How I Learned to Drive Study Guide

How I Learned to Drive by Paula Vogel

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Introduction

Paula Vogel's play *How I Learned to Drive* opened in New York in February 1997. The play concerns an affair between its protagonist, named Li'l Bit, and her uncle Peck. The affair takes place over the course of years, with the character of Li'l Bit maturing from age eleven to eighteen before she puts an end to it. In spite of the serious situation, there are many comical elements of the play, which avoids the expected condemnation of this situation to look at the basic humanity that binds these two characters. It uses innovative staging techniques to fade from one time frame to another and one place to the next. It also uses just three actors, in addition to those playing Li'l Bit and Peck, to represent all of the other characters who affect their lives, especially their quirky, intimidating rural Maryland family. The addition of popular music from the earlyand late-1960s, such as "Dream Baby" and "Little Surfer Girl," helps audiences understand the prevailing mood of the era that Vogel covers in this play: it is romantic and sexist, emphasizing youth and fun, the sort of social message that would make a girl like Li'l Bit, who has many feelings of insecurity, turn to a flawed relationship where she can bask in the reverence of an older man.

How I Learned to Drive is noteworthy for the many awards that it won, including the 1998 Pulitzer Prize for drama. Its initial off-Broadway run lasted for fourteen months. In addition to the Pulitzer, the play also was awarded an Obie, a Drama Desk Award, a New York Drama Critics' Award, an Outer Circle Critics Award, and the Lucille Lortel Award.

Author Biography

Paula Anne Vogel was born on November 16, 1951, in Washington, D.C., and lived there throughout most of her early life. She attended Bryn Mawr College on a scholarship in 1969 and then went back to Washington, where she attended Catholic University of America, earning her Bachelor of Arts degree in 1974. She went to graduate school at Cornell University in Ithaca, New York, earning enough credits for a Ph.D. but leaving with an A.B.D. in 1977 after failing to submit her thesis. From 1979 to 1982, she was a lecturer in Women's Studies and Theater Arts at Cornell; she was fired in 1982 for political reasons. Leaving Cornell gave her time to work on theater projects including guest lectureships at McGill University and University of Alaska. In 1984, she took a position as the director of the graduate playwriting program at Brown University in Providence, Rhode Island, where she stayed until the fame she earned from *How I Learned to Drive* allowed her the financial independence to leave there in 1997. Throughout her playwriting career she has been associated with numerous programs, including Theatre With Teeth in New York, Theater Eleanor Roosevelt in Providence, and Perseverance Theater in Juneau.

Vogel's plays have been produced since 1974. Her themes have generally centered around imaginatively making sense of subjects that mainstream society finds taboo. *And Baby Makes Seven,* for instance, deals with a same-sex couple using the occasion of their impending childbirth to clear out the imaginary children that they already have. Hot *'n Throbbing* has a divorced mother raising her children with the money she makes writing pornographic novels. In *The Oldest Profession*, senior citizens fight against their slide into poverty during the Reagan era by working as prostitutes. One of the most personal of Vogel's plays, and the most successful before *How I Learned to Drive*, was *The Baltimore Waltz,* written in 1989 and produced in 1992. In it, a woman tours Europe with her brother, seeking a cure for the fictitious Acquired Toilet Disease, or ATD. Vogel wrote it soon after watching her brother Carl, with whom she shared a close bond throughout life, die of AIDS. The play uses the prejudices and misconceptions about the imaginary disease to highlight societal attitudes about AIDS and its victims. That play won numerous writing awards and was produced by over sixty theater companies in the United States, Europe, and South America.

With the acclaim that she has garnered for *How I Learned to Drive*, Vogel has been able to leave teaching and concentrate on writing. She is only the tenth woman to win the Pulitzer Prize for play righting and the first openly gay woman to do so. Among the projects that she has been involved in is adapting *How I Learned to Drive* to a movie and bringing John Barthes' novel *The Sot-Weed Factor* to the stage.

Plot Summary

How I Learned to Drive is not told with a straightforward plot but is instead an uneven mixture of flashbacks, narration, monologues, and the kind of impersonal voice-over that accompanies driver education films. It starts with Li'l Bit as an adult, addressing the audience, as if she is giving a lecture about how to drive. She describes Maryland during her youth in the 1960s, and then the setting dissolves into 1969, with her uncle Peck sitting in a Buick Riviera. Seventeen-year-old Li'l Bit climbs in next to him. He takes the role of a child, telling her that he has been good, and she acts like an authority figure to him. When he says that he has not had a drink all week, she allows him the "small reward" of undoing her bra. When they leave their parking spot, Li'l Bit drives.

At a family dinner in 1969, the conversation focusing on the size of her breasts is embarrassing to Li'l Bit. Her grandfather makes one wise crack after another about her breasts being big, until Li'l Bit flees the room for some privacy. Peck is the one who follows her and consoles her. Feeling better, Li'l Bit arranges to meet him later that night.

Grown-up Li'l Bit, as narrator, explains to the audience that she was kicked out of school in 1970 for constant drinking and then took a job in a factory and spent her nights drinking and racing through the streets in her car.

The scene fades to Li'l Bit and Peck at an inn far from home along the Maryland shore in 1968 (a year before the family dinner portrayed earlier). The occasion is a celebration of Li'l Bit having received her driver's license. Peck, who has had a drinking problem, does not order a drink, but he tells Li'l Bit to have one, even though she is only sixteen. Li'l Bit's mother shows up at the side of the stage to give the audience "A mother's guide to social drinking," which includes such advice as to eat much bread and butter and never to order sugary "ladies" drinks. Li'l bit orders a martini and quickly becomes drunk. When they leave, she is hardly able to walk, and she expects Peck to try to take advantage of her. She objects to their relationship, and he tells her not to worry, that he is a man and will not do anything sexual until she wants to.

There is a brief scene of Uncle Peck teaching Li'l Bit's cousin Bobby to fish, just as he has taught her to drive. At the end of the scene, Peck offers to show Bobby "a secret place" in the trees, where they can be alone and drink a beer: "this is something special just between you and me," Peck says, reminiscent of his friendly seduction of Li'l Bit.

The next scene has Li'l Bit, her mother, and her grandmother seated in a kitchen and is titled, "On Men, Sex and Women: Part I." The grandmother explains that her husband always wanted to have sex several times every day. As the grandmother and mother talk about what crude beasts men are, they become increasingly aroused.

The grown-up Li'l Bit narrates the story of a bus trip in 1979, when she was in her twenties. A high school boy sat down by her and struck up a conversation. She made

herself attractive enough that he followed her when the bus stopped and continued his conversation until she invited him up to her room, where they had sex.

"On Men, Sex, and Women: Part II" has fifteen-year-old Li'l Bit asking her mother and grandmother about sex. Her mother tells her that it hurts just a little, at first. Her grandmother tells her that the first time a girl has sex is very painful and bloody. The mother is resentful about the misinformation that her own mother gave her, feeling that it is responsible for her having gotten pregnant young with Li'l Bit, leading to her awful marriage to Li'l Bit's father.

Then Uncle Peck is giving Li'l Bit a driving lesson. She is light-hearted and joking around. Instead of indulging her, as he has before, Peck is strict, demanding that she take driving seriously. Li'l Bit makes a brief joke about the need to "defend" herself, implying that Peck has already made advances toward her, but he promises that he would never try anything while she is driving.

Li'l Bit recalls a time when she was in the ninth grade and a boy embarrassed her by pretending to have an allergic reaction to foam rubber, grabbing her breast. In the locker room after gym class, female classmates took note of the fact that her breasts were indeed real and not foam rubber. At a sock hop, a shy boy approached Li'l Bit several times to dance. A radar-like beeping, supposedly emerging from her breasts, indicated the way that boys were drawn to them, making Li'l Bit wary of their attention.

In 1965, in his basement, Peck has a camera, and he has Li'l Bit pose for pictures in his "studio." He tells her that she is beautiful and urges her to respond to the music with her body. She loses herself in the moment but is shaken back into reality when he mentions that these pictures will help her compile a good portfolio in five years, when she is eighteen and can pose for *Playboy.* Li'l Bit is horrified at the realization that her pictures could be seen by someone else.

Christmas 1964, when Li'l Bit is thirteen, she has a conversation with her uncle about why he drinks so much, and he tells her how much it helps him to talk to her. She suggests that they could meet once a week to talk, that they would keep their meetings a secret from her mother and his wife. The meetings have to be in public, she says: "You've got to let me—draw the line." She is aware from the start of the possibility of a sexual relationship.

In 1969, while Li'l Bit is away at college, Peck sends her a series of gifts, with notes that include a count of the days until she is eighteen, the age of legal consent. When he shows up on her eighteenth birthday, Li'l Bit explains that his notes have been so crazy they frighten her. She does drink the champagne that he has brought: as explained in an earlier scene, her first year at college was spent drinking constantly. She tells him that they should not "see" each other any more, and his offer to divorce Aunt Mary and marry her just makes her more frightened of him and more resolute that their relationship should end. He goes directly to a bar and starts drinking again. "It took my uncle seven years to drink himself to death," the adult Li'l Bit tells the audience.

The play continues with "On Men, Sex, and Women: Part III," which takes place in 1962. Peck wants to take her to the beach, and her mother refuses: "I am not letting an 11-year-old girl spend seven hours alone in the car with a man. . . . I don't like the way your uncle looks at you." In the end, though, she gives in. It is on this car ride that Peck asks Li'l Bit for the first time if she would like to learn to drive, and he lifts her up on his lap behind the wheel.

The last scene is the adult Li'l Bit preparing to go driving. She climbs into the car and makes the necessary adjustments. When she adjusts the rearview mirror, she sees the image of Uncle Peck in the back seat, before she takes off.

Part 1

Part 1 Summary

The play begins with narration from Li'l Bit. She sets the scene in 1969 rural Maryland and introduces herself as a know-it-all seventeen year old sitting in the front seat of a classic car with a married man, her uncle Peck.

The staging of this play is minimal and suggestive. For example, in this scene two chairs function as the car, while the action takes place with the two actors playing Li'l Bit and Peck facing the audience and not actually touching each other.

