

## INTRODUCTION

In her play The Long Christmas Ride Home, Paula Vogel creates her own narrative by borrowing metanarratives from existing texts. She uses both the works of Thornton Wilder and Japanese Bunraku Puppet Theater in order to construct a socially and culturally conscious piece of theater. Vogel discusses this use of intertextuality in the preface to The Long Christmas Ride Home. Because she is forthcoming about her use of Thornton Wilder and Bunraku, readers do not challenge the origins from which the narratives and techniques are drawn. However, the playwright does not openly divulge the catalyst behind her collecting of previous narratives. Through the careful analysis of Vogel's use of Wilder and Bunraku in The Long Christmas Ride Home, the reasons behind her use of these specific plays, genres, and styles, as well as Brecht's verfremdungseffekt, will be deciphered. In order to utilize The Long Christmas Ride Home as medium for provoking social awareness on behalf of the non-traditional American family, Vogel uses various postmodern theatrical styles and techniques throughout the play. By examining and dissecting both Vogel's play and the metanarratives within the text we may gain an understanding of the playwright's reasons for using intertextuality.

The concept of postmodernism is multifaceted and there is no official overriding definition of the word; however, this paper will focus on Linda Hutcheon's description. She calls postmodernism "fundamentally contradictory, resolutely historical, and inexplicably political" (Shirvani 293). Narrowing a concrete description of postmodern drama is specifically challenging because it is often blurred by both modern and avant-garde texts and performances. Stephen Watts cites postmodern drama as "denial of the

existence of rules and regulations governing dialogue, character, dramatic structure, etc” (37). This means that postmodern drama is not categorized by date, but rather, by content. Vogel disregards the traditional five act narrative; she uses unconventional rhythmic dialogue and rethinks the common notion of character by employing puppets, rather than actors. It is this sort of rebellion from traditional Western realism that allows The Long Christmas Ride Home to fit within the confines of Watts’ description of the postmodern play.

The Long Christmas Ride Home, like many postmodern works, is a fragmented collection of past genres. David B. Downing and Susan Bazargan propose that the postmodern encounter “incorporates the past and sense of ‘second handedness,’” or previously used styles and concepts, “into the present” (237). By including intertextual references to literary history within her play, Vogel, like other postmodern authors, creates a new narrative as she applies and references existing texts. In order to be postmodern, a work is not required to fit within the structures of a certain style; instead, writers borrow from previous forms of storytelling. This technique is known as pastiche.

Frederick Jameson considers pastiche to be a literary device that uses a collage of historical metanarratives; however, it was Linda Hutcheon who recognized the use of pastiche as a tool for social and political criticism through the narrative and aesthetic elements of a text. Duvall writes, “For Jameson, postmodern narrative is historical, playing only with pastiche images and aesthetic forms that produce a degraded historicism; for Hutcheon, postmodern fiction remains historical, precisely because it problematizes history through parody, and thus retains its potential for cultural critique”(1). Hutcheon’s theory is acted out by Vogel within The Long Christmas Ride

Home. The playwright implements historical works, including those of Thornton Wilder, in order to critique the idea of the traditional nuclear family. By doing this Vogel proves that pastiche is not simply a collage of historical metanarratives, but a way to confront current social problems by reflecting on previous time periods.

Paula Vogel's postmodern experimentation with pastiche began almost twenty years before she became widely known for How I Learned to Drive. Vogel's 1979 play Desdemona: A Play about a Handkerchief, is an intertextual examination of the female characters in Shakespeare's Othello, which challenges the original male dominated script by retelling the story through Desdemona, Othello's wife. In this adaptation of William Shakespeare's work, Desdemona is outrageous, uncouth, and manipulative; she acts out her rebellion by working at the local brothel. Like many postmodern writers who seek to restore the "lost" groups (the peasantry and working-class, women, minorities) to the historical record that animates historical research itself in our time" (McHale Postmodernist 91), Vogel rewrites the role of the Elizabethan woman. By presenting Desdemona as disassociated from her lover, Vogel encourages contemporary readers to rethink the under-representation of women in literary history. Linda Hutcheon comments on the on this absence of women and other oppressed groups within historical literature: "The versions of the story of the past that the present tells have always been associated with questions of cultural authority and identity" (402). By forcing her audience to examine the history of women in Western society, Vogel proves Hutcheon's theory. She also incites the reevaluation of the cultural roles of women in the past and the evaluation contemporary inequality and female stereotypes.

Like Desdemona, Vogel's play How I Learned to Drive relies heavily on

intertextual devices and includes literary history within the play. Vogel's references to ancient Greek theater are not subtle. In the play's production notes she names three of the characters "Male Greek Chorus," which is represented by Grandfather, Waiter and High School Boys; "Female Greek Chorus," also known as Mother, Aunt Mary and High School Girls; and "Teenage Greek Chorus," composed of Grandmother, High School Girls and the voice of eleven-year-old Li'l Bit. Because the idea of a Greek Chorus is not based in realism, the characters can appear on stage at anytime. This ability to constantly infiltrate Li'l Bit's life is representative of the outside influences an eleven-year-old girl faces. Vogel's creative use of the chorus from theater history also ensures that the actors work in unison. This stylistic choice removes the play from the genre of domestic drama and thrusts it into postmodern drama. The use of the Greek Chorus allows for a great deal of directorial creativity. Because no director has seen an actual ancient Greek Chorus, he or she must not only steer away from the confines of family-oriented modern drama, like Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf, but also rely on his or her imagination to create the ensemble. The inclusion of the Greek Chorus not only provides additional guidance for the actors and director when decoding the playwright's performance-related intentions, but allows Vogel to link theater history with contemporary drama, just as she does throughout Desdemona: A Play About a Handkerchief.

Vogel furthers this intertextual element of her play by looking not only to theater history, but also to literary history. In this regard, her work is undeniably similar to Lolita, Nabokov's 1955 novel and a comparison of the two can be instructive. In the play Li'l Bit, Vogel's protagonist, engages in a romantic relationship with her Uncle Peck, just as Lolita does with her stepfather. Like Lolita, Li'l Bit does not act as if the relationship

is necessarily an abusive one, but instead, she displays a sense of emotional conflict. Stefan Kanfer describes *Li'l Bit* as a “mixture of victim and unwitting temptress, not quite complicit in the affair—but not entirely blameless either” (22). Because Nabokov’s book is narrated by Humbert, the adult having an affair with Lolita, the girl is never given an accurate voice. Just as the playwright discredits Othello by giving Desdemona a voice in her earlier work, Vogel provides *Lolita/Li'l Bit* the opportunity to tell her story. Terry Eagleton explains this technique, calling it a “digression from the classical narrative, a ‘textualizing’ of history that reclaims repressed and unmapped areas” (61).

In *The Long Christmas Ride Home* (2004), the playwright continues her twenty year tradition of composing plays based on pastiche. Vogel’s originality in this play involves incorporating elements from two historical forms of theatrical literature. She pieces together fragments of Thornton Wilder’s works and employs techniques of traditional Japanese Bunraku Puppet Theater. She then combines the historical designs with contemporary characters, settings, and social arguments. By using these historical narratives as a guise, Vogel is able to challenge current taboos. For example, in the later section of Vogel’s one-act play, siblings Rebecca, Clair, and Stephen are continually haunted by their dysfunctional upbringings. As the sisters wrestle with unwanted pregnancy, complicated sexual identity, and thoughts of suicide, they rely on their brother for guidance. After Stephen tragically dies of AIDS, they seek comfort from his ghost. Because of the use of historical texts and techniques, readers are less likely to view the subject purely in terms of contemporary political controversy and are free to encounter the characters sympathetically. Although AIDS became a household word in the 1980s, negative stereotypes surrounding AIDS victims and homophobia in general still exists in

2004 due in part to the popularity of right-wing politics. At the forefront of Vogel's social agenda is the challenging of the idea of the traditional American family. She displays the negativity surrounding the nuclear family, while painting alternative family situations in a positive light.

