

[Article]

# Longing for Oneness/Wholeness in Ukiyo: The Floating World in *The Long Christmas Ride Home*\*

Mao NAITO

*Ahh! My breath thunders in my chest! How wonderful it feels to breathe! You cannot know how beautiful it is. When you are alive, you cannot see your breath.*

*But we, your ancestors, can see the air move when you breathe. Your breathing creates a spectrum of color; the motion and heat of your life.*

—The Ghost of Stephen in *The Long Christmas Ride Home* by Paula Vogel

## 1. Introduction

Best known for her 1997 Pulitzer Prize-winning play *How I Learned to Drive*, Paula Vogel has been challenging how to deal with controversial themes such as aging, domestic violence, pedophilia and AIDS. She never shrinks back from backlash, but rather she purposefully creates such moments on the stage—this is her dramaturgy. Vogel has been accepted as a highly original and experimental playwright in contemporary American theater. She is acclaimed for her writing style, making the audience think about the world around them, while at the same time making the audience take a critical view of their own actions and attitudes. Vogel's dramaturgy is influenced by the theories of Victor

---

\* The article is newly written for the 25th anniversary issue of *Vantage Points of English Linguistics, Literature and Education*. The background information of the playwright Paula Vogel is revised based on my article in N.21, *Studies in English Linguistics and Literature*.

Shklovsky, the Russian formalist who proposed the idea of defamiliarization, and Bertold Brecht, who adapted Shklovsky's concept and presented it as his famous "alienation effect." By problematizing and deconstructing established and commonly accepted ideas, Vogel questions, disputes and experiments with gender, sexuality, power, family, history and memory via her nonlinear, circular play structure.

Defamiliarization is an indispensable component in Vogel's plays. According to Brecht, "[t]he A-effect consists in turning the object of which one is to be made aware, to which one's attention is to be drawn, from something ordinary, familiar, immediately accessible, into something peculiar, striking and unexpected" (143). This is exactly what Vogel's philosophy of writing intends—taking the audience on an unexpected and unordinary journey and giving them opportunities to have critical eyes on the events through her plays. Vogel has been using various theatrical effects and techniques as alienation effects. The use of music, sounds of beeps, lights, pictures or slides are standard techniques, and in addition, in most of her plays, each actor plays multiple characters. In *How I Learned to Drive*,<sup>1</sup> for example, a sensual scene of a photo shoot of 14-year-old Li'l Bit by her Uncle Peck is presented with photos like those from *Playboy* magazine inserted in between the montages of actual photos of Li'l Bit. The effect of the slides gives the audience the idea of a "male (Uncle Peck's) gaze," which constructs one type of gender image in terms of heterosexual male desire. The audience's empathy in a seemingly romantic scene is disrupted by the 14-year-old girl's vulnerability to her uncle as evoked by the slides. In another play, *The Mineola Twins*,<sup>2</sup> Vogel uses a crossdressing technique along with multiple casting since the scenes revolve around twin sisters. In addition to representing the conflict in humanistic identity, as well as the possibility of multiplicity in and mutual transformation within oneness, crossdressing defamiliarizes existing cultural beliefs and behavior while creating bizarre situations for the audience.

*The Long Christmas Ride Home*, first produced in New York in 2003, is likely autobiographical for Vogel, commemorating her brother Carl, who died of AIDS in 1987. As she has been creating her works by revising and rewriting plays by William Shakespeare, Edward Albee, Sam Shepard as well as David

Mamet, *The Long Christmas Ride Home* is a rework of Thornton Wilder's one-act plays.<sup>3</sup> Focusing on the history of one family, Vogel depicts the hope and longing for oneness or wholeness which are hardly ever fulfilled. Needless to say, the play encompasses all the hallmarks of Vogel's writing including nonlinear and circular play structure, humor, poignancy and compassion. Above all, the play is markedly experimental since Vogel uses these elements for a more abstract and diffuse approach to the subject matter by employing Japanese Bunraku and Noh theatre techniques. Deconstructing two basic units of authority in the human world—religion and family—by the juxtaposition of Western and Japanese theatrical perspectives, Vogel attempts to represent the world of “what if” on the stage and gives the audience an opportunity to experience certain shareable memories which remain inside each of us. This study examines this challenging work, *The Long Christmas Ride Home*, from the perspective of how its alienation effect—Japanese Bunraku and Noh theatre techniques—works and expands the history of one family toward the shareable experiences of human beings.