Li'l Bit joins Peck in the front seat of the car. As they discuss the smell of Li'l Bit's shampoo, she tensely reads suggestive meanings into comments that Peck protests are completely innocent. Gradually, though, Peck steers the conversation towards Li'l Bit's breasts, and asks to feel them. She gives in to his pleas and he caresses her breasts, a sensation she enjoys in spite of herself. When he starts to go further, Li'l Bit tells him she's a grown woman and won't let him keep touching her that way. Peck confesses that he really looks forward to his times alone with Li'l Bit, who then tells him she'll drive home.

Part 1 Analysis

This section of the play sets up several important elements. It introduces the main characters (Li'l Bit and Peck), and establishes the sexual, complex nature of their relationship. It lays the narrative foundation for the story we're going to be watching - the revelations of how and why Li'l Bit and Peck have the relationship they do. The introductory scene also shows us how that story is going to be told by introducing several theatrical conventions. These include narration, poetic language, multiple realities existing on stage simultaneously, and the minimal use of props and set to suggest larger situations. Finally, this scene introduces two important symbols that recur throughout the play: cars, which represent power; and Li'l Bit's breasts, which throughout the play represent female sexuality. Throughout the play, the development of these two symbols dramatizes a major aspect of the play's theme, which explores the relationships between power (particularly male power), female sexuality, and freedom.

Part 2

Part 2 Summary

Li'l Bit steps out of the car and tells us some of her family history; she is helped in this by a three person Greek Chorus, the members of which take on the roles of her grandfather, grandmother, and mother at various points throughout the play. Peck joins in as one witnesses a family dinner where Grandmother make comments about the size of Li'l Bit's breasts, while Grandfather makes inappropriate sexual remarks and Mother remains mostly silent. Li'l Bit gets angry with Grandfather, and Peck tries to calm Li'l Bit down; she loses her temper, though, and leaves the table. She then turns to us and explains that as an adult, she got kicked out of university because she was drunk all the time, and that after she left, she spent her days and nights cruising the back roads of Maryland. She tells us that in all that time, she never got a ticket, and says that Peck "taught her well."

This leads Li'l Bit into the memory of Peck taking her out to celebrate when she was sixteen, after she got her driver's license on the first try. As they sit down to dinner in a fancy restaurant, Peck recommends some food choices and asks Li'l Bit if she wants a drink. Li'l Bit asks him anxiously if *he's* going to drink. Peck reminds her that he promised not to drink when with her, but then convinces her that even though she's underage, she can have a drink to celebrate getting her license. As Peck bribes the waiter, Li'l Bit orders a martini ... then another one ... then another one. Her conversation with Peck becomes more disjointed, and she doesn't seem to notice that his answers to her questions about what he did in the war are actually uncomfortable and uncommunicative.

At key moments in this scene, a member of the Greek Chorus comes out in the character of Li'l Bit's mother. She delivers a continuing comic lecture on how a lady should drink, getting more and more tipsy as she goes on. At the end of the lecture, she is carried off the stage ...

At the same time as Peck carries Li'l Bit out to the car. He tenderly makes her comfortable. She kisses him, then becomes nervous and confused about what's going to happen next. He convinces her that nothing's going to happen if she doesn't want it to happen, and then seems happy to just have her head resting on his shoulder.

Another member of the Greek Chorus introduces the next scene, in which Peck teaches Li'l Bit's cousin Bobby how to fish. In a long, detailed and poetic monologue, Peck instructs Bobby on how to bait a hook, attract a fish, and reel it in. Bobby (who is unseen) catches a fish, but cries because he's afraid the fish feels pain. Peck lets the fish go, calms Bobby down, tells him it's okay to be sensitive, and then offers to take him to a hidden tree-house where only boys go. They'll have lunch, and a beer, and keep it a secret forever from the women.

Part 2 Analysis

It is clear from the beginning of the play that the relationship between Peck and Li'l Bit is inappropriately sexual. Thus in the "family dinner" section, one sees Peck's attempts to calm Li'l Bit down as perhaps another aspect of his attempts to seduce her, while in the "dinner out" section, one interprets what he is doing as an attempt to get Li'l Bit drunk and take advantage of her. As a result, it is surprising when he does not take advantage, and we're forced to question our preconceptions of how Peck feels and behaves, and also of how pedophiles in general feel and behave. Because we're so aware of the play's sexual subtext, a powerful sense of suspense throughout the scene between Peck and Bobby can be felt. The entire speech may be a metaphor for seduction and patience, or it may be nothing more than a lecture on how to fish. When Peck invites Bobby to the tree-house, one wonders whether Bobby is about to be assaulted or whether Peck genuinely does just want to comfort him.

The "family dinner" scene and the Mother's lecture provide both comic relief and a sense of context. The family dinner tells us that Li'l Bit grew up in an atmosphere where sexuality was inappropriately discussed and displayed all the time, which means that on some level, Peck's inappropriate behavior might have been less frightening than it would have been in other families. This scene also brings our attention back to the symbolism of Li'l Bit's breasts. As Grandfather makes fun of them, he exemplifies the general male misunderstanding of, and over-attention to, a relatively minor aspect of female sexuality. The Mother's lecture, on the other hand, illustrates the play's theme. Through her discussion of how a woman should drink, appear and react, it becomes clear how women were (and often still are) conditioned to respond to men. This scene foreshadows Li'l Bit's eventual rejection of that conditioning.

Part 3

Part 3 Summary

In the first scene of this section, the female members of the Greek Chorus (playing Li'l Bit's Mother and Grandmother) sit fifteen-year-old Li'l Bit down at the kitchen table and instruct her on relations between men and women. First, the Grandmother talks bluntly about how it seems that all her husband wants is sex; in the course of the discussion she gets herself- and the Mother - all hot and bothered.

Li'l Bit steps out of the scene to tell us about a time when she experienced this "get it now" aspect of male sexuality. It was a later-in-life encounter on a bus with a man much younger than her, and she adds that as a result of that encounter, she understood Peck a little better -the appeal and attraction of being the older, the more experienced, and the more mature.

She then steps back into the kitchen table scene, in which (as her fifteen year old self) she asks whether having sex for the first time actually hurts. When the Mother is honest and tells her that yes, there is pain and even a little blood, the Grandmother accuses the Mother of trying to scare Li'l Bit, which will only drive her into the arms of the first horny boy that comes along. The argument between the Mother and Grandmother escalates to the point where they call each other names and Li'l Bit flees ...

... into a scene with Peck which begins with him describing all the cars he's loved since he was a child. (Adult) Li'l Bit describes this as a man's intermediate love, the love that grows after the love of the breasts of the mother but before the love of the breasts of the lover. Li'l Bit then becomes her younger self again, and the scene becomes that of her first driving lesson.

As Peck instructs her in the workings of the clutch, gear shift, and pedals, Li'l Bit keeps cracking jokes, particularly about defending herself from being touched by him. Peck suddenly turns very serious, promises that he will never touch her while she's driving, and tells her that when she's behind the wheel of a car, she has her life in her hands and must behave responsibly. He adds that she's the closest thing he'll ever have to a son, and that he wants to teach her the one thing he would have wanted to make sure his son knew: how to drive like a man, defensively, powerfully, and in control. He then refers to his car as a "she," and Li'l Bit tells us that she decided not to change the car's gender.

Part 3 Analysis

This sequence of scenes demonstrates the narrative and emotional power of the play's dominant theatrical convention: the moving of the action back and forth through time. Through this technique, one sees how the idealism and innocence of fifteen year old Li'l

Bit is still quietly alive in the more mature Li'l Bit. At the same time, one sees the beginnings of the older Li'l Bit's cynicism and deep confusion in her younger self.

The time shifting technique also gives us more information and perspective about Peck. His desire to teach Li'l Bit seems genuine, and the scene of the driving lesson is perhaps the first occasion where there is no sexual undertone to what he's doing. Most importantly, there is more perspective about Li'l Bit and why her feelings about Peck are ambivalent and confusing. One clearly sees that she realizes that Peck is teaching her something important and that, perhaps for the first time in her life (and not just the play), he is not being sexual with her. In other words, the convention and structure of this sequence of scenes dramatizes the complex emotional and spiritual journey that Li'l Bit is undertaking.

The kitchen table scenes are also important, and they illustrate one particular aspect of the play's theme. The argument between the Mother and the Grandmother dramatizes the different attitudes that women had (and have) toward sexuality; their disagreement provides additional context for Li'l Bit's confusion. Even more context is provided by Li'l Bit's story of the young man on the bus, in which she, and we, gain greater understanding of Peck.

The driving lesson scene is perhaps the most important scene of the play. In addition to the character revelations discussed above, it is also key on a thematic level. At first, the scene explores the tension between power (particularly male power), as represented by the car) and women's sexuality, as represented by Li'l Bit's breasts. As the scene develops, however, the symbol of the car takes on additional depth. Peck refers to the car as female, meaning that the thematic content of the scene is now connected to the idea of having power over women in general and female sexuality in particular. This symbol is reinforced when Peck tells Li'l Bit that she has to drive like a man; Li'l Bit accepts that role when she accepts the car as female.

On both a thematic and dramatic level, this scene illustrates how Li'l Bit came to accept Peck's control and dominance over her, a central aspect of the play's theme relating to the power relationship between men and women. At the same time, Peck's urging of Li'l Bit to be in control foreshadows the final moments of the play, when for the first time in her life she actually is.

Part 4

Part 4 Summary

In two short scenes, Li'l Bit recalls how she was teased in school about the size of her breasts and felt uncomfortable at being the object of so much attention. This leads her to a memory of a very early experience with Peck, in which he photographed her in various stages of taking off her clothes.

As slides of Peck's photographs and other semi-erotic pictures appear on a rear screen, Li'l Bit takes pose after pose while Peck takes picture after picture. At first, Li'l Bit is uncomfortable, but she soon begins to enjoy herself. Peck's calming words and her own emerging enjoyment of her body combine to make this into something she perceives as a pleasurable experience. At the climax of the scene, Peck confesses to Li'l Bit that he loves her ... and Li'l Bit begins to undo her blouse.

Part 4 Analysis

This section of the play focuses on Li'l Bit's feelings and perspectives about her body. The first short sections tell us how and why she felt so uncomfortable in her own skin, while the long scene of the photo-shoot tells us how she began to feel comfortable. There are two layers of foreshadowing here. On one level, Li'l Bit's initial resistance foreshadows her ultimate rejection of Peck, while on another level her growing sense of comfort and empowerment foreshadows the ultimate empowerment, and freedom, that she experiences at the end of the play.