Vogel recognizes this use of historical text in a 1999 interview and explains, "I think history allows us to historicize the immediate concerns that we don't want to look at and therefore actually creates empathy, brings us closer" (75). In this interview with David Savran, she describes the way that she might approach a play about the death penalty, "I wouldn't do it the way that Dead Man Walking did. I'd probably write a play about Mary Surratt, the mother of John Surratt, one of the conspirators in Lincoln's assassination. By using history, I think you can get through to an incredible, empathic identification on the subject of capital punishment in a visceral way" (75). This sort of unpolluted comprehension allows the audience to observe a socially and politically driven text as a historical narrative. Texts in which this technique is employed can be more influential than a text with an overt agenda because the messages are somewhat subliminal. This influence over the audience is the playwright's motive for using historical narratives in The Long Christmas Ride Home. The postmodern implications of history can be seen as Vogel combines narratives originally written by Thornton Wilder and the style and techniques associated with Japanese Bunraku Theater in order to steer away from the traditional realism associated with the American family drama. The act of collecting of stories and storytelling devices is what Lyotard, a postmodern theorist, calls the use of metanarratives (McHale, "Constructing" 19). Metanarrative is a term referring to a story that encompasses a universal sense of truth. . In addition to Lyotard's definition

of the concept, a metanarrative can also be described as the previously formed narratives within a storyline. Todd F. Davis and Kenneth Womack state that in the case of Tom Stoppard's postmodern play Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead, the author neglects the "single-voice master narrative in favor of a more variegated text whose greatest strength lies in its plurality of authorial voices" (154). Like Stoppard, Vogel combines a series of borrowed metanarratives in order to form her own narrative. She does this not only by combining various historical styles and storylines, but also by updating the content and placing it into a contemporary context. In addition to using pastiche, Vogel includes her own voice: which is often more emotionally driven than the historical aspects of the play. While postmodern tactics like the collapsing and combining of metanarratives, distance the audience from the characters, Vogel chooses to bring the audience to a catharsis by adding her own sentimental voice.

In her how-to of Bunraku Theater, Vogel exhibits the children in the play not as live actors, but life-size puppets. Vogel's eerily realistic creations, which are comprised of accurate human shapes and mannerisms, first appeared in traditional Japanese puppet theater, originating in the mid-1600s. The strikingly realistic and sophisticated movements of the puppets enable them to convey the details of complex storylines and characterization. By including puppets as a theatrical device within a realistic domestic play, Vogel allows the audience to witness a performance that examines, rather than represents the American family, thus reshaping the American family drama. Each child in Vogel's play is represented by a life size puppet and is manipulated by the actors that play the siblings (Clair, Rebecca, and Stephen) as adults. The actual dialogue is convincingly realistic, but props, set designs and in Vogel's case puppets, are used as theatrical devices. The lifeless puppets are abstract representations of the death of the

post World War II American nuclear family. The children are wooden figures trapped within their parents' deficient attempt to create an unblemished replication of the proper American family. It is only after the characters escape their tortured childhoods and find their individuality as adults that they are played by live actors.

Vogel's use of Japanese components within her play is fueled by more than her enthusiasm for theater history and her tendency to employ hallmarks of postmodernism within her work. She includes letters from her brother Carl at the end of The Long Christmas Ride Home. Although the letters are not a part of the actual play, they are appended to the published edition in order to clarify her personal motive for creating a play with Japanese characteristics. Like Stephen, Carl Vogel was fixated on Japanese culture and also suffered an early death due to AIDS. While the origins of Carl's interest in all things Japanese is unclear, he and Steven are well versed in the country's poetry and art. The use of Bunraku assists Vogel in creating a historical and postmodern piece of theater and acts as a personal therapy, allowing her to honor her late brother. By first introducing Stephen as a warm and caring child, eager to please his mother, Vogel allows the audience to see him as vulnerable and sympathetic. Vogel states that puppetry, "requires a participation from the audience that goes against the grain of adult cynicism or jadedness" (Van Lente 32). Because the audience becomes attached to Stephen's character before it is revealed that he is both homosexual and an AIDS victim, they are able to maintain affection for the character even after these sometimes taboo issues arise.

While the final section of the play includes a memorial to Carl Vogel, the introduction to the play Vogel suggests that directors read three classic Thornton Wilder works, including The Happy Journey to Trenton and Camden, The Long Christmas



Dinner, and The Pullman Car Hiawatha. While she is forthcoming about her alterations of classic plays, she gives no obvious explanation of why she has chosen to model her play after three of Wilder's one acts. Through the use of similar scenarios, tone and structure, and the examination of literary history, Vogel pays homage to Wilder and connects two time periods. Vogel implements the style and content of Wilder's three one-act plays within The Long Christmas Ride Home, so that she may incorporate similar social statements within her work. By introducing situations that parallel those in Wilder's work, Vogel openly criticizes the myth of the American Dream and examines the impact of death on the family unit, which is symbolic of the death of the American Dream. Vogel writes about the negative aspects of the stereotypical American family in order to criticize the strict conservative idea of family that is present in 2004. For example, she mentions that Claire, who is a lesbian, has children. Small details like this allow her to subtly implement the idea of a new definition of family. She chooses to use Wilder's plays in order to prove that, despite the apparent increase in domestic problems over time, American families have always struggled to communicate affectively.

Although both playwrights focus on these realistic themes, neither Vogel nor Wilder is concerned with the mimicking of realistic events on stage; both choose to combine realistic scenarios and dialogue with abstract elements, forcing readers and audience members to use their imaginations in order to understand the symbolic undertones of presentational theater. In the early 1930s, Wilder's plays "showed that realistic-naturalistic theater had pretty much exhausted itself and that realism now properly belonged to the realm of films and radio plays. Further, it was clear now that legitimate theater, if it were to survive, would have to address itself to a smaller, more

discriminating audience and devise new modes of representation” (Goldstone 139). In the introduction to her play Vogel writes, “I want us to emulate Mr. Wilder’s great gift to American theatre in presentational, rather than representational, theater” (6). By breaking away from the realistic styles of theater made popular by Constantin Sergeevich Stanislavsky and Anton Chekhov, Wilder developed a style of theater that combines both realism, or a representation of what is real, with abstract elements of the avant-garde. His work helped shape modern drama and influenced later modernist and postmodernist dramatist. Vogel displays this style of presentational, or non-realistic, theater within her play. As a result of this stylistic choice, she is able to better showcase her social criticism through attention grabbing, non-realistic techniques.

Whether she is rewriting Shakespeare, reevaluating a story of incest, or challenging the traditional notion of the American family, Vogel’s work is always provocative. It is through the use of pastiche that she is able to confront controversial subject matters without completely alienating the audience/reader. Because the playwright’s narratives are within a historical context, readers believe that the text is safe. This sense of security allows the audience/reader to become less guarded when approaching the narratives, thus enabling Vogel to better convey her social agenda of rewriting the description of the traditional American family.

#### THE INTERTEXTUAL USE OF THORNTON WILDER

In order to accurately assess Vogel’s use of literary history, one must turn to Thornton Wilder’s The Happy Journey to Trenton and Camden. This play, which premiered in 1931, is the seemingly rudimentary tale of the archetypal American family.

The Kirbys may initially appear devoid of defects, but a hint of irony lies within Wilder's writing as he reveals the implausibility of a flawless American family. The work is centered on Mrs. Kirby, an average, yet willful mother of three. The play dramatizes the experiences of Mrs. and Mr. Kirby and their children, Arthur and Caroline, as they travel to visit the eldest sibling, Beulah, in Camden following her recent miscarriage. Wilder uses a minimalist set, relying almost exclusively on the words and motions of the actors, and an omniscient stage manager to sustain the play. The family's prized Chevrolet, the eldest daughter's new house, and all other material elements of the play are described in the stage directions as non-realistic. Through this lack of stage properties, the playwright displays the material and economical expectations connected with the myth of the American Dream and the melancholy associated with economic desperation during the Great Depression.

Although Wilder's characters exist in the 1930s, they share both themes and storylines with the family in the contemporary play. The Kirby family, as well as the family in Vogel's play, seek the clichéd concept of the American Dream. She presents this Dream in a negative manner because it is exclusionary of non-traditional lifestyles like that of the fictional Stephen and the non-fictional Carl. In the view of Wilder and Vogel, Americans possess the false notion that financial success can be achieved through honest labor and that esteem of individual Americans is automatically associated with such success. This idea of social superiority, both for an individual and for a family unit, makes up the concept of the American Dream, high social status arises as a byproduct of self achieved wealth. While ownership of property is a crucial element of the American Dream, its significance is different in Vogel and Wilder's families.

After World War II, the GI bill was enacted, allowing more men to attend college and purchase houses. While a concrete date is not given, the first section of Vogel's play presumably takes place in the late 1950s. This estimation is based on the fact that the children in the play are young adults during the height of the AIDS crisis, presumably in the late 1980s. The play is set during a time of conformity and consumption, causing the characters to have a greater sense of material expectation. According to Johannes Willem Bertens, this suburban lifestyle aided in dividing modern from postmodern fiction. Bertens states, "Mainstream postmodernism clearly reaffirms the real as experienced by the new middle classes" (217). Becoming part of the "new middle classes" is synonymous with achieving the American dream. By choosing this time period, Vogel is better able to display the cultural impact of postmodernism. The choice also allows her to distinguish Wilder's modern social situation from her characters' postmodern lifestyle. Wilder's family works towards achieving the American Dream by simply owning a car and a house. Vogel's family is constantly discontented with their social and financial standing, showing the alteration of the American Dream between the early 1930s and the late 1950s. The mother lusts for silver jewelry, Clair for a toy cowboy gun, and Stephen for a gold bracelet, while in The Happy Journey to Trenton and Camden the Kirbys assess themselves only by the ownership of real estate and an automobile. This displays the different expectations and intensity connected with the evolving definition of the Dream.

