

Sexual Identity and Suicide or Why (not Other than) Lady Gaga?

James Lecesne: Trevor

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Abstract

The paper analyses James Lecesne's young adult novel *Trevor* from the point of view of sexual identity, gender identity and performance identity. It traces the protagonist's way till the suicide attempt highlighting the main crisis points that prompted Trevor to commit his deed. The final part of the study briefly introduces the Trevor-project that inspired the novel then it tries to answer the question why Lady Gaga is the main referential point of the novel. The author of the paper concludes that gagaism and the Trevor-project have the very same origin.

Key words: sexual identity, gender identity, performance identity, Lady Gaga, Trevor-project

Let us play with the thought that we have to make up a top list of the all time best known artwork beginnings. In such a catalogue, the opening of *The Stranger* by Albert Camus, the frequently cited and rewritten introductory sentence of *The Metamorphosis* by Franz Kafka and the beginning of *Neuromancer* by William Gibson would surely have a distinguished place. Keeping at popular literature, the first dialogue of the novel *Dirty Fred, the Captain* by Jenő Rejtő would be unskippable from the list: "–Good Sir! I've come for my knife! – Where did you leave it? – In some sailor. [etc.] – I have your knife! – Where? – Here, in my back." At this stage, we can already refer to the writing, which will be approached henceforth and which starts as follows: "There I was, lying on the front lawn in plain sight a knife in my back." It must be on the list. Let us start up from the initial sentence. The opening scene of *Trevor* a novella by James Lecesne is a performance. On the front lawn, the protagonist is taking up a position implying (looking from the street, it seems) that he has been murdered. Thus, he acts out his own death but – and here comes the substance of the scene – his parents are untouched by this. "It's fun to be pretend-dead and then lie there as the world goes on without you" – says Trevor facing parental disinterest. This scene perfectly prepares the main problem of the novella, which is related to the questions of self-understanding and self-representation of teenage youth, at first sight.

In the second chapter, this playground is complemented with an important momentum. Trevor meets his friend Zac, who asks him if he is planning to dress up for Halloween. Trevor tells him that he is considering "going as Lady Gaga". Zac disapproves of his idea so Trevor explains to him that Lady Gaga is a star who set up new rules in the matter of normalcy. Trevor did not convince his friend (though he is right), who suggests for him to consider something "less

gay". Trevor informs him that on the one hand, Gaga is certainly not "gay"; on the other hand, she is exemplary from the point of view of identity building. Our protagonist identifies himself with this model when he states that he will have to do the same Gaga has done in order to achieve his goals. The matter at stake is clear: "to be myself". All of which comes across a resistance at this point, since Zac misunderstands Trevor's appeal to the Gaga-style role repertoire as a sexual identity disorder. (The substance of which, however, would be that it motivates to rearrange the rules and dislocates the instances of access to gender categories. [Halberstam 2012, 65–131])

The next step in exposition of the question is a school class where the effect of art is being discussed. The teacher pulls up Picasso's *Guernica* as an example then asks the class: "Can you think of any other examples of how artists have brought about change through their work?" (Picasso's artwork – through odd depiction of the war mechanism – drew attention to the Spanish civil war.) Trevor did not comment on the topic but we are aware of his thoughts. "I almost raised my hand to mention how Lady Gaga has famously worn a suit made of meat in order to protest the fact that gays in the military had to keep their sexuality a secret or else be kicked out with a dishonorable discharge. But then I thought better of it. I didn't want everyone to think that I followed gay news." Trevor's retreat here is also related to the fact that the environment might be repulsive towards gays. On the other hand, the continuation of the monologue – correctly – refers to Gaga's media uproar as an ambiguous gesture; his cautiousness might also be owed to this. However, when, under the influence of the lesson, Trevor prepares a performance once again that is withered, he explains the intensifying of his artistic gift as follows: "And just like Lady Gaga, I intended to change the world."