Part 5

Part 5 Summary

A member of the Greek Chorus introduces another member of the Chorus as Aunt Mary, Peck's wife. Aunt Mary tells us that Peck is a good husband and provider, always working hard and always doing little things around the house. She also tells us that he has what she calls "troubles," and that a great many men who fought in World War Two have similar troubles; she sharply refers to the fact that these men never had the chance to get help that soldiers, and men, of later generations have had. She suggests that Li'l Bit is manipulating Peck, taking his attention away from life at home. She concludes by saying she can't wait for Li'l Bit to go off to school and manipulate someone else so that she (Aunt Mary) can have her husband back.

This section leads into a memory of Christmas when Li'l Bit was thirteen, sitting and talking with Peck while he does the dishes. Sometimes gently, sometimes directly, she asks Peck what's bothering him. Sometimes honestly, sometimes hesitantly, he tells her - that ever since he came back from the war, he's had what he calls a "fire in his heart" that can't be easily put out. Sometimes drinking helps, but not always. Li'l Bit offers to spend time alone with him, once a week, to give him a chance to talk. Her conditions are that he doesn't drink, and that she'll draw the line about what does and doesn't happen between them. Peck, grateful for the opportunity to unburden himself, and to not feel so lonely, accepts.

Part 5 Analysis

In this short section, there is an even deeper understanding of how and why Peck is who he is. His story is such that for a moment, one may be tempted to excuse what he does to Li'l Bit. Because Li'l Bit is so firm about drawing the line on his behavior, though, there is a clear reminder that even though he has problems, his actions are still wrong. To look at it another way, in spite of what is known about Peck, one begins to have compassion for him as the story unfolds. This is a secondary theme of the play: that there can always be room for compassion for a troubled fellow human being. It is this idea that Li'l Bit discovers at the end of the play, and her grasp of it is what enables her to undergo her final transformation. This scene foreshadows that transformation, and also foreshadows Li'l Bit's firmness with Peck in the following section.

Finally, this scene begins a steady escalation of emotion and tension that will build to the play's thematic and dramatic climax - the scene in the hotel room in the next section.

Part 6

Part 6 Summary

This section begins with short comments by the Greek Chorus on letters and gifts sent to Li'l Bit from Peck in the fall of 1969. The gifts are chocolates, books and flowers; the letters all look forward to, and comment on, Peck's reunion with Li'l Bit. Suddenly we're in a hotel room with a bewildered Peck and a very angry Li'l Bit (who is in her late teens). She very quickly drinks three glasses of the champagne Peck brought, tells Peck that the letters and gifts really frightened her, confesses that she's dropped out of school, and tells him she's not willing to spend time alone with him any more. Frightened more by the thought of being without her than he is by her anger, Peck calms her down and talks her into lying on the bed and letting him hold her. When he promises that nothing else will happen, Li'l Bit reluctantly lies beside him.

The Greek Chorus appears and comments, along with Li'l Bit, on how sensually pleasurable it is to be held, to feel safe, and to feel loved. As the emotional and sexual tension builds, Li'l Bit comes close to kissing Peck but stops herself just in time and instead tells him that she has to leave. Peck pulls out a ring box and proposes to her, saying he'll leave his wife. Li'l Bit is shocked, tells him to go back to Aunt Mary, then leaves.

The Male Greek Chorus becomes a bartender, and one sees Peck sitting at a bar downing shot after shot. Li'l Bit tells us that after that night, she never saw him again ... and that seven years afterwards, in his efforts to drink himself to death, Peck fell down the stairs to the basement and broke his neck. She then wonders who sexually molested him, and when, and tells us that she still imagines him in his old car, cruising the back roads of Maryland, searching for a young girl to just love him.

Part 6 Analysis

On both an emotional and technical level, the short snips of dialogue in the first part of this section increase narrative momentum and emotional tension and builds towards the climactic scene in the hotel room.

As Li'l Bit works her way around to confronting Peck, this momentum continues to build through more short snippets of dialogue and careful small talk (which, incidentally, reveal why Li'l Bit was drunk all the time in her first year of college, as she had earlier mentioned being).

This scene is the narrative and thematic climax of the play. In terms of the story, Li'l Bit confronts Peck, while in terms of the theme, she confronts both her attraction to him and the influence that traditional sexual and gender roles (i.e. man dominating woman) have played in their relationship. She succeeds in gaining power over both.

Interestingly, the symbols that have illustrated the theme are absent from this confrontation. The image of the car does show up at the end of Li'l Bit's monologue at the end of the scene, in which the car becomes a symbol of the loneliness and narrowness of Peck's sexuality. In the actual hotel room confrontation, though, neither the symbol of the car nor that of Li'l Bit's breasts comes into play.

Also in Li'l Bit's monologue, Peck comes close to becoming a tragic character - that is to say, a generally good man brought down by an overpowering flaw. In Peck's case, the flaw is his inappropriate desire for sexual comfort from children. Is it the playwright's intent for us to see him that way? Or are society's pre-conceptions of pedophiles too strong to allow us to completely go there? It's another shade of gray in this complex and multi-faceted story.

Part 7

Part 7 Summary

A member of the Greek Chorus appears as Li'l Bit's Mother, who is reluctant to let (the very young) Li'l Bit spend time alone with Peck. The Mother thinks there's something odd about Peck, but Li'l Bit convinces her to let him go.

This scene blends with what is revealed in the first driving lesson Peck gives Li'l Bit. Because she's too short to reach the pedals, Peck sits her on his lap and lets her steer. Soon, though, in spite of her protests, he puts his hands under her blouse. As she begins to cry, one sees Peck have an orgasm.

Li'l Bit steps out of the scene and, as Peck disappears, becomes her adult self. She tells us that that was the last time she ever felt connected and free in her body, but that as she gets older she finds joy in seeing people who *are* connected in that way. She also tells us that another aspect of getting older is becoming more able to find joy in her family - and freedom in forgiveness. Finally, she tells us that she's also able to find freedom while driving. As she tells us about preparing to go for a long drive, the Greek Chorus appears and repeats short, important phrases from her childhood ... and Peck appears in the back seat of the car.

Li'l Bit gets in the car ... smiles for a moment at Peck, who smiles back ... and then floors the gas. Blackout.

Part 7 Analysis

In this section one finally sees how the sexual relationship between Li'l Bit and Peck began. It is clearly traumatic for Li'l Bit, and this reminds us that in spite of whatever compassion may be felt for Peck, his actions were very wrong. The power of this scene, though - which also translates into the power of the play - is that immediately after showing us the trauma, Li'l Bit speaks of forgiveness, and of the possibility for happiness.

At this point, the symbol of the car again takes on a slightly different meaning. As Li'l Bit gets in and prepares to drive, the car is still an image of power; it has transformed, though, and instead of being an image of sexual power, it now represents personal power. This transformation is taken further by the image of Peck sitting in the back seat while Li'l Bit sits alone -in complete, sole control for the first time - in the driver's seat. This is both a visualization and a dramatization of the play's theme of transformation. In these final moments, the central dramatic issue of claiming sexual power is actually an example of a broader, more encompassing theme. By going with Li'l Bit on her journey, one is reminded that courage, compassion and forgiveness can bring about freedom, fulfillment, and joy.

Bibliography

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Characters

B. B.

See Cousin Bobby

Big Papa

Li'l Bit's grandfather, the father of her mother and Aunt Mary, is a crude, offensive man who expects to be waited on by his wife. He is proud of the fact that he came and took his wife away, when she was fourteen, against her family's objections. His wife describes him as a big bull, wanting sex every morning and every evening and even coming home at lunch for it. Early in the play, the family jokes about Li'l Bit's developing breasts when she is seventeen, and her grandfather keeps making derogatory comments about what a waste it is for her to go to college: "What does she need to go to college for?" "She's got all the credentials she needs on her chest—" and "How is Shakespeare going to help her lie on her back in the dark?"

Cousin Bobby

He has no spoken lines and does not appear onstage, but the actor playing Uncle Peck speaks to him in a monologue. In a scene announced as "Uncle Peck teaches Cousin Bobby how to fish," Bobby pulls in a pompano and then cries until Peck cuts the fish loose and releases it. Then Peck asks if Bobby would like to go to a secret tree house with him, drink beer, and eat crab salad. Peck's behavior toward Bobby is similar to how he treats Li'l Bit in that he gives her liquor and driving lessons and swears her to secrecy. There is no indication of where this scene fits chronologically with the rest.

Bobby is first mentioned early in the play, as an example of how nicknames in the family center on genitalia. His nickname is "B. B." for "Blue Balls."

Grandmother

Li'l Bit's grandmother is accustomed to serving her husband, Big Papa, which she does with bitterness. Although he constantly has sex with her, she has never had an orgasm and believes that her daughters made the concept up; when they talk with her about sex, she becomes almost violently irritable, suggesting that her sex drive is repressed. She makes it a policy to make sex sound dirty, painful, and disgusting to Li'l Bit, with the hope that the girl will not want to try it, even though the same tactic did not help keep her daughter, Lucy from getting pregnant.

Greg

Greg is a short, shy, courtly boy who frequently asks Li'l Bit to dance at the sock hop at Francis Scott Key Middle School. She is afraid to dance with him, suspicious that he just wants to dance with her so that he can watch her breasts.

High School Senior

On a bus trip to Upstate New York in 1978, when she is nearly thirty, Li'l Bit is approached by a boy who introduces himself as a senior at Walt Whitman High. He is awkward, with large ears and a high-pitched voice. After some conversation, she takes him to her hotel room and has sex with him, which reminds her of the way Uncle Peck seduced her when she was young.

Jerome

In ninth grade, when Li'l Bit's breasts are developing, Jerome, with the help of a female classmate, feigns an allergy attack and falls to the floor. When Li'l Bit bends down to help him, he says that his allergy is to foam rubber, and he squeezes her breast. Later, after gym class, a female classmate stares at Li'l Bit's breasts in the shower and, determining that they are real, tells her that this means Jerome owes her fifty cents from a bet.

