teaches cousin Bobby how to fish,” the audience witnesses Uncle Peck seducing Li’l Bit’s young cousin Bobby, and it learns something Li’l Bit never did: that Peck’s taste included pre-pubescent boys. But the monologue also reveals tender aspects of Peck that he does not show to Li’l Bit. Earlier in the restaurant scene, Peck implies that he is not fond of visiting his childhood home of South Carolina (27). In the monologue with cousin Bobby he reveals that he actually misses it very much, especially the fishing, and that the northern stereotypes of the South bother him (34). He shows aspects of his humanity that contradict Li’l Bit’s memory.

In the second instance, the polyphony affords the greatest depth of character in the person of Peck’s wife, Aunt Mary. In a monologue towards the end of the play, Vogel allows Mary to speak for herself for the first time. Earlier, in the first family scene, Li’l Bit remembers and presents her aunt as a woman who is totally unaware that something festered in the relationship between Li’l Bit and Peck. The audience watches as Mary encourages Peck to “go after” Li’l Bit after she has stormed away from the dinner table, insulted and embarrassed by her grandfather. Mary comments, “Peck’s so good with them when they get to be this age” (19). But in her monologue, Mary contradicts her niece’s memory. She says, speaking for herself, “And I want to say this about my niece. She’s a sly one, that one is. She knows
7. Formal Subversion in "How I Learned to Drive" (Andrew Kimbrough) 103

exactly what she's doing; she's twisted Peck around her little finger and thinks it's all a big secret." (67).

Through polyphony Vogel not only allows characters to speak for themselves, but she disrupts audience perception. She forces audiences to ask themselves anew what they think of situations and relationships that they are constantly assessing through different points of view. As through a process of defamiliarization, they are asked to see people again and again as though for the first time. In the specific case of Aunt Mary, when she speaks for herself the audience understands her position, and her pain, in a way that Li'l Bit doesn't. Vogel also gives spectators permission to doubt that the truth of Li'l Bit's story may not be entirely accurate. Viewers have been under the impression that Li'l Bit believes that the relationship she had with her uncle was secret, which is a belief that Mary contradicts. But neither can one entirely side with Mary in the belief that Li'l Bit has done all the twisting and that she is ultimately responsible, even though both she and Peck are on a certain level aware of what they are doing. So if neither Aunt Mary nor Li'l Bit is right, then who is? Vogel doesn't say. As Bakhtin affirms about Dostoevsky's polyphonic novels, the driving questions should not be about right or wrong, judgment and condemnation, but about understanding individuals in the maze of life's complexities. Likewise, Vogel desires to "tease out contradictions" (Holmberg 1998). She wants, in Bakhtinian fashion, to raise the level of discourse and raise a level of consciousness. Such an ethic finds aesthetic expression not simply by what characters say or do, but also within the structure of the play.

A third example of polyphony occurs when the generic construction of one of the ensemble scenes breaks down and two of the characters demand to be heard on their own terms. Lucy, Li'l Bit, and her grandmother are seen together in three separate scenes. The first two scenes obey the comedic convention Vogel establishes with her ensemble. But in the third scene, Lucy and her mother argue over who was ultimately responsible for Lucy's teenage pregnancy. What begins as a scene generically predetermined for comedic potential quickly becomes dramatic and it undermines audience expectation. Two characters who previously enjoyed a humorous camaraderie are suddenly given over to rage. What was a moment ago a scene about Li'l Bit is now about these two women. Lucy blames her mother for not teaching her about men and sex; her mother defends herself by saying "I told you what my mother told me," and at one point levels the accusation, "I hold you responsible!" (44).

Lucy and Grandma's exchange exemplifies one aspect of Bakhtin's notion of dialogism, its quotational nature. He observes that speech for the most part is quotational of other speech acts. People tend to repeat what they have
learned or heard from others, and conversation tends to report on speech acts or conversations previously had with others. Bakhtin calls this dialogic aspect the “already-spoken-about” quality of utterances, and they represent what Morson and Emerson label an “internal dialogism.” In clarifying the concept, they note, “No speaker is ever the first to talk about the topic of his discourse” (Morson 1990:137–138). In a sense, every time we speak, our words borrow from and respond to speech and ideologies in other contexts, whether consciously or not. Considered in an ethical light, our speech reflects our communities and societies, and our speaking is never in isolation (Morson 1990:138–139). In the exchange noted above, Li’l Bit’s grandmother evades responsibility by quoting her mother. Later in the play Lucy employs the same strategy as she readily quotes her mother when she does not want to take responsibility for her eleven-year-old daughter spending seven hours alone in a car with Uncle Peck—especially given that she suspects Peck does not harbor the purest intentions towards Li’l Bit. She tells her daughter, “If anything happens, I hold you responsible” (88).

Both claims are insidious. Surely, if both Grandma and Lucy were able to follow their better instincts, their daughters may not have suffered the trauma they did. But to blame these two individuals simply scapegoats them for responsibilities either they were ill equipped to handle or that their societies had already chosen not to confront. Furthermore, it is impossible for one person, even a parent, to shield anyone from trauma. The girls would eventually grow into women who would eventually encounter men who just might succeed in seducing and subjugating them. Vogel wants to admit that this cyclical nature of blame and collusion in violence exist. Identifying who is responsible for crimes is not the issue. Rather, escaping the endless cycle of judgment and condemnation presents the more immediate challenge.