Vogel highlights postmodernism within the play by openly acknowledging her reconstruction and reexamination of The Happy Journey to Trenton and Camden. She does not apologize for the similarities, but instead openly pays homage to one of the

founders of presentational theater. This is what is sometimes called the “parasitic” aspect of the postmodern (McHale, “Constructing” 23). This idea asserts that postmodern drama does not fit within certain constraints, but instead borrows from genres of literature. The word “parasitic” can be interchanged with the word pastiche, which accurately describes Vogel’s collecting and reworking of historical works, including Wilder’s one-acts. By modeling her play after Wilder’s, Vogel makes it possible for her readers to directly compare contemporary America with the now idealized lifestyle that presumably existed in 1931. While this comparison aids the playwright in displaying the downtrodden climate surrounding the family unit during the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, further investigations of Wilder’s writing reveal that his optimism is often misunderstood.

Like Vogel, Wilder also displays a cynical view of the American Dream cliché, but his message is cryptic, while Vogel’s is undisguised. It is through his rejection of naturalism that the reader is able to understand that his plays are not a reflection of truth, but a purposely skewed representation of daily life. Both playwrights acknowledge that the American Dream does not exist, but Wilder tries to restore hope through his play, while Vogel aims to expose the false images of perfection associated with the American ideal. She purposely seeks guidance from Wilder’s works in order to display multi-layered problems facing America in a way that is subtle and realistic, while focusing solely on one family. While church and high school productions of Wilder’s best known work, Our Town, have falsely portrayed him as a sentimental playwright, hoping to alter the world, rather than observe it, theater critics disagree. Wilder’s biographer, Robert Goldstone describes Our Town in this way:

Although it avoids the depiction of the mean, petty, ugly and sordid, [it] is no

sentimental idyll: the church organist hates the town and commits suicide; the young Gibbs boy dies of appendicitis on a camping trip; mothers and fathers and sons and daughters go through life taking one another for granted; the most promising young man in the village, after winning a scholarship and graduating from M.I.T., is among those killed overseas in a remote war; Emily dies in childbirth (140).

The subjects of death and general discontentment are present in both plays, but Unlike Our Town, The Long Christmas Ride Home not only avoids the sentimental idyll but leaves very little hope for the future.

The writers both emphasize the unobtainable nature of the American Dream and highlight the thematic resistance to the national ideal. Vogel and Wilder further address this by examining the subjects of wealth and class. The Happy Journey to Trenton and Camden was written in 1931, during a time in which it would have been suitable for Wilder to recount stories of the struggling families facing the ill fortune brought by the Great Depression. Instead, he writes about a middle class family traveling comfortably in the North Eastern United States. Some critics suggest that this was done in order to enable readers to escape from their existing financial tribulations. However, Wilder does not neglect the issues of class and wealth. For example, when the family arrives at the oldest daughter's house, young Caroline says to her mother, "ma, it's better than our street. It's richer than our street. –Ma, isn't Beulah richer than we are?" (Wilder, The Happy 99). Her mother responds by saying, "Mind yourself, missy. I don't want to hear anybody talking about rich or not rich when I'm around. If people aren't nice I don't care how rich they are" (99). While Caroline is beginning to succumb to the American Dream

by seeking material riches, Mrs. Kirby tries to avoid discussions of cultural influences. Because Mrs. Kirby is from a time period in which fewer had access to wealth, she refuses to encourage her daughter's materialistic desires. This illustrates how Wilder's commentary on class underscores the theoretical subject of the American Dream, not the financial situations of the day. This play could be interpreted as a ploy to bring optimism to readers during times of financial hardship. However, it is more likely that this scene, as well as the play as a whole, is meant to act as commentary on the impossibility and irrationality of collecting wealth in order to obtain happiness.

Like Wilder, Vogel develops her interpretation of America's misconstrued priorities. Unlike Ma, her maternal character does not bashfully brush aside her class status. Ms. Kirby is economically supported by her husband, but she does not blame him for the family's unadorned home and modest income. In The Long Christmas Ride Home, the mother blames the family's lower-middle class standing on her husband's philandering. Vogel clearly patterns her approach to class, wealth, and jealousy after Ms. Kirby's understated envy, but the addition of a mistress gives a new dimension to the contemporary wife's jealousy. Because of her husband's extravagant gifts for his mistress, Vogel's female character lacks the revenue to provide her children with a typical suburban lifestyle. The couple and the Minister, a character in the play, give this picture through dialogue:

MINISTER. Yesterday in the jewelry store, when he bought silver earrings for

Sheila, silver rings too, a silver bracelet, thick for her tapered wrist...

WOMAN. And he though...

MAN. Screw!

WOMAN. The rent for January.

MAN. Screw!

WOMAN. The grocery bill.

MAN. Screw!

WOMAN. The money for braces.

MAN. Screw!

WOMAN. The milkman, the doctor, the broken washing machine, the payment  
on the car, the savings for the house (41).

Through this section of dialogue, Vogel shows the impossibility of achieving an ideal lifestyle by accumulating material items. Instead of verbally acknowledging the family's needs, the father simply responds with the word "screw," as if to say "screw it all" to his family and "screw you" to his wife. Despite the mother's attempts to acquire groceries and braces for her children, her husband's negligence prevents her and the children from attaining the American Dream. He views sexual gratification and extravagant material possessions as the scale by which both his success and masculinity is weighted.

As the mother works to fulfill her role in the quintessential domestic life, the reader can see that she sees herself as a failure. She stays at home, while Shelia, her husband's mistress, has a career. Not only is Shelia absorbing money from the family; she is also financially self-sufficient. The husband does not give his wife lovely tokens as he does Shelia. Instead, she receives a vacuum cleaner for Christmas. Through this, Vogel is able to transparently display the misconstrued class expectation within the American culture in a way that is much bolder than that employed by Wilder.

At first glance, The Happy Journey to Trenton and Camden appears to be the



simple story of the Kirby family traveling to New Jersey to visit the oldest of the three siblings, but enigmatic social messages lie within the play's subtext. While traveling, the family witnesses a funeral procession. One of the children, Caroline, protests when her father pauses to pay respects as a funeral passes. He reminds his daughter, "Well, we haven't forgotten the funeral that we went on, have we? We haven't forgotten our good Harold. He gave his life for his country, we mustn't forget that. Well, we'll all hold up the traffic for a few minutes some day" (90). While an idealism exists within the play, this statement demonstrates the non-idealistic aspects of Wilder's work by acknowledging that death is inevitable. By bringing up the subject of death, Mr. Kirby forces his children to consider their own mortality and to access the importance of Beulah's situation, reminding them that their older sister recently lost her infant. This reminds them that luxuries like their Chevrolet are only temporary. Because Harold is presumed to have been a soldier, the dialogue also addresses the memory of World War I that loomed over the United States during the Great Depression and its impact on the average family.

Vogel finds that, while Wilder writes in a time when the First World War was on the minds of Americans, she faces a country with a changing climate and a different war. The battle that she chooses to describe in The Long Christmas Ride Home is not international, but domestic. Vogel's fictional family, whose last name is never revealed, discovers that violence and opposition are found in the home, rather than abroad. This internal conflict is apparent when Claire asks her mother about the family's religious beliefs. The mother explains to Claire that the family attends a Unitarian Universalist Church because she is Catholic and the father is Jewish, making their relationship an

“intermarriage.” When the child asks what intermarriage is, the father responds, “intermarriage is the mingling of blood from two cultures at war” (Vogel 31). This statement acknowledges the cultural battles that exist within the United States. While the country is no longer fighting overseas during the time period of Vogel’s play, wars rage within American communities and families. While the abusive father is at the center of the domestic war, the mother is submissive and helpless; she is unable to battle on behalf of her intimidated children. Unlike the children in Wilder’s play, who all but ignore Mr. Kirby, the children in the contemporary play shrink from their father.

The men in both plays are misanthropic, but the patriarch in The Happy Journey to Trenton and Camden does not show the same abusive impulses as the father in the contemporary work. It is Ma who communicates tenderly with her children, coaching their independence and assuring them that they do not have to wait for a shooting star to make wishes. The father in Wilder’s play never speaks; his personality is ambiguous and the actor must determine how to present the character to the audience. Although he has no lines, he does appear on stage throughout the play. His secondary status is confirmed in the character list that appears before the play. These character descriptions individually identify Ma as “Mrs. Kate Kirby,” while Pa is billed simply as “Ma’s husband Elmer” (Wilder 85). This makes it apparent that the story is told from Ma’s point of view. The sense of isolation surrounding Mr. Kirby is contrasted with the gregarious disposition of Mrs. Kirby. While Wilder refers to his play as a “testimonial of homage to the average American mother” (Wilder 84), Vogel’s play can be considered a testimonial of concern for the average American mother.