Li'l Bit

This play focuses on Li'l Bit, following her life from age eleven to nearly thirty-five. It centers on her relationship with her uncle by marriage, Peck, showing how that relationship grows closer and closer to a sexual one and how Li'l Bit's life becomes increasingly disorderly as she matures. When she is eleven and her mother does not want her riding in a car alone with Peck, she assures her mother confidently that she "can handle" him. She basks in the attention that he gives her throughout the years, posing for pictures for him and accepting gifts. When, at puberty, her breasts develop, her mother and grandparents make her self-conscious, and other children at school make her feel like an outcast, but Peck speaks to her sympathetically. When she goes away to college, Li'l Bit stops going to class and develops a drinking problem; removed from Peck, she can see their relationship for what it is, and she tells him they can't see each other anymore, even though it destroys him. In late her twenties, she picks up a high school boy on the street and has sex with him to feel the power over a younger person that Peck felt. In the end, as she drives off, she sees the image of Peck, long dead, in her rearview mirror.

Lucy

See Mother

Aunt Marry

Aunt Mary is the sister of Li'l Bit's mother and the wife of Peck. Li'l Bit describes her as "beautiful." In a monologue announced as "Aunt Mary on behalf of her husband," she speaks to the audience, explaining Peck's good qualities: he is always willing to help out the neighbors, and he works hard to provide for her and even brings her furs and diamonds. She explains the psychological trauma that he must have experienced in the war. She is well aware of the relationship between Peck and their niece, she says. She blames Li'l Bit: "She's a sly one, that one is. She knows exactly what she's doing; she's twisted Peck around her little finger and thinks it's all a big secret." Her response to this is to wait until Li'l Bit goes away to school, so she can get her husband back.

Mother

Li'l Bit's mother, Lucy, is skeptical of men. While giving Li'l Bit advice about how a lady should drink, she warns against particular drinks, stating vaguely, "Believe me, they are lethal . . . I think you were conceived after one of those." When she and her mother are talking about sex with Li'l Bit, she is the one to contradict the grandmother's warnings that sex is frightening. "It won't hurt you—" she tells Li'l Bit, "if the man you go to bed with really loves you. It's important that he loves you." She is angry at her parents for turning their back on her when she became pregnant, for telling her, "You Made Your Bed; Now Lie on It." She does practically the same thing, though, when Li'l Bit is eleven and wants to go on a long car ride with Uncle Peck. The mother gives in, even though she suspects Peck of having sexual intentions, telling the girl, "All right. But I'm warning you—if anything happens, I hold you responsible."

Uncle Peck

Uncle Peck is the only one in the family who takes Li'l Bit seriously when the others make fun of her, and she is the only one to take him seriously. His wife, Aunt Mary, says that she understands his suffering but that she does not talk to him when he is feeling bad. When Li'l Bit is thirteen, he says that talking to her makes him feel better and gives him the strength to battle his alcoholism. When she agrees to meet with him to talk regularly, a quasisexual relationship is established: their meetings must be secret, and she must be allowed to "draw the line." All future meetings between them lean toward sexuality. He takes pictures of her in his basement, planning for the day when she will be old enough to pose for *Playboy*. When she receives her license, he takes her to a restaurant that will serve her liquor. As she approaches her eighteenth birthday, when she can have sex legally, Peck sends letters, each with the number of days until her birthday, showing his excitement. When he visits her on her birthday and she breaks off

their relationship, he starts drinking again. "It took my uncle seven years to drink himself to death," Li'l Bit tells the audience. "First he lost his job, then his wife, and finally his driver's license."

Waiter

The waiter at a restaurant on the Eastern Shore is the only character in the play to interact with Peck and Li'l Bit when they are together as a couple. He is skeptical about serving alcohol to a sixteen-year-old girl, especially when she orders a martini, but he does it, hoping that he will receive a big tip.

Themes

Growing Up

Audiences can sometimes miss the fact that *How I Learned to Drive* is a play about growing up. One reason for this is that the main character, Li'l Bit, already has grown-up attitudes and responsibilities when she is young. The earliest chronological scene takes place in 1962, when Li'l Bit is eleven. Warned against the danger of riding in a car with her uncle, she not only shows an awareness of the possibility that he will take a sexual interest but also a cool confidence that she can control the situation. In addition, at the age of eleven, she is intelligent enough to understand her own psychological motive for being attracted to Peck: "Just because you lost your husband—" she tells her mother, "I still deserve a chance at having a father! Someone! A man who will look out for me! Don't I get a chance?" Even this young, Li'l Bit is intellectually mature, understanding her situation more clearly than many adults would. The fact that she has an adult perspective about sex throughout the play helps to obscure the fact that she still needs to grow up emotionally, to distance herself from her family, especially from Uncle Peck.

Another reason that this play does not seem like a story about growing up is its structure. The play starts with Li'l Bit as a grown woman, nearly thirty-five, and it moves backward through her life, reaching the earliest time frame at the end. The action all reveals details of the relationship between Li'l Bit and Peck, but not in the way that Li'l Bit experienced it. She seems mature from the very first scene, when she is seventeen, and the narrator explains, "I am very old, very cynical of the world, and I know it all." The play questions assumptions that often connect growing up to chronological development, which is actually not such an important part of maturity.

What does make this a play about growing up is the emotional development that takes place in Li'l Bit, leading up to the point near the end at which she is able to end her unhealthy relationship with her uncle. To reach this point, she needs to understand the elements of her life that drove her to that relationship, including the mocking from classmates and other family members that lowered her self-esteem and increased her desire to take care of Peck, to help him stop drinking, to defend him from gossip, and so forth. To reach this point with her, the audience needs to see how the relationship developed, but they do not need to see its development in actual chronological order. For Li'l Bit, growing up means understanding, not just accumulating experience, and understanding does not follow a straight path.

Incest

Legally, the relationship between Peck and Li'l Bit is not an incestuous one, because he is only related to her by marriage and not by blood. He is right when he points out that once she is eighteen, they could be married if he divorced his wife. Morally, however, it is an incestuous relationship because of the social roles that they have. He has been

present since Li'l Bit's birth—"I held you, one day old, right in this hand" is a line that is repeated several times throughout the play. Although they do not have a blood relationship, he has been a father figure to Li'l Bit throughout her entire life, and it would be impossible to push this emotional bond aside after eighteen years. When Li'l Bit expresses her horror at his proposal of marriage, she emphasizes this, stating, "Family is family," echoing the fact that he told her the same thing in an earlier scene, showing that she is old enough to recognize the social ties that once seemed irrelevant to her.

Vulnerability

The relationship between Li'l Bit and Uncle Peck in this play is based on the vulnerability that each of them feels. The audience sees how Li'l Bit's family encourages her insecurities. They emphasize sex at a time when she is too young to understand it, and when she does ask about it, her grandmother tries to make her feel that it is disgusting and unpleasant for women but inevitable because men want it. Her mother's bitterness toward Li'l Bit's father makes her all that more determined to do better in love than her mother. With this social dynamic already established, Li'l Bit is made to feel even more self-conscious when she reaches puberty and her breasts develop. Her family draws attention to them, making them the topic of conversation at Sunday dinner; her classmates, both male and female, treat her breasts with awe, as if Li'l Bit is not one of them but some other sort of creature. Her relationship with Peck counters this vulnerability and makes her feel a sense of empowerment. He is the only family member to go to her with calm, soothing words when everyone else is making her feel self-conscious. Even at a young age, she is able to dictate the terms of their relationship. When she is thirteen and agreeing to meet with him in secret, she is able to make him accept her demand, "You've got to let me—draw the line. And once it's drawn, you mustn't cross it." Later in their relationship, she can make him beg like a child for the favor of unhooking her bra in exchange for "being good." Uncle Peck's subservience makes up for the ways the world makes her feel vulnerable.

The relationship also helps Peck overcome his own feelings of vulnerability. He is aware of being out of his element, a Southerner. He feels most comfortable sitting barefoot at a South Carolina fishing hole. When Li'l Bit asks why he doesn't go back there to live, he responds, "I think it's better if my mother doesn't have a daily reminder of her disappointment." During the same conversation, he tries to sidetrack her questions about fighting in the war, changing the subject at the earliest opportunity. Later, Aunt Mary refers to the trauma of his war experience as "whatever has burrowed deeper than the scar tissue," and she explains that her way of dealing with it is to keep conversations superficial. It is clear that Peck is using his relationship with Li'l Bit to recapture some of his lost childhood, when he felt secure.

Gender Roles

"Rage is not attractive in a girl," a female classmate tells Li'l Bit when she screams at Jerome for grabbing her breast. Her statement reinforces the attitude that Li'l Bit has

already learned at home, from her mother and grandmother, that women are expected to put up with being sex objects, that it is their responsibility. Her grandmother shows this attitude most clearly when she talks about her relationship with Li'l Bit's grandfather. Throughout their married life, they have had sex almost every day, because he demands it, even though she has never been interested in it. Though Li'l Bit's mother is not involved with anyone sexually at any point in the play, she still sends a similar message when she warns that men are only after sex and that women must stay sober and alert to fight off their advances. In her relationship with Peck, which gives her the upper hand over a grown man, Li'l Bit seems to be taking a different attitude than the one she was taught, but deep down she really believes in traditional gender roles. She accepts that cars are female after Peck explains that he calls his car a "she" because "when you close your eyes and think of someone who responds to your touch—someone who performs for you and gives you just what you ask for—I guess I always see a 'she.'"

Style

Music

The music that Paula Vogel's script for this play suggests is music that spans two generations. The Motown music that she mentions several times, as well as songs by Roy Orbison, Jan and Dean, and the Beach Boys, are all historically correct for action that is taking place in the mid-to late-1960s. Stylistically, they are romantic songs with hints of sexuality and with roots in the harmonically rich doo-wop music of the 1950s. This is most important for understanding the playwright's point when, at the end of the discussion about sex, the chorus members who have been speaking for Li'l Bit's mother, grandmother, and grandfather break into song, singing in three-part harmony and evoking the kind of music that lovers would listen to on the radio, as the scene dissolves to Li'l Bit and Uncle Peck in his car. Though the play deals with child molestation, a subject that is generally treated with deadly seriousness, the music that Vogel suggests to accompany it is romantic, wistful, beautiful, and nostalgic. Using this music, the play is able to evoke the mood that surrounded Li'l Bit in her adolescent confusion, as opposed to the harsh facts of the case as the audience and the grown-up Li'l Bit can see them.