### **2.1. The Framework of *The Long Christmas Ride Home* and Defamiliarization**

*The Long Christmas Ride Home* is a comedy and, at the same time, it is a play of pathos to examine political issues through the lens of a dysfunctional family. The play is autobiographical, honoring the memory of Vogel's brother, appearing as the character Stephen. Vogel mentions that with this play she revisited one of her crucial concerns that homophobia, not AIDS, kills homosexual individuals in society in the United States.<sup>4</sup> She adds, “One of the great gifts that my late brother gave to me was an understanding that homophobia and misogyny are all about policing our gender—what it means to be a man or a woman in this country. I think it is culturally universal, but I don't think it is innate” (qtd. in Raymond 5). As if it is her own journey of memory, the play explores the traumatic experience of three children in the car with their parents on Christmas Day. Vogel says that she chose Christmas because for Americans, regardless of whether they are Christian or not, it is almost the same as a myth for everyone. She continues, “At the time when we are supposed to be experiencing charity and embracing everyone inside as well as outside the home, I wanted to show

how the children were outcasts in their own home” (5-6).

The play begins with the Ghost of Stephen entering the stage, stating that the scene “was a very cold Christmas in a long and cold winter—decades and days ago” (9). The recollection of Stephen continues with the drive to his grandparents’ home with his family. The play goes along with the narration of The Man/Father and Woman/Mother. Three children, Rebecca, Clair and Stephen, are represented with puppets manipulated by three puppeteers who are, at the same time, adult Rebecca, Clair and Stephen. The scene proceeds from inside a car (Man/Father and Woman/Mother in the front and three puppet-children in the backseat), with Stephen’s recollections from the scenes of Christmas Eve at the Unitarian Universalist Church to the chaotic dinner at the grandparents’ home and flashes forward in time. Finally, the scene comes back to the critical moment of the car accident with open-ended closure.

Vogel’s nonlinear and circular play structure is much more complex and experimental with this play. In order to emphasize universality, it seems that she intentionally made the play abstract and diffuse in terms of characters as well as the time axis of the play. There are eight characters—Man/Father, Woman/Mother, Three Children, Grandparents and Minister/Dancer—in the play, and they are played by six actors. Vogel carefully describes the function of these characters: the Man, Woman and Minister work as the narrators of the play while speaking for assigned characters. She also adds some further notes:

The man and woman narrators start the play as omniscient narrators, able to read each other’s thoughts and the thoughts of everyone in the car. As the play goes on, they dwindle into parents, frozen in time in the front seat of the car.

The adult actors who play the adult children begin as mute puppeteers in the backseat of the car, but grow into narrators of their own, able to narrate and manipulate their memories. (7)

The inner feelings and thoughts of each character are narrated by the Man and

Woman, and the Minister/Dancer scrambled up all the categorizations of sex, age, and even time space. Here, in order to make this approach work efficiently, Vogel utilizes the use of Bunraku puppet theatre techniques as well as Noh theatre play structure.

This play is a fusion of a one-act play and Bunraku puppet theatre techniques—or more importantly, of one Westerner’s misunderstanding of Bunraku. The misunderstanding is key. (5)

This defamiliarization technique based on “misunderstanding” gives Vogel the chance of presenting and reflecting the history and memory of the characters, especially those of the three children, naturally, freely and also effectively in the nonlinear play structure. Mansbridge says that the use of Bunraku techniques creates distancing effects on subjects such as family, violence, religion, and sexuality, impairing “habituated responses by demanding a constant negotiation between drama and aesthetics, identification and distance, affect and intellect” (164). The adaptation of the non-representational nature of Bunraku theatre confuses and deconstructs the conventional perspectives associated with western realist theatre and contributes to creating time space where the audience is challenged to have a new scope to experience the events on the stage.