Trevor's identity is shaped by another school activity: he becomes a member of the school drama club. This momentum is also a sign to the environment. Moreover, it is such an association which is undoubtedly rooted in the past, that is to say a cultural heritage. Peggy Phelan in her study *Playing Dead in Stone* writes as follows: "Acting has long been associated with male homosexuality, in part because mainstream modern Western acting is about the creation of a double body. The actor is trained to reproduce the gestures, bearing and »being« of some other body, the »character«. [...] When men attempt to display two bodies at once they are labelled effeminate. This is part of the long-held suspicion that male actors are homosexuals." (Phelan 1996, 80–82) This stereotype or false presupposition also contributes to Trevor's isolation. (Lecesne – as a man of theatre – is presumably fully and deeply aware of this connection, he by all means utilizes it for the preparation of the turn.)

Although Trevor starts to deal with the musical *Anything Goes* by Cole Porter as a director, this position gets widened until the premier. Not only must he step in at the last moment, but he must do it for two members of the cast straight-

away, so Trevor introduces himself as an actor – in a dual role. With this, the above mentioned function of acting gets bigger emphasis, Trevor's doublings work multiplicatively since in some scenes he plays the two roles at the same time, this way duplicity itself gets into focus. The play and the actor-director Trevor owes their success right to these seamless metamorphoses.

And then the breaking-point comes. One of Trevor's "friends" (the inverted commas are well-founded here), Pinky reacts to the protagonist's letter as follows: "Hate to break it to you but you are a fairy and a weak person and maybe don't deserve to live." Trevor breaks down and turns to his "girl-friend" for uncton, who tells him that the guys are saying he walks like a girl. The protagonist decides to alter some things: "I went straight home and threw out my black leotard and sequined cape and all of my glitter makeup. No way was I ever going to dress up as Lady Gaga ever again. That phase of my life was over." The decision does not prove to be enough (eliminating the costume does not affect the image evolved about its bearer), at school Trevor is being insulted and mocked henceforward: "In addition to Faggot, some of the names they called me to ma face were as follows: *Fruit Loop, Proof, Sissy, Girlboy, Nellie, Big Nell-box, Nancy, Mary and Evelyn.*" The situation gets really deteriorating therefore Trevor decides to kill himself.

The thirteenth chapter of the novella is Trevor's suicide note. First, he ensures his parents that they are not to be blamed for anything, and then he makes a brief testament. Meanwhile he utters the key sentence of the story: "I'm different and there is nothing in this world that's going to make the change." After these he draws attention to an important Lady Gaga song: "And please, if it's possible, play *Born This Way* at my funeral. It says everything. It's the title song from her second album and it's my absolute fave." This is a really eloquent parallel. Lady Gaga's world hit is about tolerance, self-acceptance and respect of otherness. A relevant piece of the lyrics speaks openly: "Rejoice and love yourself today / 'Cause baby, you were born this way / No matter gay, straight or bi / Lesbian, transgendered life". Therefore, Trevor's suicide note rightly alludes to this but the whole novella may be interpreted as a *Born This Way* commentary (or conversely). The protagonist sees it clearly that all that has been said by Lady Gaga may also apply to him (moreover, on everybody: "same DNA – we were born this way"), however, his homophobe environment does not recognize, discredits otherness.

As a closing effect, the book has a surprise in store: "The people at the hospital informed me that a person cannot commit suicide by taking too much aspirin." Behind the unsuccessful suicide attempt a possibility shows itself, Trevor understands that he has to find someone reliable he can talk to on a regular basis about his problems. Then Zac, one of the "friends" who left Trevor in the lurch, arrives with two Lady Gaga concert tickets (this gesture may obviously be understood as an apology) and the novella closes with this positive scene.