Form

The scenes of this play are presented, for the most part, in reverse chronological order from how they occurred in life. In the earliest scene, Li'l Bit is seventeen, driving, and already in a physical relationship with her uncle Peck, although intercourse has not taken place between them. Subsequent scenes show her at sixteen, when she receives her driver's license; at fifteen, when the other children at school notice that her breasts have developed; and at thirteen, when she agrees to meet in secret with Peck and he arranges to shoot photographs of her in his basement. The story reaches its climax when the results of this relationship come to fruition, on Li'l Bit's eighteenth birthday. They can finally have an adult relationship, and Peck eagerly anticipates the reward for the "patience" that he has mentioned over the years, but Li'l Bit puts an end to what has been going on instead, leaving him to destroy himself with alcohol. The last scene, with eleven-yearold Li'l Bit pestering her mother until she allows her to ride alone in the car with Peck and his subsequent first driving lesson with the girl, functions as an after-the-fact reminder of how their relationship developed, showing Li'l Bit as pursuing it from the beginning, even when he was not present to egg her on, and the start of Peck's obsession with her breasts.

One more element to the play's structure is the inclusion of dramatic monologues throughout. Most are from the grown-up Li'l Bit, who starts the play addressing the audience as if she is conducting a lecture in drivers' education. At various times in the play, different characters give titles to the scenes as they are being presented, such as the three "On Men, Sex, and Women" segments or "Uncle Peck teaches cousin Bobby

to fish" and "Aunt Mary on behalf of her husband." One of the most notable individual pieces is Li'l Bit's mother's lecture, "A mother's guide to social drinking," which is addressed to the audience while a scene is acted out of Peck getting Li'l Bit drunk. Like the drivers' education lectures, this serves to ridicule social formality, which conflicts with basic urges and emotions.

Symbolism

The main symbol in this play is, of course, Uncle Peck teaching his niece to drive, which represents an older man's attempt to initiate a young woman into a life of sex. It is a fitting symbol because the two, driving lessons and seduction, have so many points in common. The car has often been thought of as a sexual image, not only because of the power that its engine gives to its driver but also because it is a safe haven for lovers to meet in private, away from the attention of society. The relationship between Peck and Li'l Bit resembles a driving lesson in that he has experience and patience and she has power: the car is as much a powerful machine as her body. The day that she receives her driver's license marks a rite of passage, a celebration that is commemorated with another rite, her first drink. (This is paralleled later in the play when Peck drinks his life away, and Li'l Bit makes a point of mentioning that he lost, after his job and wife, his driver's license.) One of the clearest connections made between learning to drive and sexual initiation is in their final scene together, when Peck puts eleven-year-old Li'l Bit on his lap to drive the car. To her, the opportunity to control a car is awe-inspiring, racing down the highway, until he puts his hand inside of her blouse, forever uniting sex and driving in her mind. One last connection between the two, a bittersweet one, comes when Li'l Bit, a grown woman, takes off driving and sees Peck in her mirror. The rear view mirror is a fitting symbol for looking backward at the events of one's life, as Li'l Bit does in this play.

Historical Context

Intercourse between an adult and a child is called "statutory rape": that is, a rape that might not seem to fit the definition of the word because both participants consent in having sex but that is considered rape according to legal statute because children are considered unable to knowingly give such consent. The age at which a young person can legally consent to sex is different in different states but generally it is between the ages of sixteen and eighteen. In *How I Learned to Drive*, Uncle Peck anxiously counts the days leading up to Li'l Bit's eighteenth birthday, and she easily recognizes that he has been waiting for the opportunity to have sex with her legally, without fear of being put in jail for statutory rape.

Laws against sex with children have always been enforced in this country. In the 1960s, though, there was a sexual revolution that swept away much of the social stigma attached to many sexual practices. Starting in the 1950s, when Playboy magazine made pornography a mainstream commercial venture, and carrying on through the late 1960s and early 1970s, when there was a counter-culture revolution of college students who found their identity in social disobedience against the Vietnam War, sexuality came to be seen as a private matter, not a governmental one. Laws punishing homosexuality were challenged, in some cases successfully, and other laws were changed to make it easier to obtain divorces, giving people more leeway in determining what they could consider an unsatisfactory marriage. From the late 1960s to the mid-1970s, questions were constantly raised regarding which sexual practices were morally wrong and which were just deemed wrong by obsolete traditions.

The same social shift that powered the sexual revolution also drove the women's movement in the 1960s and 1970s. Feminists brought attention to subjects that had always been known but seldom talked about in public, subjects like rape, spousal abuse, and incest. In the 1970s, books began appearing that examined the psychological damage done by adults who sexually abuse children. One of the earliest and best-known of these was Louise Armstrong's *Kiss Daddy Goodnight,* which was about her being molested by her father throughout her childhood; it became a bestseller in 1978. In the wake of Armstrong's success, more and more women began to speak out about being sexually abused by older people, usually male relatives. Throughout the 1980s, the stigma attached to having been abused dwindled, as victims of the experience banded together, bolstering each other's pride in having had the strength to survive.

The support groups for survivors of childhood abuse grew so quickly and were so widespread that a backlash against them arose in the 1990s. To some extent, this backlash came from animosity toward celebrities who told their stories of being sexually abused during childhood. As Oprah Winfrey, Suzanne Sommers, Rosanne Barr, and others came out in public about their difficult origins, many Americans sympathized, but others, finding no sympathy for the rich and famous, cast a cold eye toward the subject. The more it seemed that everyone had a story of childhood abuse, the more people tuned out the horror of the subject.

One extreme theory regarding sexual abuse of children was responsible for both the rapid growth of incidents reported and the growing firmness of skeptics. Repressed Memory Syndrome is based in the Freudian theory that a person suffering a traumatic experience is inclined to lose the memory of that event but that the memory can be accessed later to piece together what actually happened. Working with this idea, stories began making headlines during the 1990s of people suddenly "remembering" that they were abused by their parents. Suspicions rose when the stories became more and more outrageous. People claimed memories of having been forced to participate in Satanic sex and murder cults fifty years earlier; grown children accused parents and grandparents of abuses when no other physical or behavioral evidence backed up their claims. As news reports of cases relying on Repressed Memory Syndrome became more common, the methods that were used to bring these memories out were called into question. In many cases, psychoanalysts led patients to claim that they remembered childhood sexual abuse by asking them guided, leading questions. (For instance, if a person remembered being given a bath by an older relative, the researcher might ask, "And where did his/her hands go on you?") Often, the repressed memories were brought out using techniques that have not been accepted as hard psychological science, such as hypnosis, visualization, and trance therapy. Sexual abuse is certainly a traumatic experience, and repression is recognized as the mind's way of dealing with trauma, but most researchers doubt the claims made by proponents of Repressed Memory Syndrome. The sensationalism and scientific dubiousness of this field has fueled the backlash against victims of sexual abuse, which in turn has encouraged writers like Paula Vogel to look at the situation from less traditional perspectives.

Critical Overview

Critics have appreciated *How I Learned to Drive* since it was first produced in 1997, with general praise that only intensified when the play won the Pulitzer Prize in 1998. Writing about the original production at the Vineyard Theater, off-Broadway, Robert L. Daniels wrote in *Variety* that Vogel "paints a richly poetic and picturesque landscape," referring to the way that the playwright uses words to show things that cannot be presented on the stage. Daniels credited Vogel with her ability to deal with pedophilia in a way that was not distracting or offputting, noting, "The play is a potent and convincing comment on a taboo subject, and its impact sneaks up on its audience." Stefan Kanfer, writing for the *New Leader* about the same off-Broadway production, found excellence all around: "Still," his review ended, after praise for the cast members, costumer, and scenarist, "as fine as these professionals are, the star of the evening remains Paula Vogel, a playwright who never gives in to the obvious. . . . Vogel is a major talent waiting for a big theater to display her wares." Kanfer's praise is built on the observation that, by 1997, the subject of incest was a familiar one on television and print. This review credits Vogel with being able to find something new in the material and presenting it with such style. "If *How I Learned to Drive* focused only on this roiled relationship it would still be an outstanding effort," Kanfer wrote. "But Vogel exhibits more than a talent for clinical analysis. She has also composed a comedy of bad manners, with a series of memorable riffs." Kanfer goes on to quote the "Mother's guide to social drinking" speech, which several reviewers referred to when discussing the play's humorous tone.

When Laurie Stone reviewed the play for the *Nation,* she acknowledged the acting, calling David Morse's Peck "brilliant" and observing of Mary Louise Parker's performance that "with her rabbit twitchiness, [she] seamlessly embodies a child whose nose sniffs for the hustle, the grope." Still, her review is mainly concentrated on Vogel's ability to carefully balance the complex psychology of the central relationship. "In this weirdly captivating play," Stone wrote:

Vogel admits the psychological toll of intergenerational sex and the immorality of exploiting the weakness of children, but she stands apart from the advocates of victims' rights who don't grant the erotic allure of such connection—a given of our sexual natures, though one that responsible adults limit to fantasy. Perversion, *Drive* says, isn't in acts and wishes but in burying a piece of truth where it can leap out hungrily.

How I Learned to Drive remained in New York for over a year. After it received the Pulitzer Prize in praise that only intensified when the play won the Pulitzer Prize in 1998. Writing about the original production at the Vineyard Theater, off-Broadway, Robert L. Daniels wrote in Variety that Vogel "paints a richly poetic and picturesque landscape," referring to the way that the playwright uses words to show things that cannot be presented on the stage. Daniels credited Vogel with her ability to deal with pedophilia in a way that was not distracting or offputting, noting, "The play is a potent and convincing comment on a taboo subject, and its impact sneaks up on its audience." Stefan Kanfer, writing for the New Leader about the same off-Broadway production, found excellence all around: "Still," his review ended, after praise for the cast members,

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How I Learned to Drive remained in New York for over a year. After it received the Pulitzer Prize in 1998, it expanded to theaters across the country, as well as to places as diverse as Japan, Scandinavia, Germany, and South Africa. With her newfound fame, Vogel was able to take an extended leave from her teaching job and to concentrate on writing. Although there has not been much time to see what she can do to match the success of this play, it is clear that, at least in the short-term, she is not locked into following the award-winning formula but instead is exercising her creativity and branching out with new styles. She has been commissioned for an historical Christmas drama and for a screen treatment of *How I Learned to Drive*, which has yet to be produced.