The “misunderstanding” of Bunraku theatre certainly gives Vogel a way to create a fine balance between defamiliarization and empathy. While Bunraku puppeteers manipulate puppets with the purpose of a unified performance with its theatrical components—text, music and puppets and they completely act as “puppeteers”—in *The Long Christmas Ride Home*, the actor-puppeteers are elements that constitute the story. In Mansbridge’s analysis, these actor-puppeteers are “like a diegetic audience, watching the action that they are making the puppet perform and placing the audience in the same position of detached analysis, rather than emotional (over) involvement” (167-68). Also, Pellegrini says that actor-puppeteers “portray the children as adults, compellingly symbolizing the psychic grip of the past on the present” (483). Thus, by introducing actor-puppeteers, instead of “puppeteers,” as the observers of the history, Vogel skillfully creates

an alienation effect not only between the audience (and the play) but also within the characters.

## **2.2. The Themes, Contents and Defamiliarization**

Vogel's adaptation of Bunraku and Noh theatre as defamiliarization is not only effective for deconstructing conventional realism drama, but is strongly operative in posing questions about canonical and authoritative viewpoints. As previously mentioned, the play begins with the Ghost of Stephen recollecting the annual Christmas visit to his grandparents' home. Since the narrators talk alternately, as expressing the feelings of multiple characters, it is not really clear who is the central character. Although the appearance of the Ghost of Stephen gives a certain clue that he is the central character, the play is rather vague about the significance and function of each character until the second half of the play. It seems that Vogel has conceptually utilized one of the structural patterns of Noh theatre. Considering her complex use of flashbacks and moving forward with a ghost character, Vogel undeniably adapts "Mugen (fantasy) Noh." In Mugen Noh, the central character does not reveal its identity in the first half of the play. Then, its true identity as a ghost, spirit or phantasm with a haunting attachment to the world is disclosed in the second half. The play structure focuses on flashbacks of the past with unrealistic movement, dance and chanting.

In *The Long Christmas Ride Home*, the Man/Father and Woman/Mother narrate the inside feelings of all the characters, revealing how they are disconnected and dysfunctional as one family: the three children are not really looking forward to going to their grandparents' home and are complaining or indulging in their own concerns and interests, Father is fantasizing about his mistress and Mother is struggling to deal with her doubts and suspicions about her husband's infidelity. In the middle of the first half of the play, Stephen suddenly recalls the Christmas Mass on the day before (a flashback) as if he is trying to keep himself from facing the dysfunction and disconnection of his family. Then, at the grandparents' apartment, the frustration, discontent and abandonment of all the family members is exposed, and by this time, the audience knows that "Merry Christmas" and "Family Gathering" are pseudo-happy, fake events at least

for this family. The first half of the play ends with the critical moment of the almost-violence of Father on the way back to their home. Here, Vogel “stops” the moment and the play flashes forwards to the Christmas Days of 25 years later, 24 years later and 15 years later. Then, throughout the second half of the play, the Ghost of Stephen, as the narrator, shows what has become of each child. At the very end of the play, the Ghost turns back the clock to that Christmas Day in the car and the story proceeds toward the traumatic car accident—the car slips and goes out of control, coming to a stop on the cliff edge.

In addition to the use of the structural concept of Noh theatre, Vogel also experiments with the idea of Ukiyo—the floating world—as one of her alienation effects. The philosophy of the floating world is introduced and intermingled into the play as Stephen’s adoration of it and continues to add to the aesthetic together with the fragility and instability of Vogel’s controversial concerns such as the power of authority, homophobia and other prejudices. The Minister at the Unitarian Universalist Church speaks at the Mass about “the spirit and the flesh” and throws out some questions about faith by showing Japanese woodblock prints—Ukiyo-e. Here, the Minister is the voice of the playwright: “Sometimes using the distance and perspective / of a far-off land, of another people / we can return and see our home more clearly” (26). He continues, “The taste and temptation of the flesh— / these artists and courtesans, actors and merchants / determined to enjoy the flesh because it was ephemeral. / Putting aside Western notions of guilt and shame about the body— / why not embrace what will too soon be gone? [ . . . ] The Floating World” (27). Hashimoto summarizes the idea of Ukiyo as originally signifying the sadness of transience, which was gradually altered in its meaning to capture and enjoy the pleasurable moment of the ephemeral material world, liberated from all the depression, sadness and burden that one has to have. However, this idea of a world of pleasure and freedom at the same time signifies a world of insecurity and uneasiness. This insecurity and uneasiness is floating like weeds, looming over each of us all the time (142).