Fittingly, another of the quotations in the play comes from one of Shakespeare’s well-known speeches on ethics, “The quality of mercy is not strained” from The Merchant of Venice (18). Li’l Bit quotes this in response to Big Papa’s question, “How is Shakespeare going to help her?” (17). The quote may also serve as a thematic response to the question of how theatre can serve a public, and how the lesson of How I Learned to Drive in particular can serve us. As Vogel seems to indicate, the quotational aspect of dialogism also has its positive uses. One key plot device of the play is the survival technique that Li’l Bit learns from her Uncle Peck. He gives her the tools not only to overcome obstacles while operating a car or navigating her life, but he gives her the tools to overcome him. In the final confrontation between Li’l Bit and Peck in the hotel room, she repeats to Peck what he had taught her in an earlier driving lesson when he said, “You’re going to learn what the other guy is going to do before he does it” (50). Only in this case, cutting
off Peck's advances to go to bed with her, she says, "I know what you want to do five steps ahead of you doing it" (76). After he proposes marriage, she claims that it violates the family contract that Peck had confirmed twice before when he said, "family is family" (69). In order to be heard, she repeats Peck's words to him while having made them her own. In this example, quotation is celebrated. Li'l Bit gains strength from what she has been taught.

Bakhtin speaks of dialogism as "poised on the threshold" of new insights and greater awareness of life (1984:63). *How I Learned to Drive* likewise exists on a threshold, given that in it Li'l Bit evaluates a past before turning to the future. The last image of the play shows her getting into a car and embarking on a journey, but the audience is not told where that journey lies. While the play may be finished, it remains "unfinalized" because its end is also a beginning. Li'l Bit leaves with the ghosts of her past with her, given that the image of Peck accompanies her in the car. Li'l Bit's lessons come at a price. As in the Greek tragedies where someone dies or is killed, Peck becomes the sacrificial victim; he is a tragic figure in the classic sense because he is the pawn of forces beyond his control. The Fates in the form of an intolerant society have mapped out a destiny for him that ultimately ends, like Agamemnon, Herakles, and Ajax, in death. As a victim of childhood abuses and war he is an innocent, but as Li'l Bit's victimizer he is an agent of oracles and curses. In the long run he is punished for crimes the gods had authored, and Li'l Bit escapes death in much the same way as Electra and Agave: implicated in the death of another. Although she cannot be blamed for the relationship with her uncle, or for breaking it off, her actions have consequences. Peck cannot survive without Li'l Bit, and he ends up drinking himself to death (86). As much as she try, and as unjust as it is, Li'l Bit will never quite wash the bloodstains from her hands. As the lights go down on the final tableau of Li'l Bit and Peck together, nobody can guess what the future holds for her.

For Vogel, classical tragedy is of social importance because, as she puts it, "catharsis purges the pity and the terror and enables the audience to transcend them.... Purgation means forward movement" (Holmberg 1998). Despite the shifts in style and genre, she succeeds in teasing out an emotional response from an audience. After all, much of the success of the play depends upon the audience's emotional involvement with both Li'l Bit and Peck. Still, Vogel wants the critical mind to be working. Worth noting in the description of characters, Vogel recommends that the Teenage Greek Chorus, who is to play the voice of the eleven-year-old Li'l Bit in the scene of her first sexualized "driving lesson," should be of legal age, warning that "If the actor is too young, the audience may feel uncomfortable" (4). Actors and directors more often revel in the notion that they might disturb their
audience. But emotionally unsettling the audience is not Vogel's primary aim. Vogel has great faith in the mind, and great faith that her play can appeal to both the intellect and the emotions.

Thematically and structurally How I Learned to Drive reflects social and ethical concerns. As in a memory play, the character Li'l Bit investigates her past in order to attend to its particulars and to share her experiences with others. The investigation has therapeutic value for her, even though she ostensibly tells her story in order "to teach a lesson" to the audience about family and forgiveness (7). The play demonstrates Li'l Bit's reaching back into her past with the desire to see and hear and feel the people who hurt her as well as helped her. Particularly in regards to her uncle, Li'l Bit attempts to look back without judgment and without a condemning "recognition." Towards the end of the play, after the audience learns that Peck has drunk himself to death, Li'l Bit says, "Sometimes 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" (86).

 Appropriately, as Vogel describes the final image of the play, "a faint light strikes the spirit of Uncle Peck, who is sitting in the back seat of the car. [Li'l Bit] sees him in the mirror. She smiles at him, and he nods at her. They are happy to be going for a long drive together" (92). In a real sense, Li'l Bit has set her uncle free. This freedom granting process, I suspect, is one of many secrets in the play, and it is a process Vogel mirrors in the construction of her play. For Drive represents a reaching out as well with the hopeful, positive desire to restore an open and inclusive sensation of the world. The process can only be effective as long as it is does justice to all parties concerned, and when everyone has a voice. Vogel's aesthetics formally embodies such an ethics — one that is made possible in the polyphonic drama answerable to the concerns of its characters and it audience.

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Notes

4. Victor Erlich notes that Roman Jakobson came close to admitting an ethical concern, but Jakobson's investigation of ethics was limited to their expression within compositional style and devices. Ethics were to be studied only from the perspective of their "literariness." See Erlich 1981:199.
5. Shklovsky 1990:5; Thompson 1971:67. I wish to note that Benjamin Sher, one of Shklovsky's translators, believes the English translation of *ostranienie* as "defamiliarization," "estrangement," or "making strange" to be flawed for various reasons and therefore prefers "enstrangement." See his discussion in Shklovsky 1990:xviii–xix.


References Cited