Vogel followed *How I Learned to Drive* with *The Mineola Twins* in 1999. It is a comic, camp vehicle that uses clichéd; characterizations and settings while it follows two twins, one good and one evil, through the Republican administrations of Eisenhower, Nixon, and Reagan. While this play touched upon social extremes, it was not nearly as serious about its subject matter as its predecessor. Charles Isherwood, writing in *Variety*, called *The Mineola Twins* "a bright cartoon of a play" and took time to mention the earlier play by comparison: "It certainly lacks the depth and complexity of Vogel's *How I Learned to Drive*, but its go-forbroke adventurousness is endearing, and it's a divinely funny vehicle for [its star]."

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3

Critical Essay #1

Kelly is an instructor of creative writing at Oakton Community College. In the following essay, he examines the ways Vogel makes the character of Uncle Peck, the child molester, bearable by making him understandable.

The focal characters of Paula Vogel's 1997 play *How I Learned to Drive* are Uncle Peck, a grown man who orchestrates a seven-year-long sexual assault against his niece, and Li'l Bit, the object of his fixation who encourages his lust. On their own, the facts of the case qualify the play as a drama, more specifically a tragedy. A good case can be made that such subject matter could never be anything but inherently and irrevocably tragic. But the play has comic elements, and all turns out well for Li'l Bit, its narrator and protagonist, who, fifteen or twenty years after the action, can look back on her relationship with her uncle, scrutinize it, and then get on with her life. These elements support the interpretation, made by the author herself, that the play is actually a comedy with tragic elements. The fact that there is no definitive answer, that the work remains suspended between the two categories, is one of the sources of its power.

A character like Uncle Peck is not one that can be found likeable, in theory. Morally, he has no ground to stand on. In the beginning of the play, Li'l Bit is, as she describes herself, "very old, very cynical of the world, and a know it all. In short, I'm seventeen years old." There might be some room for moral equivocation when Peck fondles and kisses her breasts. Audiences just may think that Peck accepts the girl for the age she feels, pushing her age upward by just a few months, and that he is a hopeless romantic who views love as a moral imperative more compelling than the legal age of consent. It is a shaky argument at best, one that is probably used by pedophiles all of the time; with her nearness to the magic eighteenth birthday and her permission to his touch, he at least has a case to argue. The play only starts with that situation, though: where it builds to, even after the news of Peck's death while Li'l Bit is in her twenties, is a scene of the same man fondling the same girl's breasts when she is eleven. There is no argument that could make this acceptable.

In spite of the horror that he is responsible for, the potential psychological destruction of his niece, Peck cannot be written off by audiences as a monster. He can't be seen as a decent man with the one small flaw of child molestation: the best that can be said about him is that he is a complex character. Vogel creates his complexity with an even hand that makes it difficult for audiences not to care about what he is going to do every moment he is onstage. Li'l Bit is complex, too, but audiences are not as resistant to feeling what she feels: because she is a child, the presumption of innocence is hers. Peck is guilty from the start. The greatest challenge that *How I Learned to Drive* faces is the challenge to invest Peck with enough innocence that audiences will leave the theater accepting his basic humanity.

It would be more difficult to accomplish this if innocence were a peripheral matter to this play, one that could only be hinted at symbolically. As it stands, however, innocence is a central issue, which allows Vogel to address it directly. The protagonist, Li'l Bit, can

remember her early sexualization with nostalgia because, as an adult, she knows how wrong it was to want to give up her innocence so quickly, but at the same time, she understands why she wanted to do it. Even without the presence of Uncle Peck, Li'l Bit's family life is warped, a fact made clear early in the play with the information that family nicknames are based on genitalia, giving her an awareness of sex at an age when she was too young to cope with the knowledge. She sees her grandmother lead a miserable life because of her efforts to deny her own sexual urges, while her mother tells her that there is nothing wrong with sex, so long as it is intertwined with love. Her grandfather, "Big Papa" (audiences are told that his is one of the genitalia-inspired nicknames), is a bully who uses his wife as a receptacle for sex and who has no patience for anyone who is not a sex object for him. Sexuality equals maturity and power in Li'l Bit's home; innocence is to be ridiculed.

The same pattern continues at school, where, in a quick trio of scenes, audiences see Li'l Bit mocked, then alienated, then, finally, revered. This sequence starts with Li'l Bit naïvely unaware of the importance of the breasts that have grown on her, not expecting Jerome to ridicule her for them as he does. Even among other girls, she is an outcast, first because of her intimidating physical development and then because of the uninhibited sexual humor she brings from home. The last high school scene, with Greg, shows her dawning awareness of the way her breasts give her control over boys and men. The message throughout her childhood is that innocence is a problem, sexuality a cure.

Peck is a man who has seen some suffering, which he is too stoic to admit to himself. It is his wife, Aunt Mary, who tells the audience that his stint in the Marines affected him. In a display of considerable denseness, she explains that he will hang around her when troubled and that her wellmeaning response is to avoid talking about anything substantial, leaving Peck to swallow his sorrows and deal with them alone. His ideal life is fishing barefoot, as he explains to Cousin Bobby in their scene together at the fishing hole. It is what he misses most of all about South Carolina, and, by extension, about his past. In that scene, the basic guidelines of his relationship with Li'l Bit show themselves. He starts the scene as a boy himself, fishing alongside Bobby, then eases into the role of the mature participant with his fishing advice, and finally he is forced, when Bobby is upset about the fish's pain, to take a paternal position to comfort him. His offer of beer at the end of the scene, apparently a seductive tactic (as it is when he buys Li'l Bit martinis), can be seen as an attempt to pull Bobby over the line into adulthood, so that he will not be alone.

With Li'l Bit, Peck goes even further, trying to bump her up ahead of him in maturity, putting her into the adult role so that he can reclaim his youth. He begs her for sex; he backs away when she shows her annoyance and promises that he will wait chivalrously until such time as she might be ready. Far from being the type of predator that usually comes to mind when the subject of grown men and young girls is raised, Peck acts like he is a young boy who has every reason to expect Li'l Bit's rejection and to dream of her attention. He acts like Greg, just as Big Papa is a grown Jerome, and, in fact, their overlapping scenes responding to the mystery signals from Li'l Bit's breasts merge Peck's and Greg's personalities into one.

If the situation were just left like this, with raw psychological motivations—Li'l Bit rushing to undo her innocence as Peck struggles to regain his—it might make a convincing paradigm, but audiences could be left to appreciate such a situation intellectually, instead of falling into the world of the work. The setting cannot be ignored. It accounts for much of what makes these people and what they make of themselves. A rural setting might give Peck and Li'l Bit too much free reign to work out their own psycho-social dynamic between themselves, as occurs in countless Southern gothic stories, in which the characters' environment is more symbolic than real. An urban setting would be too real, though, making it unbelievable that they could stay the focus of one another's attention year after year. Instead, Paula Vogel has placed them in an artificial environment; they live in the suburbs, but when they need to be alone, they drive to the farms run by the Department of Agriculture, or else they go far away, to the shore, where attitudes are described as "European."

Vogel actually relies less on the physical place to tell audiences about the world these characters occupy than she does on the music that floats in the air around them. The songs that she suggests are for the most part sweet and melodic, celebrations of love and youth and the special synergy that the two create when they are blended together. Songs like "Come Back When You Grow Up, Girl," "You're Sixteen," and "Hold Me" might seem chosen to fit the specific details of the situation, but they all suppress their awareness of the danger of love. They are love songs with an edge. Pure, treacly love songs would not do for the story of Li'l Bit and Uncle Peck's illicit affair. They have a rock and roll attitude.

Rock and roll has always been known as the music of youth, especially when it was new and revolutionary in the 1950s and 1960s (when the songs that Vogel suggests were on the charts). The tension about this youth music is that it also has a reputation as the music of sexuality. As Bruce Springsteen explained in 1988 (quoted in Schultze):

When I was growing up, I got a sense of so many things from rock 'n' roll music. I got a sense of life. I got a sense of sex. But most of all, I got a sense of freedom. For me, the best rock 'n' roll always gave a sense of freedom and expanding awareness.

It is music that makes old people feel young and free and young people feel that they possess the wisdom of a hard-lived past.

Uncle Peck cannot be forgiven, but he also cannot be ignored. Vogel shows him and Li'l Bit in mutual agreement. The crime that Peck commits—and a considerable one it is—is in wanting so badly to be young again that he is willing to take the chance of causing his niece irrevocable harm. His wife drives him to it; his victim drives him to it; the music drives him to it; and, in the end, Li'l Bit comes away wiser and content: still, none of these extenuating circumstances absolves him of moral responsibility. Nor is his guilt any reason for audiences to take him lightly. He is too well written for that.

Source: David Kelly, Critical Essay on *How I Learned to Drive*, in *Drama for Students,* The Gale Group, 2002.

Critical Essay #2

Carson is an instructor of English literature and composition. In this essay, she examines both modern and classical dramatic elements of Vogel's play and its themes.

How I Learned to Drive forces its audience to confront the tough issues of parenting, gender stereotyping, incest, and child abuse. More comic than tragic, it succeeds because of Vogel's innovative handling of her subject matter. The play opens with the main character, Li'l Bit, speaking directly to the audience. "Sometimes to tell a secret, you first have to teach a lesson," she says. What follows is her stream-of-conscious monologue told in flashbacks. The action is circular, often looping back in time or jumping ahead to the future like incidents in a dream. The Li'l Bit who opens the play is a confident, self-possessed woman in her thirties, a teacher who begins by explaining the historical context of her lesson. With only her voice, she conjures up a warm summer night, thick with the smells of farm animals and the leather dashboard of the parked car. Both she and her audience are in the parking lot of the Beltsville Agricultural Farms on a warm summer evening in suburban Maryland. A hundred years before, farmers on the same spot might have sat watching Civil War battles. Tonight, however, the audience will witness a different, far more personal and secret civil war between an elevenyear-old Li'l Bit and her middle-aged uncle Peck—a war that lasts for seven years.