Because Vogel admittedly models her storytelling techniques after The Happy

Journey to Trenton and Camden, her play is also written from a matriarch's view point. Although the mother is flawed, her devotion to her children, particularly Stephen, redeems her and allows the father to assume the role of villain. Like Wilder's Pa, the father in The Long Christmas Ride Home is cold and detached. Unlike Wilder's character, the father in Vogel's play is anything but silent. As he sits in the driver's seat, he mutters, "Who can think in this family?" He later declares, "I can't breathe in this family" (17). Vogel borrows the skeletons of her predecessor's characters and reconstructs them in order to further explore contemporary family structure and domestic combat. While the story is crafted so that readers will empathize with the mother, she is not outspoken like Kate Kirby. Her character's meek manners and attitude of victimization, along with her decision not to join the work force, enable Vogel to criticize the traditional male dominated family structure. The parental figures in both plays focus not only on the internal structure of the family, but also on societal elevation and approval of those in the community at large.

Unlike the ideals associated with financial gain, reproduction remains an unchanging necessity for American women to achieve public esteem. In the traditional home, the patriarch is responsible for the economic component of the American Dream, while the woman is relied upon for childbirth in order to achieve her half of the Dream. By giving birth the woman becomes a success. She produces a baby, just as the American husband generates revenue. As Helen Malson states, "Issues of 'reproduction' have occupied, and continue to occupy, a central place in both knowledge of 'women', whether or not they themselves reproduce, are inevitably at least partially defined in relation to the regulatory idea of 'reproduction' and 'woman's reproductive body'" (199).

By displaying the commonality between Beulah and Rebecca through their struggles with pregnancy, Vogel links the two characters. While The Happy Journey to Camden and Trenton is not a postmodern, characters in Wilder's pieces, as well as those in Vogel's, confirm this theory. Both Beulah, the eldest daughter in Wilder's play, and Rebecca, the oldest of the three siblings in Vogel's work, cope with the social repercussions of reproduction.

In The Happy Journey to Camden and Trenton, Wilder examines the shame and despair surrounding the issue of stillbirths in the 1930s. Because the primary role of the woman was to be a mother, women who could not have children may have seen themselves as failures. When Beulah describes her unsuccessful attempt at childbirth to her mother, she says, "she didn't even live a few minutes, Mama. It was awful" (101). In addition to the sorrow associated with losing an infant, she also suffers the anxiety of failing to uphold her maternal position. While no one openly faults Beulah for the death, she is surrounded by pity as the Kirbys avoid addressing the tragedy. Wilder's character silently dubs herself ineffectual, and states, "When I got back from the hospital Horace had moved everything into it (the house), and there wasn't anything for me to do" (101). Because Horace attains the male absolute through his earnings, which he displays by purchasing new furniture, she is reminded of her possible inability to bear children and becomes aware of her perceived uselessness.

Vogel contrasts Wilder's play with her contemporary interpretation of reproductive crisis. The second section of her play is set in the 1980s, and although Rebecca has become an adult during a seemingly progressive period in history, the concept that a woman's sole purpose is to be a mother has not completely vanished. In

the second section of The Long Christmas Ride Home, the adult Rebecca finds herself pregnant and unmarried. She is no longer played by a puppet, but by an actor; her boyfriend Chester is played by a shadow puppet in an upstairs window. Chester does not speak his part; it is implied by Rebecca. She yells into the window, “You want me to keep the baby? You want us to raise it together- I don’t think that’s a good idea” (53). Unlike Beulah, she is crippled by her pregnancy, rather by her inability to bear children. She implies her plans for an abortion throughout the scene, stating, “I hate feeling this baby using me like some host body” (53). On stage she rejects Chester’s offers of marriage and protests the use of her body for reproduction; yet, in the end, Rebecca chooses to keep the child. She does not entirely escape her mother’s traditional familial lifestyle, but mimics women of past generations, proving that the pressures to engage in reproduction have not deserted the postmodern woman. However, she is able to remove herself from a traditional sense of family by choosing to become a single mother and by using her siblings, rather than a husband, as a support system. While the reader is not privy to the catalyst behind Rebecca’s decision, it is possible that she longs to fulfill the American Dream in a way that her mother could not. Vogel shows that Rebecca has more in common with Beulah than the reader may at first detect, but it is Rebecca, not her predecessor, who obtains a satisfactory sense of family.

In addition to simulating Wilder’s thematic and situational approach, Vogel furthers her tribute by employing Wilder’s unique style of presentational theater. Vogel and Wilder are not concerned with the detailed mimicking of realistic events on stage, but instead choose to combine realistic scenarios and dialogue with abstract elements, forcing readers and audience members to use their imagination. Like Wilder’s, Vogel’s dialogue

is structured in the same way as a realistic or representational play; it is the abstract stage dressings, the acknowledgment of the audience, and conceptual narration techniques that make the plays presentational. As a result of this stylistic choice, Vogel is able to distinguish her play from the typical family drama and better convey her social commentary through attention grabbing non-realistic techniques. It is through this abstract form of dramatic literature that both playwrights are able to clearly create a world that allows readers to observe as an impartial audience. In a broad sense, presentational theater is any style of performance that does not seek complete naturalism. This form of dramatic literature can technically encompass anything from the classic Greek interpretations of flying gods to nineteenth century melodramas. However, when a play is labeled presentational, the critic is most likely referring to the twentieth century movement away from naturalism, such as we see in the works of Ibsen, and towards non-realism, the avant-garde, and eventually postmodernism. In theater, “postmodernism is difficult to define precisely, however, because it is usually contrasted with either modernism or the avant-garde. ‘Thus some critics mean by postmodernism what others call avant-gardism, while others still would call the same phenomenon modernism’” (Whitmore 3).

Thornton Wilder exemplifies this style of performance by combining natural dialogue with improbable situations. According to George R. Kernodle, this was a much needed change in drama. He writes, “naturalism is a very limited style. Not only do we grow weary of the overemphasis on under acting, but we put on the stage both old plays and new that take a very different view of nature and man and require a different manner of expression” (253). The presentational form of storytelling allows playwrights to look

beyond the harsh realities associated with naturalism and further explore his interpretation of American idealism. Kernodle writes that the goal of presentational theater is “not artificiality but a high kind of sincerity to show a genuine desire to get along with people rather than the primitive impulse to curse them” (259). Wilder strives for this sort of idealism by employing the Stage Manager to act as a narrator or “spectator-actor” in The Pullman Car Hiawatha, Our Town, and The Happy Journey to Trenton and Camden. In The Happy Journey to Trenton and Camden, The Stage Manager represents both the reader and the characters within the plays. While he makes insightful commentary that is emblematic of a storyteller, he also reads the lines of all minor characters. Wilder specifies that the Stage Manager will read the lines “clearly, but with little attempt at characterization” (85). By using this technique, the playwright frequently reminds the reader, and/or the audience, that the play is not a recreation of an event, but an abstract representation of the story. Because the play is presentational, its lack of concrete detail enables the reader to replace the characters with themselves; therefore, the play becomes Universal.

Vogel employs this same tactic in The Long Christmas Ride Home, but instead of using one narrator, she incorporates three. The Minister follows the family through Christmas day. Like the Stage Manager, the Minister gives sermons, provides representational interaction with the reader and is used to play several minor characters, including the children’s maternal grandparents. The mother and father are not named; Vogel calls them “Man” and “Woman.” She writes, “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” (7). The Man and Woman, as well as the Minister, make Vogel’s writing appear keenly self aware and reflect the influence of Wilder’s presentational elements of contemporary theater. Because characters are onlookers, readers become observers and critics of the situation and the time period. Without this and other presentational techniques, Vogel’s play would simply be a family drama, indistinguishable from representational dramatic literature. It is only through the use of Wilder’s presentational techniques that the author is able to create a commentary on the ethical practices of Americans.

The Happy Journey to Camden and Trenton is not isolated in its use of presentational devices. Other Wilder plays, including Pullman Car Hiawatha, are also mimicked by Vogel to further cultivate her translation of this specific abstract theater style. In Pullman Car Hiawatha, as in The Happy Journey to Camden and Trenton, the story of a group of strangers traveling on a train from New York to Chicago is articulated from the perspective of The Stage Manager. An ordinary night on a train car takes on a larger theme when a young woman, Harriet, is stricken with heart trouble and dies that night. After Harriet’s death, the play turns from a somewhat realistic evaluation of an exhausting trip, becoming an abstract and highly presentational interpretation of Harriet’s death. During a latter section of the one-act, readers witness angels removing Harriet from the train; the play then focuses on her enlightened response to the concept of death.