The family in *The Long Christmas Ride Home* all harbor insecurity and uneasiness toward each other, in themselves, and also as a family. On “the Christmas Day,” Father says that he can’t breathe in his family; Mother says

that she should get pregnant again to make her husband's infidelity end; Stephen cries, blaming himself that his father does not love him; and Rebecca screams in her mind that she is not going to have children as she (and the other children) freezes in the car, looking at her parents' almost-violence (17, 19, 51). These frustrated and disconsolate attitudes are consolidated with Clair's repeated question, "What do we believe (in)?" (25, 26, 31). They are all confused by and caught up in their lives and identities. Vogel tactfully applies this question to the past/memory of each character. At the end of the play, when the Ghost of Stephen turns back the stopped clock to the near-death car accident scene, The Man/Father and Woman/Mother lament: "God. Let me start over. Let me take back this day. / If I try harder—if I have another child— / My children are good children— / If I dress a bit younger—if I say softer things— / My wife is ... my wife" (73). A sequence of regrets—"what if"—is drawn out at the eleventh hour of their lives as all trembled in their seats, hoping to "getting out" of the car or, in other words, the insecurity of their world—the floating world.

### 3. Conclusion

The sequence of "what if" and the family's survival of the accident seemingly give the audience a hopeful ending for this disconnected family. However, Vogel does not dare to conclude the play in that manner. Throughout the second half of the play what Vogel presents is a loop of insecurity and uneasiness by showing the disconnected and dysfunctional relationships of the three children with their beloved persons. There, like their parents, they struggle for and suffer from their past/memory—trauma from their childhoods. In *Hunter On-line Theatre Review*, Greene made a critical comment on the Vineyard Theatre production of the play:<sup>5</sup>

. . . [I]n *The Long Christmas Ride Home* Vogel puts us in a quandary. [ . . . ] To be sure, childhood incidents can permanently traumatize us. But when they become adults, Stephen, Rebecca and Claire move us little. [ . . . ] The play essentially begins and ends during that horrific Christmas ride. The

aftermath—whatever it truly was—remains untapped and unshaped. (par. 8)

However, the point is not whether these adult children move the audience or not. Here, the audience is challenged by the crucial reality of “What’s done cannot be undone”—the line repeatedly uttered by the Ghost of Stephen and the Minister. As Pellegrini analyzes, “[The problem] is that they do not know how to attach or connect in the present [world]. The adult children are haunted by a past they can feel, but whose meaning they have not yet apprehended. They yearn for contact with each other, with the past, with lost parts of themselves” (483).

Pellegrini’s viewpoint is reasonable in terms of Vogel’s use of the words “breathe/breathing” in the play. The stage directions for the opening scene emphasize that the play starts with the sharing of “a common breath” by three characters—the Ghost of Stephen and the two Narrators (9). This motif of “breath/breathing” continually flows throughout the play, coupled with the idea of Ukiyo as the present world. The Ghost of Stephen says:

I come back each year: on the waning of Christmas Day to the waning  
of the Feast of Stephen—my Feast Day.

All of our ancestors come back to observe the still-breathing. Those for  
whom time has not yet stopped. [ . . . ]

We watch you for a day. We are with you in the twilight.

And it is that time again: Christmas Day is passing into night. I will walk  
upon the earth once more. [ . . . ]

I will meander along the bluffs until I find a man whose beauty is worth  
the trip back and I will borrow some of his breath. I must borrow some of  
his breath. He won’t mind. The living have so much breath to give. (67-68)