Minimalist staging allows Vogel to create the bland bareness of a lecture hall. Two chairs facing the audience serve as the front seats of various cars. Sitting in the chairs, Li'l Bit and Peck do not touch. Pantomime suggests sexual behavior rather than overtly acting it out. Pop music of the sixties, automobile sounds, and road signs continually remind the audience of its participation in a driving lesson. The only actors other than Li'l Bit and Uncle Peck are the flat, static characters of the threemember Greek chorus that is actually part of the staging. Composed of a male, female, and teenager, the chorus members fulfill a variety of roles in the play. As individual family members, high school girls, high school boys, and a waiter, they assume roles in various scenes, as well as observing and commenting on the action. At times they provide a background musical score of 1960s' songs sung in three-part harmony. At crucial moments, they offer comic relief between the audience's moments of insight into Li'l Bit's family background. Throughout the play, the voice of the instructor announcing the next lesson topic drives the play from scene to scene, easing the audience over what might otherwise be too bumpy a road.

Because the lesson she wishes to teach is inseparable from her secret, Vogel deliberately begins the play *in medias res* (in the middle of the action) with an already old and cynical seventeen-year-old Li'l Bit parked in a dark lane with an older married man. Their conversation indicates that they know each other well, that such occasions are regular in their lives. In exchange for his not drinking all week, she permits him to kiss her breast but draws the line at anything more. It is not until she calls him Uncle Peck and reminds him that he needs to get home to Aunt Mary that the audience realizes the relationship of the two. Since clearly she is the one in the driver's seat, the

one calling the shots, the audience tends to see her not as a victim but as a willing participant. Vogel's structuring of Li'l Bit's flashbacks throughout the play reverse that perception, ending the play with two unforgettable images: Peck's initial abuse of the eleven-year-old Li'l Bit and the soon-to-be thirty-five-year-old Li'l Bit. The former is an innocent victim; the latter, a whole woman who has learned a tough lesson, healed herself, and moved on to forgiveness.

Li'l Bit lives with her mother and maternal grandparents. Her mother's sister Mary and Mary's husband, Peck, are frequent visitors in the home. Conversation almost always centers on the discussion of men and women and sex. "In my family," Li'l Bit says, "folks tend to get nicknamed for their genitalia." Her remark provides the occasion for the first comic performance from the chorus as her mother explains how Peck, Li'l Bit, and her cousin Bobby got their names. Li'l Bit's grandmother was a child bride who still believed in Santa Claus and the Easter Bunny. She has never experienced an orgasm and does not believe such a thing exists. She warns her daughter that telling Li'l Bit the truth about sex will result in her ruination. However, Li'l Bit's mother blames her mother for not telling her the facts of life so that she could protect herself from pregnancy. The scene "A Typical Family Dinner" begins with Mother observing that Li'l Bit's bust is getting as big as her grandmother's. Li'l Bit's attempts to steer the conversation into another direction only encourage her grandfather, whose jokes perpetuate the stereotype that a female does not need an education. "She's got all the credentials she'll need on her chest," he says. His jokes only confirm what Li'l Bit is already discovering at school. To the teenage boys, she is no longer a person, only an object of sexual fantasy. Their innuendoes and jokes strip her of her self-confidence. She is embarrassed to dance, to participate in sports, or to be part of any activity that calls attention to her breasts.

Peck, Li'l Bit's uncle by marriage, is childless. He is a veteran of World War II and a Southern boy whose mama wants him to be more than his father, to amount to something in the world. A hard worker and a jack-of-all-trades, he is a gentle, kind man, but he is also an alcoholic and a pedophile. He goes back to South Carolina once or twice a year to see his mother and family but most of all to fish. His real prey, however, is his timid cousin Bobby, who cries at the baiting of a hook. He and Bobby keep secrets. He promises not to tell anyone that Bobby cries over the pain a fish might feel if Bobby won't tell anyone what happens in the tree house afterwards. He has truly loved his niece Li'l Bit all her life, ever since he first held her tiny body in his hand. She is only eleven, alone with him and completely at his mercy, when he first touches her in a sexual way. His wife Mary is an enabler who convinces herself that her husband is a good man. She complains that all the women in the neighborhood "borrow" him to shovel sidewalks, jump-start a car, or provide a ride. She knows he has "troubles" but blames them on the lack of "rap sessions" to help men talk about their troubles after the war. She also knows that something is going on between her husband and Li'l Bit but chooses to blame her niece.

Unquestionably a very modern and innovative play, *How I Learned to Drive* succeeds in great part because of its classic elements. Although it is more comic than tragic in tone, the play focuses on a series of causally related events in the life of a person. Its two

main characters, Li'l Bit and Peck, are observed and analyzed by a Greek chorus. Its purpose is to provide a catharsis for the audience. Its protagonist is superior to the people around her. Her own error in judgment results in her downfall. A sharp recognition of that error is immediate, but she does not move to reverse her actions for seven years. Li'l Bit is, after all, only eleven when her overconfidence leads her to ignore her mother's warnings and willfully persuade her mother to let her travel alone with her uncle Peck. When Peck invites her to sit on his lap and drive, she is at first surprised and then delighted by being treated as a grown-up. Peck instructs her to keep her hands on the wheel and her eyes on the road. Her delight in actually steering the car gives way when he places his hands on her breasts. She realizes that her mother's warnings were justified, that what he is doing is wrong, but she is a vulnerable child at the mercy, not only of an adult family member but also of her own innocent love for him. It is not until Peck attempts consummation of the relationship on her eighteenth birthday that Li'l Bit finally has the courage to end their relationship. For the first time in seven years, she takes back her body and her life. Peck goes home to drink himself to death. When the adult Li'l Bit drives off at the end of the play, once more able to believe in forgiveness and family, the catharsis for both Li'l Bit and the audience is complete.

Moreover, Vogel, like the ancient Greek playwrights, warns her audience of its own fallibility. She does not ignore omens that presage moral disaster but meets them head on. In "The Photo Shoot," Vogel forces her audience to confront the tougher issues of voyeurism and sexualizing of young children. In dramatizing the different perspectives of Li'l Bit and Peck, by extension she dramatizes those of every member of her audience and its larger society. At thirteen, Li'l Bit is uneasy about being in the basement alone with her uncle but responds to his direction after being reassured that her aunt Mary is not at home. He tells her that she "has a body that a twenty-year-old woman would die for," that in five years she'll have "a really professional portfolio." She is horrified by the realization that he is building a portfolio of photos to submit to *Playboy* when she becomes eighteen, but he shrugs off her response. After a heated argument, the scene ends with her choosing to accept his promise that the photos will never be seen by anyone but him, a person who has loved her all of her life. Yet even as he is making his promise, his actual photos of the thirteen-year-old Li'l Bit and those of real contemporary models are being flashed on the stage in a slide montage.

Ironically, the family member that does the most harm to Li'l Bit is also the one who teaches her how to navigate life's roadways successfully, warning her that driving like a woman "can be fatal" because women "tend to be polite" and are likely to hesitate. "Men are taught to drive with confidence—with aggression," Peck tells a fifteen-year-old Li'l Bit. "They drive defensively—always looking out for the other guy." He teaches her how to drive like a man so that she will be capable of handling whatever road disaster she encounters—even a tencar pile-up. When she checks her rearview mirror before driving off in the final scene of the play, she sees the spirit of Peck sitting in the backseat. At thirty-four, able once more to believe in family and forgiveness, she has made peace with the past.

Source: Lois Carson, Critical Essay on *How I Learned to Drive*, in *Drama for Students,* The Gale Group, 2002.

Critical Essay #3

In the following essay, Kanfer examines Vogel's treatment of sexual predation in How I Learned to Drive.

The subject of childhood sexual abuse has gone from tabu to prime time. It has been explored on television shows like *NYPD Blue* and *Law and Order,* exploited on Oprah and Sally Jessie Raphael, given hours of carefully lascivious attention on network and local news. The current best seller, The Kiss, makes much of a deeply disturbed fatherdaughter relationship, and piles up royalties in the process.

Serious theater, usually the first art form to deal with difficult topics, is behind the curve in this matter. Still, *How I Learned to Drive*, at the Vineyard Theater, more than compensates for lost time. Paula Vogel's play begins as a diverting lecture in driver education as a high school student might perceive it—tips on how to hold the wheel, how to watch for on-coming traffic, how to turn and park. All too soon, however, we learn that this is a metaphor for the life and times of a toxic family.

In the sticks of Maryland the narrator, Li'l Bit (Mary-Louise Parker), grows out while she grows up. Her burgeoning figure becomes the star attraction for Uncle Peck (David Morse), who spends hours, days, weeks, and finally years, attempting to gain his niece's confidence. Peck's interest is hardly a secret. Li'l Bit's mother (Johanna Day) is well aware of what runs beneath the surface of her brother-in-law's avid, overly polite concern. "I don't like the way he looks at you," she warns her daughter. But when Li'l Bit demurs, Mama cautions that "if anything happens, it will be *your* responsibility!"

Meantime, Grandma (Kerry O'Malley) speaks of sex as a miserable burden carried by women down through the centuries. Constantly beleaguered by Grandpa (Christopher Duva), she has never had an orgasm and doesn't believe that such a thing exists. As for her Neanderthal husband, much of his dinnertime conversation consists of tormenting Li'l Bit by commenting on the increasing size of her breasts. ("You'll need a wheelbarrow to carry them soon.") Manifestly this situation is rife with disastrous possibilities, and most of them occur. Despite the colorful characters and southern locale, however, Paula Vogel is not some Erskine Caldwell for the '90s.

How I Learned to Drive is in fact a scrupulous attempt to anatomize the drama of the abuser and the abused, and to see how such incidents occur en *famille*. To accomplish this most difficult task, the playwright tells her story in mosaic form—an accretion of small scenes leading to the truth. Sometimes it is 1969, and the girl is a mere child; at others it is her high school years, or her freshman college semester. The only person in her family ever to go on beyond high school, the restive and confused Li'l Bit finds it impossible to concentrate on her studies, drinks to excess, becomes the subject of campus gossip and innuendo, and finally gets expelled. Time moves back and forth like sand in an hourglass, the light and emphasis constantly shifting. One moment we may see the teenager squirm at a dinnertime confrontation; another moment we may be listening to her mother's moral lectures or her Uncle's continuing pleas for intimacy.

