

**Driving in Today's World: Putting Woman behind the Wheel and in Control
in Paula Vogel's *How I Learned to Drive***
--Heather Lucas

Introduction—"Fastening Safety Belts"

Paula Vogel's *How I Learned to Drive* is a coming-of-age story told episodically and out of chronological order. The playwriting, plot structure, setting, and character names, illuminate Vogel's feminist ideology. The characters of the play are defined by their genitalia—Big Papa, Uncle Peck, and of course, Lil' Bit; feminism, by "normative standards," wishes to deny this sexual hegemony. However, through focusing on the life of Lil' Bit, Vogel simultaneously embraces the tenets on which feminism was built, while pushing back against some of those very same principles. In *How I Learned to Drive*, with the help of Judith Butler, I will reveal how Vogel revalues the female experience by raising questions of male/female differences through biology and social construction. In addition, I will explore the feminist, gender, and semiotic theories of Hélène Cixous, Simone de Beauvoir, Sue-Ellen Case, and Marvin Carlson. In so doing I hope to uncover that Lil' Bit is not a woman entirely oppressed, but rather a woman with the power in her relationships.

How I Learned to Drive premiered at the Vineyard Theatre in February of 1997, starring Mary-Louise Parker as Li'l Bit, David Morse as Uncle Peck, and Johanna Day, Kerry O'Malley and Michael Showalter as the Greek Chorus members. Vogel's play centers on the relationship between Li'l Bit and Uncle Peck, which takes place over seven years of Li'l Bit's adolescence, from ages 11 to 18. In spite of the severe implications of such a socially unacceptable relationship, Vogel weaves extremely comedic moments into an otherwise serious storyline. In an introduction to an interview with Paula Vogel, theatre studies scholar David Savran writes in his book, *The Playwright's Voice*,

...all her plays endeavor to stage the impossible. They defy traditional theatre logic, subtly calling conventions into question or, in some cases, pushing them well past their limits... For Vogel, a play is never simply a politely dramatized fiction, it is always a meditation on the theatre itself—on role-playing, on the socially sanctioned scripts from which characters diverge at their peril, and on a theatrical tradition that has punished women who don't remain quiet, passive and demure.¹

How I Learned to Drive maneuvers around the expected condemnation of Li'l Bit and Uncle Peck's relationship, and rather focuses on the basic humanity that intrinsically binds these two characters. Using a variety of techniques—a scattered chronology based on simultaneously reassuring and discomfiting memories, three actors who play many characters affecting Li'l Bit's life, and popular music of the 1960s—Vogel manages to tap into the dichotic mood of the era: both romantic and sexist. With such a conflicting message, it isn't any wonder that Li'l Bit turns to the outstretched arms of a flawed relationship, basking in the veneration of an older man.

Paula Vogel creates her own inscription of the female body, language, and text—her own 'écriture feminine,' with *How I Learned to Drive*. The play tells the story of Li'l Bit's upbringing, in reverse; we watch her relationship with Uncle Peck end before we

see it begin, and we see the effects of that relationship before we see the cause. Vogel's unkempt structure makes it incredibly difficult for the audience to pass judgment on a messy situation as quickly—or tidily—as we would like. Li'l Bit and Uncle Peck's relationship is the ultimate demonstration of Vogel's brand of feminism: it brazenly upends all expectations.

Part I: “Obeying the Rules of the Road”

Semiotics studies the role signs play in our lives. For Vogel, semiotics is a means of exploring and redefining biology and social constructs. Signs, both literal and figurative, litter *How I Learned to Drive*, and amass to create the roadmap of Li'l Bit's life. Marvin Carlson writes in his book, *Theatre Semiotics: Signs of Life* that, “the interpretation of signs is of course culturally generated, but so is the recognition of signs as signs, and this semiotic dimension seems impossible to avoid in any performance in our culture recognized as a performance by an audience.”ⁱⁱ Similarly, in her book, *Feminism and Theatre*, Sue-Ellen Case posits, “the norms of culture assign meaning to the sign.”ⁱⁱⁱ Vogel takes the culturally recognized meaning of certain signs, flips, blurs, and mingles those meanings, and creates something entirely new for herself, her characters, and her audiences.