Pellegrini further adds, “The children’s struggles to remember are struggles to re-member, for flesh to touch flesh” (483). At the very ending of the play, the three children recall the moment of survival: “We held our breath as Father started the car. [ . . . ] / And when at last we were safely away / from the edge, / as one family and one flesh, / we breathed as one: / Ahhhhhh . . . ” (75, 2nd ellipsis in

original ). Then, the Ghost of Stephen speaks to the audience while watching the color and air of the unified breath, “Ah! How beautiful! Do you see it?” (75). At the last moment, Vogel expands their yearning for attachment, or oneness, to those in the audience and the entire theatre. Yasuda explains that breathing is fundamental for the performance as well as the aesthetics of Noh theatre: In Noh theatre, all the performers concentrate on the breath of each performer on the stage—they are feeling the breath overflowing from the entire body of each performer. This is, in other words sharing the “organs”—components of the body—with each other. Since the stage of Noh theatre is like an island in the ocean (the audience), if the entire audience feels and synchronizes with the breathing on the stage, the Noh theatre itself becomes a space of “breathing” (Ch.4). Like the physicality of Noh theatre, Vogel gives the audience an opportunity to synchronize with the characters, actors and the theatre, not in terms of emotional involvement but from the perspective of re-thinking—re-thinking the past/memory or history through which all the canons and values of society have been constituted from and rooted in human beings.

## Notes

1. *How I Learned to Drive* (1997) is the story of a teenage girl, Li'l Bit, growing up and surviving a sexual as well as romantic relationship with her aunt's husband, Uncle Peck. In this play, Vogel presents the issues of molestation, pedophilia, vulnerability and manipulation.
2. *The Mineola Twins* (1999) is a story of identical twin sisters over 30 years. The story covers the years from the 1950s through the 1980s, focusing on the times of the Republican administrations of Eisenhower, Nixon and Bush. The hatred, hostility, conflicting ideology, sexuality, and love between the twins are portrayed along with American society of that time period.
3. Vogel revised *The Happy Journey to Trenton and Camden*, an automobile journey by a family visiting a married daughter, and *The Long Christmas Dinner*, a story of the Christmas dinners of one family over a 90-year period.
4. What she means by “revisit” is that her other autobiographical work, *The Baltimore Waltz* (1992), also commemorates Carl and she calls into question the stereotypes and prejudices surrounding homophobia and AIDS. *The Baltimore Waltz* parodies AIDS as ATD (Acquired Toilet Disease). Anna, the central character, who has just

lost her beloved brother to AIDS, makes an imaginary trip to Europe to find the cure for her ATD.

5. *The Long Christmas Ride Home* was performed at the Vineyard Theatre, an off-Broadway theatre in New York, in October through December 2003. It was directed by Mark Brokaw and Bunraku-style puppets were designed by Basil Twist, who, according to *The New Yorker* magazine, is one of the world's premier puppeteers.

## References

- Brecht, Bertolt. *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic*. Trans. and Ed. John Willett. New York: Hill and Wang, 1982. Print.
- Greene, Alexis. "Car Trouble." *Hunter On-line Theatre Review*. Web. 19 Aug. 2015.
- Hashimoto, Mineo. "*Ukiyo*" no *Shiso* [The Idea of the Floating World]. Tokyo: Kodansha Gendai Shinsho, 1975. Print.
- Mansbridge, Joanna. *Paula Vogel*. Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 2014. Print.
- Pellegrini, Ann. "Repercussions and Reminders in the Plays of Paula Vogel: An Essay in Five Moments." *A Companion to Twentieth-Century American Drama*. Ed. David Krasner. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2005. 473-85. Print.
- Raymond, Gerard. "Puppets and Politics: Set at Christmas, Paul Vogel's New Play Focuses on Three Children, Played at Times by Puppets, But Its Real Target Is Homophobia." *Advocate*. (November 25, 2003): 5-6. Print.
- Shklovsky, Victor. "Art as Technique." Trans. and Eds. Marion J. Reis and Lee T. Lemon. *Russian Formalist Criticism, Four Essays*. Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1965. 3-24. Print.
- Vogel, Paula. *The Baltimore Waltz and Other Plays*. New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1996. Print.
- . *The Long Christmas Ride Home: A Puppet Play with Actors*. New York: Theatre Communications Group, 2004. Print.
- . *The Mammary Plays*. New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1998.
- Yasuda, Noboru. *Nihonjin no Shintai* [The Body of Japanese]. Tokyo: Chikuma Shobo, 2014. Kindle file.

(St. Marianna University School of Medicine)

m2naito@marianna-u.ac.jp