While there are many presentational elements in Pullman Car Hiawatha, the most enterprising is the use of actors to represent towns, hours, and planets. Wilder utilizes a kind of reverse personification by using live actors to represent places and objects, rather than having locations, numbers, and celestial beings exhibit human qualities. Grover’s



Corners, Ohio, is the first of these unconventional characters to appear. He states, “I represent Grover’s Corners, Ohio. Eight hundred twenty-one souls. ‘There’s so much good in the worst of us and so much bad in the best of us, that it ill behooves all of us to criticize the rest of us.’ Robert Louis Stevenson. Thankya” (50). Wilder presents the concept of time by creating characters called The Hours, played by beautiful women carrying Roman numerals. The playwright also develops characters based on planets who join together in a chorus of sound. Unlike The Happy Journey to Camden and Trenton, this play does not focus on the American dream, but examines the human reaction to death. Each interpretation of place and time captures a metaphysical sense of death that a human character may not be able to illuminate as clearly.

These abstract characters in Wilder’s play are the antithesis of Vogel’s use of puppets within The Long Christmas Ride Home. Rather than presenting the reader, or audience member, with characters played by actors representing places and abstract concepts, she manipulates objects to act as humans. Vogel’s most brazen attempt at a presentational style is her use of puppets to depict the young characters in the work. In order to create this postmodern concept, the playwright inverts Wilder’s use of personification, and combines it with traditional Bunraku theater to create a new interpretation of the classic performance styles. Just as the representations of place and time in Wilder’s work touch on larger metaphysical topics, the puppets also confront spiritual issues, such as that of the afterlife. When Stephen, Rebecca, and Claire are puppets, they are also children; they do not emerge as live actors until after adulthood. It is key that Stephen is played by a live actor after his death and is a puppet only when he is alive. By contrasting Stephen’s ghost with his puppet-self, Vogel is able to present the

afterlife as the most vibrant state of consciousness, and by using a doll to represent Stephen as a child, she conveys his earthly state as passive.

Like Vogel, Wilder amplifies the presentational construction of his plays through his fundamental and unconventional use of set dressings. Like The Happy Journey from Camden to Trenton, The Long Christmas Ride Home also calls for minimalist set design and has as few props as possible. The families in both plays sit in chairs, which represent car seats. Both authors use the family car to represent motion, change and the apparent progress of the American lifestyle. By consistently moving forward, or in some cases metaphorically backwards, the characters acknowledge their situation throughout the play. In The Happy Journey to Trenton and Camden the car is novel. To the Kirby family, the car represents available progressive technical changes. Wilder also includes this sort of journey in Pullman Car Hiawatha. The play's presentational train is distinguished by a line drawn in chalk by The Stage Manager. As the play opens, he immediately makes the reader, and/or audience, aware of the abstract situation by explaining the set. The initial line in the play is, "This is the plan of a Pullman car." The Stage Manager physically defines the boundaries between the realistic and the abstract. By allowing the character to candidly create the set as the play unfolds, Wilder acknowledges his attempt to avoid a stale representational set, and provides a model for Vogel to use the same technique in her play. However, while Vogel follows Wilder's exemplary presentational set, she is vaguer in the execution of the concept. She instructs that "The puppeteers guide the puppet children into the backseat of a car. Perhaps a miniature backseat of a car is used-perhaps not. Perhaps it is a bench-perhaps not" (Vogel 10). This variation shows that while embracing his style, Vogel does not simply mimic

Wilder, but combines and utilizes his artistry in order to create her own definitive voice. By using the words “perhaps” and “perhaps not” Vogel shows desire for the director’s original visions to be featured as well.

An additional presentational element that is found in The Happy Journey to Camden and Trenton, Pullman Car Hiawatha, and The Long Christmas Ride Home is the illusion of uneasy and painful motion. Vogel follows her predecessor by basing her work on the idea of constant movement and the illusion of a family being forced into an uncomfortably small space, mentally and physically. Unlike the hopeful symbolism associated with the conceptual representation of the automobile in The Happy Journey to Trenton and Camden, the contemporary interpretation of the family and of technology is not a positive one. While the Kirby family travels with optimistic ideals, audibly observing everything they pass, Vogel’s family is miserable and claustrophobic. This is an example of the contrasts between modern and postmodern times. Because the postmodern is linked with the postindustrial era, Vogel’s characters are not only lackluster in their perception of the automobile, but pessimistic when confronting automotive technology. The father’s erratic driving causes panic among the passengers and the car begins to represent the unknown. As the father loses control of his driving, the mother yells, “You son of a bitch. You bastard. Go ahead. Kill us all. You reckless bastard. Throw us all away” (71). This outburst shows that, while the characters in Wilder’s plays are representative of the progress of the American family through technology, Vogel’s play focuses on the family’s demise. This is symbolic of the distance families feel from one another as more technology becomes available. Vogel looks to The Pullman Car Hiawatha in order to further portray these sorts of discomforts during travel.

As Wilder's play opens, the passengers are already exasperated and miserable. They pester the Porter, asking "How the hell do you turn on the light" and "May I ask if someone in this car will be kind enough to lend me some aspirin" (43)? The same atmosphere exists in Vogel's car as the children's rowdiness increases and Rebecca warns Stephen, "Don't breathe on me, Puke-Breath" (12).

While the contemporary playwright adapts the Kirby family's journey to illustrate the demise of the American Dream, she also employs this play in order to exemplify the pain associated with both physical and metaphysical travels. Both her play and Wilder's plays depict journeys that begin with discomfort and end in untimely death. The true end of the journey in Wilder's play is not in Chicago, but in Harriett's death. The Long Christmas Ride Home is also a presentational interpretation of the voyage toward the afterlife. While both plays highlight the burden of travel, a more serious sense of hardship arises in the early death of the young Harriett in The Pullman Car Hiawatha and the premature passing of Stephen in The Long Christmas Ride Home. This is not a coincidence. Vogel appropriates Wilder's nonrealistic depiction of Harriett's illness in order to create a poignant commentary on Stephen's tragic battle with AIDS. In Wilder's play, as the train travels from New York to Chicago, Harriett, a young wife, falls ill. She calls out "Porter, I'm not well, I'm sick. I must see a doctor" (48). The Porter is not initially concerned, but when she informs him of her heart condition the story shifts, and it becomes about the dying woman. She quickly fades, and The Archangels join her at her bedside. The reader is not privy to the details of Harriett's actual death, but instead witnesses her spiritual departure as the two angels lead her away.

In The Long Christmas Ride Home, Stephen's death would in actual terms be

slow. Because Vogel abides by Wilder's example, Stephen dies suddenly, like Harriett. This is a calculated choice made by the playwright. Unlike Harriett's heart condition, Stephen's battle with AIDS could not have produced a sudden death. But Vogel creates the impression of a speedy death rather than showing his slow suffering. She chooses to move directly from his contraction of the disease to his afterlife. Stephen lives in the Castro, San Francisco's gay district, during the onset of the AIDS crisis, but still, depression and desperation cause him to recklessly seek the attention of a stranger. He tells the story of the encounter, "Oh! Oh my sisters will cry. I could feel the virus entering my body. But I could not undo what had been done" (Vogel 66). As Vogel applies Wilder's play to her own work, she is able to purposefully examine a contemporary issue through the use of theater history, which helps her to avoid existing anxiety associated with AIDS and HIV. Vogel's earlier play *Baltimore Waltz*, which also addresses her reaction to Carl's death, is described as a "rare AIDS play that rides completely off the rails of documentary reality, thriving to rise above or even remake the world in which the disease exists" (Smith 536). The same can be said for *The Long Christmas Ride Home*. The play includes tactics that enable the reader to disassociate the stigma attached with AIDS victims and causes Stephen's death to appear faultless. Because he is quickly transformed from an HIV victim into an angel/ghost, there is no time for judgment; his death is as innocent as the passing of Wilder's character Harriett.

In a sense, Harriett and Stephen are the same character, only in different circumstances. Postmodernists refer to the transferring of characters as transworld identity. According to Brian McHale, in order to use intertextuality, a writer must integrate the "text's structure" into their own work. He claims that, while there are

several ways to accomplish this task, “none is more effective than the device of ‘borrowing’ a character from another text” (McHale, Postmodernist 5). Vogel pays homage to Wilder not only by borrowing from his stylized interpretation of death, but by making Stephen’s afterlife similar to Harriett’s experiences. In The Pullman Car Hiawatha, several supernatural characters appear. In addition to The Archangels, The Workman’s Ghost plays a small and somewhat ambiguous role in the play. He enters, and gives a short soliloquy in German. The Stage Manager acknowledges him, then quickly transitions to the next section of the play.