It is from the scenes of verbal seduction that the play derives its greatest strength. For Uncle Peck is not the kind of heavy-breathing seducer who populates so many Movies of the Week. He is a plausible soul with a good job and an attractive wife. "I've loved you since I could hold you in one hand," he confesses to his niece, and there is no reason to doubt his word. He does indeed love the girl—and not just carnally. His is an affection mixed with lust and insecurity and, as things progress, a fatal selfloathing. Alternately terrified and intrigued by his advances, Li'l Bit is a mixture of victim and unwitting temptress, not quite complicit in the affair—but not entirely blameless either.

If *How I Learned to Drive* focused only on this roiled relationship it would still be an outstanding effort. But Vogel exhibits more than a talent for clinical analysis. She has also composed a comedy of bad manners, with a series of memorable riffs. Watching an outstanding cast perform them is comparable to sitting in on a session of fine jazz soloists, each waiting for a turn at the microphone. In particular, "A Mother's Guide to Social Drinking," spoken by Mama to Li'l Bit, is a classic advisory to white-trash debutantes:

A lady never gets sloppy—she may, however, get tipsy and a little gay.

Never drink on an empty stomach. Avail yourself of the bread basket and generous portions of butter. Slather the butter on your bread.

Sip your drink, slowly; let the beverage linger in your mouth—interspersed with interesting, fascinating conversation. Sip, never slurp or gulp. Your glass should always be three-quarters full when his glass is empty.

Stay away from ladies' drinks: drinks like Pink Ladies, Sloe Gin Fizzes, Daiquiris, Gold Cadillacs, Long Island Iced Teas, Margaritas, Piña Coladas, Grasshoppers, White Russians, Black Russians, Red Russians, Melon Balls, Blue Balls, Blue Hawaiians, Green Arkansans, Hummingbirds, Hemorrhages and Hurricanes. In short, avoid anything with sugar or anything with an umbrella. Get your vitamin C from fruit. Don't order anything with Voodoo or Vixen in the title or sexual positions in the name like Dead Man, Screw or the Missionary. Believe me, they are lethal. I think you were conceived after one of those.

Drink, instead, like a man: straight up or on the rocks, with plenty of water in between. You're less likely to feel hung over, no matter how much you've consumed, and you can still get to work the next morning even on little or no sleep. Oh, yes, and never mix your drinks. Stay with one all night long, like the man you came in with: bourbon, gin, or tequila 'til dawn . . . If you feel you have had more than your sufficiency in liquor, do go to the ladies room—often. Pop your head out-of-doors for a refreshing breath of the night air. If you must, wet your face and head with tap water. Don't be afraid to dunk your head if necessary. A wet woman is still less conspicuous than a drunk woman.

The tragedy that lies behind these admonitions, of course, is that while Mama is an encyclopedia on the subject of boozing, she knows next to nothing about sexual predation—a lack that is to have dire consequences.

In telling a story that might easily have slipped into prurience, Vogel and director Mark Brokaw have taken a discreet, almost chaste approach. Uncle Peck lies down on a hotel bed with Li'l Bit but we never see him do anything more than put an arm around her shoulder. Indeed, the sole time his hand comes in contact with her torso is toward the end, and then only briefly.

When the seducer and his quarry converse, his voice emanates from his mouth. Yet Li'l Bit's responses are given by other members of the cast, giving the scene the quality of a dream happening to someone else.

At the epicenter of *How I Learned to Drive*, Parker is superb as a wide-eyed child, smoldering adolescent and marred adult. Morse gives such a well-rounded performance as her uncle that the play has been criticized for being overly sympathetic to an immoralist. Such carping misses the point: The kind of men who pursue the young are seldom testosterone-driven maniacs who advertise their intent. They may very well be the man next door, the uncle who dispenses driving lessons.

Moreover, in presenting what she calls a "Male, Female and Teenage Greek Chorus" (played by the supporting cast of three), Vogel shows how friends and family members can be, in the jargon of the moment, "enablers," people who either look the other way or bewilder the young with ignorant counsel. The idea of love is treated as a four-letter word in these families, and children guiltily search for it the rest of their lives.

As complicit choristers, Duva, Day and O'Malley inhabit a variety of parts, ranging from juveniles to old folk. In every role they remain the same: that is to say, superb. Jess Goldstein's deliberately tacky costumes, and Narelle Sissons' minimalist scenery lend an acute sense of time and place.

Still, as fine as these professionals are, the star of the evening remains Paula Vogel, a playwright who never gives in to the obvious. Neither her plot nor her people are predictable; in the middle of the saddest scenes she evokes a laugh, and just when a moment seems to be edging on hilarity she introduces a wistful note that leaves the smiles frozen on the audience's faces.

Vogel is a major talent waiting for a big theater to display her wares. For now, try the small off-Broadway venue that houses *How I Learned to Drive*. She won't steer you wrong.

Source: Stefan Kanfer, "On Stage: L'il Bit o' Incest," in *New Leader*, Vol. LXXX, No. 11, June 30, 1997, pp. 21-22.

Topics for Further Study

Research some of the songs that Vogel suggests could be used in staging *How I Learned to Drive* and report on what you think makes them appropriate for using in this play.

Do you think that Li'l Bit and Uncle Peck would have developed a physical relationship if he had not given her driving lessons? Explain what there is about driving lessons that would lead to such intimacy.

At one point in the play, Aunt Mary notes that "The men who fought in World War II didn't have 'rap sessions' to talk about their feelings." Do you think that Uncle Peck's service in the war led to his becoming a child molester? Study what sort of psychological counseling is available to veterans today.

Compare the role of the traditional Greek chorus to the roles that Vogel assigns to the Greek chorus in this play.

At one point, Vogel implies that Uncle Peck is trying to draw Li'l Bit's cousin Bobby into the same sort of relationship that he has with her. Is it typical for child molesters to have several relationships with children of both sexes? Write about whether Uncle Peck would be typical or the exception to the rule.

From her final speech at the end, do you think that Li'l Bit has come to grips with what happened between her and Uncle Peck, or is she trying to run away from the thought of it?

Compare and Contrast

1960s: Popular music, such as the songs referred to in the notes for this play, hints at sexual activity.

Today: Many popular songs directly refer to couples having sex.

1960s: Pedophilia is not spoken of. A child lodging a complaint about an older relative's improper conduct could expect not to be believed.

Today: Pedophilia is talked about every day on daytime television. Support groups have been established to give serious attention to charges that family members might not want to admit.

1960s-1970s: Alcohol use is considered an acceptable leisure activity. A "gentleman" is more likely to be able to buy a drink for a sixteen-year-old girl, as Peck does in the play.

Today: After noting the correlation between alcohol and automobile fatalities, most states have become strict about enforcing underage drinking laws.

1960s: America's reliance on mass transit falls to a third of what it had been during World War II, due to the availability of private automobiles and the thousands of miles of road that were built during the 1950s and 1960s.

Today: Many people are abandoning cars in urban areas and switching to mass transit because the roads are too crowded.

What Do I Read Next?

How I Learned to Drive, published in 1997, is available by itself from Dramatists Play Service, Inc. It is also bound with Vogel's follow-up play, *The Mineola Twins*, in a 1998 book called *The Mammary Plays* from Theatre Communications Group.

Vogel's earlier plays are available from Theatre Communications Group in a 1996 book called *The Baltimore Waltz and Other Plays*. In addition to the title work, this book includes *Hot 'N' Throbbin, And Baby Makes Seven, The Oldest Profession*, and *Desdemona.*

Paula Vogel has said in interviews that this play is an attempt to look at *Lolita* from the other side. The 1954 novel *Lolita*, by Vladimir Nabakov, has become a modern classic. It is about a middle-aged European man who becomes obsessed with a twelve-year-old American girl. The book is currently available in several editions, including Vintage Press's *The Annotated Lolita*, with notes by Alfred Appel, published in 1991.

Moises Kaufman's play *Gross Indecency: The Three Trials of Oscar Wilde* concerns Wilde's relationship with a young man. It was performed off-Broadway at the same time as *How I Learned to Drive*, and several reviewers noted similar themes. The play is available in a 1998 paperback edition from Vintage Press.

The Kiss, by Kathryn Harrison, is a memoir about her four-year affair with her father, whom she did not meet until she was twenty. Published by Bard Press in 1998, it covers much of the same psychological ground as the play.

Finalists for the Pulitzer Prize for drama in the year that this play won were *Freedomland* by Amy Freed (published by Dramatists Play Service, 1999), and *Three Days of Rain* by Richard Greenberg (Dramatists Play Service, 1998).

The book *Plays and Playwrights for the New Millenium* contains eight experimental plays that ran in off-off-Broadway theaters at the end of the 1990s. It includes works by up-and-coming authors, including Edmund De Santis, Lynn Marie Macy, and C. J. Hopkins. This collection was edited by Martin Denton and published in 2000 by New York Theater Experience, Inc.

The comic novel *Roger Fishbite*, by Emily Prager, concerns a twelve-year-old-girl's relationship with a man who rents a room in her mother's house, leading to mayhem and murder. Told from the girl's point of view, this 1999 book was published by Random House.

Further Study

Armstrong, Louise, *Rocking the Cradle of Sexual Politics,* Addison-Wesley, 1994.

Armstrong, whose book *Kiss Daddy Goodnight* opened a new era of open talk about pedophilia, discusses how the culture's view of offenses against children changed from the 1970s to the 1990s.

Holtzman, Linda, *Media Messages: What Film, Television and Popular Music Teach Us about Race, Class, Gender, and Sexual Orientation,* M. E. Sharpe, 2000.

Holtzman, a former chair of the Department of Communications at Webster University, dissects the ways in which people like Li'l Bit have derived their selfimages from mass culture throughout the years.

Kincaid, James, *Erotic Innocence: The Culture of Child Molesting,* Duke University Press, 1998.

Kincaid's premise is that Western culture, while pretending to protect children from the complexity of sex, actually makes them sexual objects by making their purity an erotic trait.

Marsh, Peter, and Peter Collett, *Driving Passion: The Psychology of the Car,* Faber and Faber, 1987.

This book examines some of the attitudes about driving, including feelings of power and control and freedom, that Li'l Bit discusses in the play.

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Drama for Students (DfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, DfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of DfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of DfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in DfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by DfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

DfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Drama for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the DfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the DfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Drama for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Drama for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from DfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Drama for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from DfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Drama for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of DfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Drama for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of DfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Drama for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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