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*How I Learned to Drive* and *Our Dad Is in Atlantis* Do Not Fit the Same Metaphor

Famous author Oscar Wilde once said, “Life imitates Art far more than Art imitates Life” (Marinho). Many people use this saying and believe it, but is it true? Some would argue that it’s the opposite. In *Hamlet*, the protagonist instructed actors performing to his stepfather to hold “the mirror up to nature.” This point echoed the previous thought of many classical artists who deemed drama a way to tell the truth—that theater should be a mirror of reality (Schloss). However, many argue in favor of Wilde’s opinion. Lauren Gunderson, an American playwright, opined in 2013 that theater should lead culture and not follow it. She discusses the inequities women face in theater and that despite making up most of the viewing population, they are heavily underrepresented on the stage. She states, “We are not a mirror, we are a lens. We see what’s coming, embody it, catalyze it, and make a better future happen because we tell its story first. Or we should” (Gunderson). So, maybe theater should not precisely be a mirror, but it should spark a conversation and act as a lens into another world. In another opinion, famous German playwright Berthold Brecht adopted Marxist ideology and quoted Leon Trotsky saying, “art is not a mirror held up to reality but a hammer with which to shape it” (Trotsky). In many of Brecht’s plays, such as *Mother Courage*, the uncomfortable is made comfortable, and the comfortable is made uncomfortable. The bending of reality helps in *Mother Courage* as it presents a dystopian reality showing the horrors of war. His plays often show what the world could be and should be.

These are great arguments, and some works emulate that theater could be a mirror, lens, or hammer to reality. However, two pieces we discussed in class, *How I Learned to Drive* and *Our Dad Is in Atlantis*, have elements of reality and fiction that make comparing metaphors all the more debatable. Of the three object metaphors, *How I Learned to Drive* and *Our Dad Is in Atlantis* best align with the lens metaphor because both plays have protagonists that have dealt with extraordinary circumstances and present a new vision of objective reality.

**Unreliable Narrators**

In *How I Learned to Drive*, our narrator is Lil Bit, who describes her life experiences from a reflecting point of view. The play begins, for example, with her stating that she is seventeen and “very old, very cynical of the world.” This line seems bizarre initially, but the audience finds that she has a semi-sexual relationship with her Uncle Peck. The opening sequence begins with questionable dialogue and Lil Bit stating, “Uncle Peck-we’ve got to go.” He then continues to talk to her about her prom date and follows with, “I have had a lot of practice” after undoing Lil Bit’s bra (Vogel 1586). The rest of the play reveals more of Lil Bit’s experiences with Uncle Peck being creepy, such as a nude photography session when Lil Bit is thirteen years old (Vogel 1599).

Lil Bit’s sexual relationship with her uncle is not the only disturbing thing about her life. Her family, mainly her grandparents, ridicules her for her physique and creates an incredibly toxic environment. The play’s second scene reveals this with Lil Bit’s grandfather saying about her body, “’Cause five minutes before Lil Bit turns the corner, her tits turn first-“(Vogel 1586). What makes this sequence even more bizarre is that the sexually perverted uncle defends Lil Bit. She finds him to be a figure of comfort in this scenario (Vogel 1587). These scenes alone show that Lil Bit has experienced a very rough and traumatizing life.

The traumatizing and foreign circumstances of the protagonist make this a lens play instead of a mirror or hammer. Being sexually abused by her uncle and having a toxic family environment she does, Lil Bit’s story is far from common to the average viewer. The viewer immediately knows this because the play begins with her opening remark about cynicism and the sexual relationship with her uncle. The author knows this is of unordinary circumstances, so this is not a mirror play. There is also no strong evidence for *How I Learned to Drive* to be a hammer play because there does not appear to be a profound shaping of reality into what it should be. These circumstances best describe a lens because they reflect some sense of reality. Many women can relate to having a toxic environment, but *How I Learned to Drive* goes above and beyond by creating the cringe situation of pedophilia. While it may not shape reality, *How I Learned to Drive* may give audiences a new perspective on this topic and make them consider if this is reality. The audience can think of *How I Learned to Drive* as a lens for the reality of a victimized woman who her uncle abused in her teenage years.

In *Our Dad Is in Atlantis*, our protagonists are two brothers-aged eleven and eight years old. Before the play, the brothers suffer through the loss of their mom and the abandonment of their dad. The brothers lose their grandmother during the play and move to live with their cousins afterward. In addition, they have to deal with common adolescent challenges, such as the older brother falling in love with a girl named Graciela and the younger brother being bullied in school (Malpica 74). The play closes with the brothers crossing the U.S.-Mexico border in desperation, trying to find their father in the United States (Malpica 80).

Like *How I Learned to Drive*, *Our Dad Is in Atlantis* presents circumstances too foreign and extraordinary to the audience to be a clear mirror of reality. Also, there is no shaping of reality. However, what makes *Our Dad Is in Atlantis* stick out as a lens play is how the author forces the audience to decipher the protagonists’ situation and view it through their perspective of reality. Because the protagonists are younger than teenagers, the dialogue sounds like two young brothers arguing. For example, once the younger brother discovers that his father is potentially in Atlanta and not Atlantis, he creates a fantasy of himself playing for the Atlanta Braves (Malpica 76). In the same scene, “Stuff About Mom,” the younger brother states, “If Mom was here, Dad would never have gone to another country to clean bathrooms.” Tidbits of information showing the protagonists’ feelings are the only information the audience has to discern reality because it is not immediately apparent to the audience. For example, when the older brother talks about his cousins picking on him, he immediately changes the conversation to cars, and the brothers talk about that (Malpica 79). Topics such as those mentioned above are continuously mentioned in the play, representing the erratic behavior of pre-teen boys. The unclear direction shows that the play is clearly through the lens of an eleven- and eight-year-old who have to deal with extraordinary circumstances. The audience does not immediately catch the calamity of their situation due to their childish innocence, and these childish tendencies of the characters act as a mask to objective reality.

These plays are told very differently. It is obvious that *How I Learned to Drive* is best described as a lens play as the artist tells it through memory and retelling of the past. The memory play concept allows the audience to view the play from the perspective of the past, and the narrator reflectively tells the story. As memory serves, it is tough to serve as a complete mirror, so it can best be described as a lens into the protagonist’s past tragic life. The argument for a lens is harder to make for *Our Dad Is in Atlantis* because it is told in the present. However, age is essential, providing an entirely different view of reality. Since the only characters in the play are two eleven and eight-year boys, the audience views the world through the eyes of a child and determines their situation. The age dynamic removes the audience from the reality of the play just enough so they can see it in the context of the play itself and not their reality. Aside from this, both plays exhibit protagonists with unusual circumstances that detract them from viewing the plays as something close to an objective reality. Yet, many viewers might realize that these events could be happening somewhere away from them. So, the reality is not shaped. Therefore, *How I Learned to Drive*, and *Our Dad Is in Atlantis* best identify with the happy medium of the lens metaphor instead of the mirror or hammer metaphors.

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