In Vogel’s work, Stephen acts as both the angel and the ghost, as well as the recently deceased. Although the playwright officially labels him as a ghost, he also acts as an angel to his sisters. Through his role as angel, Vogel is able to implement the social and philosophical purposes behind Wilder’s Archangels. Just as the Archangels observe Harriett and the other passengers on the Hiawatha, Stephen watches over his sisters. In the classic play, a minor character, The Insane Woman, calls out to the Archangels as they take Harriett away. She cries, “What possible use can there be in my simply waiting?” (Wilder 5). They defer her entrance to heaven; her works on earth are yet to be completed. In The Long Christmas Ride Home, Claire also desires to abandon her body and find refuge in an unearthly place. The Ghost of Stephen watches his younger sister. Vogel writes, “The adult Stephen emerges into the shadows behind Claire and watches. Claire moves the gun up to her mouth and closes her eyes. As she opens her mouth, Stephen opens his mouth as well and blows his breath: we hear the spooky, amplified sound of breath- a human sigh- that changes into the howl of winter wind” (59-60). Stephen uses his breath to calm his sister in the same manner that the Archangels whisper

to soothe Harriett. This compels Claire to slowly remove the gun from her mouth and walk away. She never sees Stephen, but he continues to act as his sister's angel throughout the play. By including the images of the angels, the ghost, and the recently deceased within one character, Vogel is able to convey Wilder's doctrine despite the limitations of a small cast.

While the Insane Woman begs for her life to end, the essence of regret permeates the thoughts of both Harriett and Stephen, causing them to long for one more day of life. After Harriett's death, as she walks through the train, she begs the Archangels, "Do let me stop a minute: I want to say good-bye" (Wilder, Pullman 57). She realizes the time that she has wasted and tells her guides, "I'm ashamed to come with you. I haven't done anything. I haven't done anything with my life. Worse than that: I was angry and sullen. I never realized anything" (55). Wilder's sermon on the brevity of life may seem commonplace; this is why Vogel uses his presentational style, rather than realism. If a character were to say these words in a realistic setting, it would not be met with the same force. The presentational style allows the audience to consciously escape the ordinary and become acutely aware of Wilder's words. Immediately after performing a sex act behind a shadow puppet screen, Stephen knows he has been infected with AIDS. He then states to the audience, "As my grandmother would say: 'It's amazing what people will throw away'" (Vogel 66). This line is repeated throughout the play, referring to literal garbage and as a metaphor for Stephen. After his death, like Harriett, he longs to return to earth. Vogel's character sermonizes to his sisters and to the audience, "How wonderful it is to breathe! You cannot know how beautiful it is. When you are alive, you cannot see your breath" (68). Through this scene, Vogel criticizes contemporary American culture and its

lethargic and wasteful approach to life.

After their deaths, Stephen and Harriett have clarity that they did not possess while they were alive. This allows the authors to comment on the living characters by juxtaposing them with the deceased. In Wilder's play, the Porter walks through the train car the morning after Harriett's death; we see that the state of the Hiawatha has not changed. The passengers remain tormented. A woman yells to the Porter as he passes, "Young man, take your foot out of my face" (Wilder, Pullman 59). Stark contrast is a tactic used to differentiate the disposition of the humans and the supernatural. It is not an accident that Harriett and her husband are the only named characters in the play. The other passengers are called "Lower One," "Lower Two," and so on. This indicates that they are less spiritually conscious than Harriett and the man who witnesses her death. Vogel takes the same approach when naming her characters "man" and "woman," implying that they are somehow less enlightened than the children. The playwright also pays post-modern homage to her predecessor in the last sequence of her play. In this scene, the Ghost of Stephen returns to the terrible Christmas Day on which the first section of the play is based. This time he is a spectator and while he joins the other characters in the scene, he, like Harriett, is clearly more knowledgeable than the living.

The Long Christmas Dinner is the most complex of the three Thornton Wilder plays mentioned in the introduction of The Long Christmas Ride Home. The play takes place over a ninety year span and chronicles four generations of the Bayard family as they participate in their yearly Christmas celebration. Wilder showcases the gradual decline of each generation until only one family member remains. The title of Vogel's play is conspicuously derived from The Long Christmas Dinner, but the playwright does



not emulate this play with the same thoroughness as she does The Happy Journey to Trenton and Camden and The Pullman Car Hiawatha. Rather than recounting the systematic presentational tactics, Vogel chooses to examine theme. While The Long Christmas Dinner is a presentational play, the actual elements of abstraction differ from those in Vogel's work. In Wilder's work, an on-stage portal transfers characters between the metaphysical worlds of life and death; however, this mechanism is not present in Vogel's play. The use of wigs and small items of clothing as a way of aging characters is also absent from the contemporary story. Unlike the other plays cited in Vogel's preface, The Long Christmas Dinner does not influence the abstract style of the show, but allows Vogel to efficiently examine both the demise of the American Dream and the concept of death. By including both themes, Vogel and Wilder comment on the fleeting nature of the Dream, which, like the characters themselves, will ultimately expire.

The year in which the play begins is not clear, but it may be assumed that the story originates shortly before the turn of the century. In Wilder's play, Mother Bayard recalls, "I can remember when there were still Indians on this very ground, and I wasn't a young girl either. I can remember when we had to cross the Mississippi on a new -made raft" (5). The reader may also assume that the last in the series of Christmas dinners takes place during the late 1920s, shortly before the play was published in 1931. The first segment of the play exhibits a festive atmosphere and a sense of loyalty among family members. Cousin Brandon and other family members bestow each other with verbal blessings. Brandon states, "My dear cousins, I can't tell you how pleasant it is to be having Christmas dinner with you all" (Wilder 6). As the years progress, this sort of joyous rhetoric fades. The dissemination of Christmas dinner climaxes when Charles,

Mother Bayard's grandson, publicly scolds his son, Roderick, for his drunken tirade at the family's country club. Roderick responds by saying, "I hate this town and everything about it. I always did" (Wilder 21). This conflict ends the family's traditional Christmas celebration.

The Long Christmas Ride Home can be interpreted as a continuation of the Bayards' story. While the families are diverse and come from various time periods and economic backgrounds, the familial conflict seen in Wilder's work resonates and intensifies in Vogel's play. The actual Christmas dinner takes place in the center of the play, just as the ceremonial Christmas dinner acts as the marrow of Wilder's work. In the original play, it is the changing of time and the collapse in communication that leads to the destruction of the Bayards' holiday tradition. In The Long Christmas Ride Home, Vogel demonstrates the additional increase in the lack of articulation as the family dinner extends into the mid to late twentieth century. Altercations and alcoholism, as well as violence have lunged to the forefront of the family dinner.

Vogel's play also consists of a family dinner; the unnamed family travels to their maternal grandparents' house and attempts to celebrate the winter holidays cordially. Like the Bayards' last Christmas dinner, this family's alcohol-soaked visitation is no ideal American holiday. The enduring argument between family members is more acute than the dispute in Wilder's play, signifying the decline of the American Dream. While Roderick is denounced for his excessive use of alcohol in The Long Christmas Dinner, both the mother and the father in Vogel's play drink excessively and the use of alcohol is no longer reprimanded; the taboo issue at hand is now Stephen's masculinity. Stephen receives a soccer ball for Christmas, however, he becomes envious of Clair's gold

bracelet. When he pulls his sister's bracelet it snaps, and his father becomes enraged. His anger does not arise because the bracelet is shattered, but because his son's effeminacy, is an embarrassment to him, just as Roderick's use of alcohol is an embarrassment to the father in Wilder's work. In Vogel's play, the man shouts to his son, "Get your coat on and get your little pansy ass out to the car" ( 44). The grandfather retaliates by saying, "You can treat my daughter like a dog if you will. She is your wife. But you will not kick my grandson" (45). This results in a physical skirmish between the men, and the dinner becomes chaotic.

Vogel purposely contrasts this battle with the verbal altercation in Wilder's original script in order to showcase the deteriorations of communication, civility, and familial loyalty, as well as the impossibility of attaining the idealistic American Dream. The similarity in the treatment of Stephen and Roderick is not a coincidence. Vogel's adoption of figures from Wilder's work parallels many postmodern writers' manipulation and insertion of actual historical characters into their works of fiction. An illustration of this tactic is Tony Kushner's use of Roy Cohn in Angels in America. Kushner uses the image of the past political figure to bring authenticity to his abstract examination of America's reaction to the AIDS crisis. Although Vogel does not incorporate historical characters within her play, Stephen is a likeness of Wilder's character Roderick, just as he is also the recreation of Harriett. In addition to mimicking the characters in The Long Christmas Dinner, Vogel also uses the play as a skeleton for her interpretation of the American Dream, as well as her investigation of death. Just as she uses the structure of The Happy Journey to Trenton and Camden in order to aid in investigating American idealism in her play, she also utilizes The Long Christmas Dinner to develop her

ideological position on the subject.