The last word however implies that the story has not been finished yet: “Okay, so maybe it was just the tickets, but right then and there I made a decision – I was going to live. At least until Saturday.” This open ending (Saturday is the day of the concert but what comes after that?) is symbolical and is enhanced by Lecesne’s Afterword. The author says how the story of *Trevor* started and which forms it took besides the novella (i.e. in 1994 the film version directed by Peggy Rajska won the Academy Award for Best Live Action Short). But the Afterword has a message beyond this, approximately as important as that of *Born This Way* (and the Foundation with identical name).

As we could see, Trevor’s suicide attempt is related to sexual identity in the novella; now Lecesne refers to a shocking data in the Afterword: a third of all teen suicides involve homosexual kids. If we add that in many countries of the world homosexuality is illegal and punished by imprisonment or corporal punishment, and there are some places where it implies execution, than this is more than a burning problem. Lecesne and his team created the Trevor-line in the USA which is a 24-hour crisis intervention and suicide prevention lifeline for gay teens. Every year they receive approximately 30,000 calls from young people around the country. So the ideology is clear: “Young people, all of them, belong to our future, and without them we cannot realize tomorrow. Convincing even one kid that his or her life is worth living is to convince ourselves that the world itself is worth saving.” (Lecesne 2012, 96) In the light of this all, *Trevor* may take up its post among the most actual young adult novels. (Respectively this has already happened; only the Hungarian translation was two years late; something like this must be immediately thrown into the discourse – the time matters, indeed.)

As a conclusion we should ask the obvious question: why is Lady Gaga of all others the focal point of this young adult novel? Well, the artist’s (already officially a pop icon) activity so far has shown that Gaga not only sensitively reacts to the social phenomena concerning the youth but she can make our beliefs thought as firm aesthetically flutter by complex and reflected mobilization of pop culture. In this subversive process the treatment of sexual identity is particularly significant. Mathieu Deflem’s study *The Sex of Lady Gaga* perambulates this issue thoroughly, which in fact means six topics. 1, the social and cultural meanings of sexuality presented in the work of L. G.; 2, the perceived sexiness of L. G. as a female artist 3, L. G.’s biological sex; 4, L. G.’s sexual orientation; 5, L. G.’s gender world and the sexism confronting it; 6, the perceptions of L. G. as a feminist icon. (Deflem 2012, 22) From our point of view the fifth topic is naturally the most insistent of all.

Briefly the thing is this. Lady Gaga’s performative world puts on the diversity of gender in such a way during which it confronts the hierarchical sexist strategies accustomed in the music industry. By eliminating the differences between “masculine rock” and “feminine pop”, it opens up the unestablishable playground

of roles where the exposure of gender as a construction meets the variations of also only temporarily fixable sexual orientation. Gaga takes on and acts out every role which, being looked at from another, stands on its ground as relative therefore legitimate and equal to the others. (From this perspective heterosexuality is also a category having numerous variations based on its shift from an assumed and obviously questionable norm.) Deflem writes as follows: "By Lady Gaga's own observation, as a female artist operating within the world of pop and rock she has been confronted with sexism, especially in connection with her liberal use of sexual themes, which, she argues, is much more discussed and criticized than equally sexually explicit material created by male performance artists." (Deflem 2012, 28) Thus Lady Gaga declares war on the sex-appeal supported in certain segments of conventional as well as artistic spheres.

The question at stake may be easily answered but let us postpone it for the tune of a counter-example. In *The True Meaning of Smekday*, a children's science fiction by Adam Rex Jennifer Lopez is a referential point, however, beyond the fact that she is the teen girl protagonist's favourite, she does not have any special function. Featuring J. Lo in the paratext, respectively mentioning her repeatedly throughout the adventures, does not create such a signifying chain that would affect our access to the story. Therefore, instead of J. Lo, the name of any other pop star could appear in the respective places of the text. On the contrary, the Lady Gaga-style behaviour is a reference in *Trevor* because – complementing the meaning strata of the novella – it compresses many of the elements of theoretical and practical countenances against homophobia. It keeps our attention awake that there is still much to do in this field. From this point of view – reading it from the context of sexual identity – the Trevor-project and gagaism have the very same origin.

Literature

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