Vogel also employs two of Wilder's plays to further develop her examination of death. Death is an omnipresent element in The Long Christmas Dinner, causing it to remain a constantly evolving story due to the frequent change in characters. Not only do the social dynamics of the family members change with each year; the actual structure of the family unit changes as elder members of the clan pass away. While there are no relatives absent from the dinner in Vogel's play, Stephen's essence is actively memorialized by both of his sisters later in the play. The homage has a similar tone to the mourning in Wilder's play. In both works, ghosts, whether supernatural or symbolic, are continuous presences. While Stephen appears as an actual ghost in The Long Christmas Ride Home, the house serves as a place of nostalgia in The Long Christmas Dinner. In Wilder's play, Lucia remembers, "Twenty-five years ago today. Mother Bayard was sitting here in her wheelchair" (12). The character associates the memory of her deceased mother-in-law with a space in the home. Because a death portal exists in the Bayards' house, the characters are connected to the actual piece of architecture. In Vogel's play, Rebecca and Claire are not connected to a tangible space but, instead, find their bridge to the spirit world through their discourse with Stephen. This discrepancy is a prime example of Vogel's utilization of Wilder's thematic make-up and her adaptation of his general concepts; however, it also exposes the differences between the ways in which the playwrights execute similar narratives. The omission of architecture in The Long Christmas Ride Home is a prime example of the way in which Vogel is able to create her own storyline through the use of metanarratives.

Through the use of these plays by Thornton Wilder, Vogel is able to examine both

the progression and digression of the American family. It is through her parody of Wilder's nuclear family that she is able to comment on the dysfunctional nature of the traditional family. It is only after Claire, Rebecca, and Stephen escape their parents archaic notion of family and create their own untraditional version of the family unit, that they are able to obtain functional relationships. Redefining the American family, and in turn the American Dream, in order to acknowledge alternative lifestyles, including homophobia, stands at the forefront of Vogel's social and political agenda.

#### AN AMERICAN INTERPRETATION OF BUNRAKU

The Long Christmas Dinner differs from the other Wilder plays used by Vogel because unlike Pullman Car Hiawatha and The Happy Journey to Trenton and Camden, it does not include a narrator. It is probable that Wilder's presentational style and the initial concept of a narrator were inspired by traditional Asian drama. Wilder was originally exposed to Chinese art forms while living in Hong Kong in 1910. After returning to the United States, Wilder maintained an interest in Asian theater and became particularly intrigued by the Peking Opera singer Mei Lanfang. It is probable that Wilder's concept of an active stage manager was derived from the narrator in the Peking Opera. Wilder's Asian influences further explain Vogel's calculated use of his works within her Asian influenced play.

Vogel's use of intertextual metanarratives in The Long Christmas Ride Home differs from her postmodern employment of elements from Wilder's works within the play. This definition of metanarrative does not follow Lyotard's notion of an overarching sense of truth; instead, it is a series of previously conjured narratives that Vogel

incorporates in her work. Rather than mimicking the narrative of the historical play, as she does with Wilder's one-acts, Vogel pays homage to Japanese Bunraku Theater through imitating and adapting the theatrical style and not the storyline. While Vogel's play employs themes that appear in Bunraku scripts, such as death, familial conflict and forbidden love, these are also considered to be generic literary themes. The lack of similarity between the structure of The Long Christmas Ride Home and that of the Bunraku plays, like The Love Suicides at Sonezaki, shows that she does not openly attempt to employ the plotlines of the traditional Japanese plays, but derives both style and technique from the historic works. Because Bunraku is an intensely visual art form, Vogel is able to create a complete metanarrative using primarily aesthetic aspects of storytelling.

In addition to acting as a metanarrative, Bunraku also aids in associating Vogel's play with postmodernism because of its reputation as a "people's theater" (Inoura 159). Because Japanese playwrights address both imperial and domestic conflicts, the plays appealed to both the royal and working class. Like Bunraku, many pieces of postmodern literature bridge "high" and "low" art forms. This transition exists within the theatrical genre. American audiences have begun to except puppets, which have traditionally been associated with children's plays, into the world of adult theater. Avenue Q, which uses Sesame-Street-like puppets to tell a story aimed at adult audiences, received a Tony Award in 2004, placing puppets into mainstream theater. Not only is Vogel's play part of this movement, but by consciously including a theatrical style that is noted for its ability to appeal to the general public, as well as scholars, Vogel purposefully magnifies this postmodern characteristic.

Vogel reaches contemporary audiences by deriving the aesthetic and stylistic basis for The Long Christmas Ride Home directly from Bunraku Theater, which reached its culmination during the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> century. The storylines associated with the puppet plays primarily originated as Kabuki scripts. This parallels Vogel's use of the realistic Western domestic drama as the skeleton for the play's plotline. While she does not directly base any of her scripts on specific Asian plays, Both Vogel and historic Japanese playwrights, such as the well known Chikamatsu, base fanciful puppetry on realistic narratives; this further links the contemporary play and the traditional Japanese puppet theater. The contemporary playwright states that her recreation of the Japanese art-form is purposeful; however, she also reminds readers that while the play is based on Bunraku, it is not an actual reenactment of the original style. As in Bunraku, The Long Christmas Ride Home features visible actors manipulating large puppets on stage. While the fifteenth century Japanese plays use only one chanter to convey all of the dialog, each actor/puppeteer speaks separately in Vogel's contemporary adaptation.

Because The Long Christmas Ride Home is an American interpretation of a Japanese art form, as opposed to an actual piece of Bunraku puppetry, Vogel includes a disclaimer in the preface of her play. She assures readers that the play is "one Westerner's misunderstanding of Bunraku. The misunderstanding is key" (4). She not only chooses to use an Eastern style of theater, but also emphasizes the "misunderstanding" in order to imply Westerners' lack of understanding and lack of motivation to learn about other cultures. This includes the cultures within the Western community, specifically the homosexual lifestyle that is featured in the play. It is a sense of misrepresentation, among other factors, that separates this work from history plays,

placing it in the category of postmodern pastiche. Brian McHale addresses the accuracies and inaccuracies that occur when utilizing fragments of historical texts. He writes that in order to camouflage “the seam between historical reality and fiction,” one must introduce “pure fiction only in the ‘dark areas’ of the historical record; by avoiding anachronism...” (McHale, Postmodernist 90). Vogel does not avoid anachronism, but recognizes her lack of expertise in Japanese theater and puppetry. This allows the reader to accept the historical flaws surrounding the Asian elements of the play.

Traditional Japanese Bunraku consists of puppets ranging from two and a half to five feet tall. These wooden figures weigh up to fifty pounds and often have movable mouths, eyebrows, wrist, and fingers. They are built and rebuilt through the use of removable body parts, such as heads and torsos. The reusable heads are categorized by sex, age, and emotion. Vogel does not demand that the director emulate the Japanese puppets; instead, she gives them the freedom to alter them. She writes, “The puppets may be in the style of Bunraku: almost life-sized children. (Other styles of puppets are possible)(6). Although she does not use the word “Westernize” in the directions, she does imply that deviating from the traditional Eastern style is acceptable. Vogel constructs her play by including the three essentials in a Bunraku production: the narrator (joruri), the puppeteers (ebisu-kaki) and the instrumentalist (jabisen). While instruments and rhythmic narration appear in other American productions, it is the use of puppets and puppeteers that separates The Long Christmas Ride Home from other current plays. She writes, “There is nothing cute or coy about the puppet children: they are fascinating and quite life-like in their animation” (6). This sort of realism is also seen in traditional Bunraku Theater: “When they should be frightened, the puppets look frightened; when they should



be angry, they look angry” (Inoura 150).

Vogel instructs directors to be flexible not only in their use of musical instruments, but also in the number of puppeteers: she suggests that one, two, or three actors manipulate the puppets. She writes, “They are actors, not professional puppeteers. They are dressed in black; their faces are neutral and unemotive when they are handling the puppets” (7). This is an example of her Western adaptations within the play. In traditional Bunraku Theater there are three puppeteers; one controls the head and the right hand, another moves the side of the body, and the third moves the feet. It is the novice puppet master that moves the feet; it requires ten years of training to be promoted to manipulator of the left hand. Only after many years of experience is the puppeteer allowed to work with the head. The process of becoming a Bunraku puppeteer is traditionally passed from father to son. In the original Bunraku Theater, puppeteers, shamisen players and chanters studied their craft from childhood. Like Vogel’s puppet masters, these three performers, two of whom wear black hoods, remain completely stoic throughout the play. Ronald Cayaye states, “Unlike the emotionally detached appearance of the puppeteer from his puppet, the narrator appears to be totally empathizing with the character and infusing the puppets with feelings” (116). This is true not only of the Japanese theater, but also of Vogel’s play. She purposefully avoids bringing unwarranted attention to the puppeteers so that the audience focuses only on the puppets/children. Because the puppeteers also play the children as adults, it is important to the believability of the characters that they are not overexposed in the first section of the play.

Principal differences exist between the contemporary and traditional narrators. Bunraku plays consist of one narrator who speaks, sings, and chants. The Long Christmas

Ride Home boasts two storytellers: Man and Woman. While they do not actually sing or chant, Vogel composes sections of the dialogue to sound like a modified American version of the Japanese chant. Through her meticulous word choice, the playwright provides the actors with speech patterns that allow them to develop rhythms, representing the traditional storyteller's chant:

MAN. Concrete frozen with ice and stalled cars. A cold winter-

WOMAN. It was not that cold. It was damp.

MAN. It was freezing.

WOMAN. I've gone through winters in New Orleans worse. It's the damp that  
chills you.

MAN. Colder than Times Square on New Year's. Colder than the monuments on  
the Mall. Colder than Washingtonians at a cocktail party (7).

Man and Woman toss quick phrases back and front throughout the production. The rhythm and momentum of their dialogue separates them from the other characters, who deliver longer and less musical lines. While it is stylized elements like symphonic language and puppets that make this play seductive to audiences and readers, the playwright's use of these techniques is not simply an arbitrary display of images, but is an attempt to address current issues, such as the breakdown of the traditional American family through the use of history.

In addition to mimicking the rhythmic styles of Bunraku, Vogel also recreates the space used in a traditional Japanese play. The puppets are manipulated within a small area of the stage, which, in domestic scenarios, is sectioned off by walls made to look like the inside of a house. Although the contemporary play does not call for a recreation

of the original set, the puppets are trapped within a cramped car for most of the play, and they are forced to work within the same sort of space. Vogel brings the spatial element of Bunraku to her play to convey the sense of entrapment that the family feels. Characters within the Japanese plays feel the same sort of inability to escape the family into which they were born. For example, *The Love Suicides at Amijima* follows the forbidden romance between a married man and his courtesan. Due to the social status of the man's family, the couple is forbidden to be together. The Japanese play parallels Vogel's work by challenging the traditional notion of family within their culture, therefore enabling Vogel to comment further on the impossibility of familial perfection. This is a rare example of similarity in the Japanese scripts and the contemporary play.

Because Vogel is not able to pull from the narratives of Bunraku as seamlessly as she does from Wilder's, she reminds the audience that the play is based on a Japanese style through overt references. Stephen often speaks of the Japanese culture. After he finds his partner in a younger man, he states, "In classical Japan it was poor form for an aristocrat to lose self-possession. Hence arose the euphemism: 'to wet one's sleeve on dew,' which meant to wipe away one's tears" (63). Stephen also mentions his adoration for Kabuki, tea ceremonies and other Japanese traditions. When the family attends the Christmas Eve church service, the topic of the sermon is Japanese art work. Vogel slips these references into the text, almost as if she is worried the audience will forget that the play is based on Japanese traditions.

The use of Bunraku puppetry differs from Vogel's translation of Wilder's work because the audience is aware of her utilization of historical elements. C.W. E. Bigsby suggests that the genre of drama "speaks in the present tense, and the sense of shared

experience which derives from this makes it a sensitive instrument for plotting changes in cultural pressure, for responding to changing ideological, social, and aesthetic moods” (331). Vogel forces audiences and readers to become aware of Bigsby’s idea of the present tense by juxtaposing it with the past. This creates an intellectual, rather than emotional, examination of the current social and political controversies that Vogel strives to bring forth. The audience feels safe; they are watching a “puppet show.” There is nothing daunting about a period piece, a history play, or a play that features childlike puppets. This sense of security causes the audience to be more available and more likely to accept Vogel’s criticism of the traditional family unit and homophobia. While the idea of a puppet show brings comfort to many readers and theatergoers, the puppets also serve as a device used to make the audience uncomfortable. Because the use of puppets causes the play to stray far from the typical family drama, and the bizarre nature of puppetry itself can make some feel awkward, the audience may be distanced from the characters. This allows the audience members and readers to avoid becoming complacent, as they might in a traditional realistic play; instead, they are forced to rethink and examine idea of the traditional family.

Like her contemporaries Caryl Churchill and Maria Irene Fornes, Vogel is often considered a Brechtian playwright. Since the early 1970s, feminist playwrights have developed politically motivated works using Brecht’s verfremdungseffekt, a theatrical technique that attempts to prevent the audience from developing any emotional investments in the play. This creates an intellectual, rather than emotional, examination of the current social and political matters. Elizabeth Wright explains the style in the following way: “According to Aristotle, mimesis, the imitation of an action, is to effect a

catharsis whereby the audience is purged via the emotions of pity and fear. Brecht wants to transform ‘fear’ (Furcht) and ‘pity’ (Mitleid) into ‘desire for knowledge’ (Wissensbegierde) and ‘readiness to help’”(25). In order to avoid emotional catharsis, the audience must be constantly aware of the work’s presentational qualities and abstract nature. While Brecht is technically categorized as a modernist writer, his work encompasses characteristics of postmodernism, and his theories have influenced the building of postmodern theatrical literature. He, like Vogel, utilizes the historical metanarratives in order to expose readers and audience members to current political issues. For example, although his play Saint Joan of the Slaughterhouses is set in World War II, the title is clearly a historical reference citing Joan-of-Arc. Shannon Hammermeister further explains that Brecht uses historical elements within his plays, she states that he, “assists in debunking the assumption that an essentialist, universal human experience” (87). Brecht tries to prevent the audience from reaching an emotional catharsis by separating them from the characters by placing them in different time periods. The implementation of a historical setting within a play allows the reader to uncover an irrefutable disjunction between him/herself and the characters, thus creating the verfremdungseffekt.

In The Long Christmas Ride Home, Vogel not only uses Japanese theater history in order to create this Brechtian effect, but also to force the reader/audience to examine current social taboos. She employs shadow puppets to play characters outside of the family. These puppets appear in scenes containing contentious issues such as AIDS, same-sex intercourse and abortion. During these scenes, Vogel briefly breaks away from the Bunraku tradition and the realistic characteristics of the Japanese puppets. The

shadow puppets are not lifelike and their words cannot be understood. By using the verfremdungseffekt, Vogel is able to suspend the existing aversions that readers might harbor towards characters played by live actors. For example, although adult Stephen is played by a live actor, the stranger that he has sex with is only a shadow puppet. Vogel writes in the play's stage directions, "(Stephen bends over a' la Harvey Fierstein in Torch Song Trilogy. The puppet stands beside him; side by side they simulate a sexual act which means this play will never be performed in Texas)" (65). Because this scene is intensely raw due to the profoundly personal nature of the subject, the shadow puppet must be utilized to prevent readers and audience members from becoming uncomfortable and refusing to examine the seriousness of the subject matter. While the play as a whole acts as a commentary on the current state of homophobia in America, the use of a shadow puppet, rather than a human, permits the audience to separate themselves from the sex act itself, thus muting any preconceived aversion to this lifestyle.

While Vogel's use of puppetry often creates a verfremdungseffekt, The Long Christmas Ride Home is far from an entirely Brechtian work. The playwright distances the audience through the use of faceless shadow puppets, but the Bunraku puppets serve a different theatrical function. Unlike Brecht, Vogel not only recognizes, but emphasizes the universality of the human experience. Not only does this cause the playwright to swerve away from Brecht's style, Vogel implements theatrical tactics in order to a cathartic feeling among audience members. While she uses some puppets to produce an alienation technique, the dolls that represent Stephen, Rebecca and Claire display human qualities that evoke sympathy in the audience. Because the playwright purposefully gains the emotional favor of the audience by actively employing Aristotle's theory of mimesis,

which suggests that the intended goal of a play is to lead the audience to a catharsis, she can not be considered an entirely postmodern writer. In this way, Vogel resembles a modern dramatist, embracing, rather than alienating the audience. The characters respond emotionally by cowering from their violent father and displaying physical sibling rivalry that mimics actual children. Vogel endorses the reader's affection towards the puppets, and the children become the protagonists of the first section of the play. This allows the audience to become emotionally attached to the children; therefore, the onlookers are more accepting of their choice to reject the stereotypical American family unit as adults.

In The Long Christmas Ride Home, Vogel combines Aristotle's theory of mimesis with the verfremdungseffekt. By merging these contrasting theories, Vogel uses conflicting areas of theater history in order to create a narrative through puppetry. Vogel carefully crafts her use of puppets around these conflicting styles in order to manage the reader's reaction. By doing this, the playwright attempts to dictate not only the emotional response of the audience, but also their political and social assessment of the play. Vogel's eclectic combination of historically based performance techniques once again places her in the category of postmodernism.

By combining the visual characteristics of Bunraku and the narratives of Thornton Wilder's plays, the playwright is able to mold these carefully selected metanarratives into a socially and politically charged play. The playwright exposes the less than idealistic essence behind Wilder's portrayal of the quintessential American family. She also uses both the visually striking components of Bunraku Theater and her own voice within The Long Christmas Ride Home. This inclusion of both mimesis and the verfremdungseffekt allows the audience/reader to experience feelings of catharsis, as well as alienation.

While this purposefully calculated balance between the pastiche and the sentimental means that Vogel does not always use entirely postmodern techniques, it is through these emotional elements that the playwright completely challenges the idea of the nuclear family and proposes the possibility of unconventional families. However, it is not the Vogel's sympathetic depiction of the American family that separates the play from the traditional Western drama, but her use of postmodernism that allows her transform her domestic drama into a piece of cultural criticism.



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