One of the most telling signs is the use of Greek chorus members for multiple roles rather than individual characters. This convention not only separates Li'l Bit and Uncle Peck from the “rest of the world,” but it also harkens back to the purposes of a traditional Greek chorus: providing background and summary information for the audience; representing the general population; but most importantly, expressing to the audience the main characters' hidden fears and secrets, while providing those characters with much needed insight. Vogel most relies on the Greek Chorus for this last purpose.

Although for much of the play, the chorus provides snippets from driving lessons—hinting to the emotional subtext of the characters—their most active and actualized moment of describing Li'l Bit's hidden fears and secrets comes near the end of the play. Li'l Bit and Uncle Peck are in a hotel room in celebration of her eighteenth birthday when the Greek Chorus appears. Through this interaction, the Greek chorus aids in verbalizing all of the things Li'l Bit is feeling for Uncle Peck, but cannot—and perhaps, should not—express. This exchange between all of the characters in the play demonstrates key issues that will continue to plague Li'l Bit long into her adult life.

Judith Butler's book, *Bodies that Matter*, seeks to clarify readings and *misreading* of gender performativity, which view the enactment of sex and gender as a daily choice. She writes,

Once ‘sex’ itself is understood in its normativity, the materiality of the body will not be thinkable apart from the materialization of that regulatory form. ‘Sex’ is, thus, not simply what one has, or a static description of what one is: it will be one of the norms by which the ‘one’ becomes viable at all, that which qualifies a body for life within the domain of cultural intelligibility.^{iv}

The family's way of naming fellow relatives becomes the way in which those members are categorized within the family. It becomes their identities: who they are within the family, but also within the greater society.

Marvin Carlson claims that, “the names given to characters potentially provide a powerful communicative device for the dramatist seeking to orient his audience as quickly as possible in his fictive world.”^v There is no better way than through character names that Vogel can demonstrate to her readers Li'l Bit's world of gender signifiers and women's subjectivity. Carlson continues,

Through these codes audiences have traditionally been provided with information not only about the character who bears a particular name, but also about his actantial role in a total dramatic structure, about his place in a pattern of relationships, and about intertextual relations between the drama in which he appears and other drama of the same or contrasting genres.^{vi}

Vogel magnificently uses the semiotics of names to delineate not only a character's function in Li'l Bit's family, but also in the grand schema—the world beyond Li'l Bit's family—the world of the audience. It is in this way that she continues the exploration of biological and social constructs.

Part of Vogel's push towards a new form of feminism is the way in which Li'l Bit's familial situation leaves few questions as to how a relationship between Uncle Peck and Li'l Bit could occur. Hers is a family bound by obsolete philosophies, haunted by drinking, and dominated by sexual mistakes, anger and resentment. Li'l Bit's family defines itself by sex.

Li'l Bit: In most families, relatives get names like “Junior,” or “Brother,” or “Bubba.” In my family, if we call someone “Big Papa,” it's not because he's tall. In my family, folks tend to get nicknamed for their genitalia. Uncle Peck, for example. My mama's adage was “the titless wonder,” and my cousin Bobby got branded for life as “B.B.”

Li'l Bit:

For blue balls.

Female Greek Chorus: (*As Mother*) And of course, we were so excited to have a baby girl that when the nurse brought you in and said, “It's a girl! It's a baby girl!” I just had to see for myself. So we whipped your diapers down and parted your chubby little legs—and right between your legs there was—

Peck:

Just a little bit.

Greek Chorus:

For blue balls.

Female Greek Chorus:

Just a little bit.^{vii}

It comes as no surprise that in a family where Li'l Bit's physical development ruthlessly and unabashedly becomes the topic of conversation, she would seek solace in Uncle Peck, the one person who refuses to discuss her anatomy at the dinner table. Vogel uses semiotics in an attempt to create a way in which the audience should view Li'l Bit's world. She establishes this world only to have Li'l Bit push against its constraints at every turn of the road.

In his essay, “Semiotics and Its Heritage,” Marvin Carlson discusses the history of usage of semiotics in the theatre. Carlson asserts that the “cultural placement of the sign also called attention to the imprint of ideology upon signification, the realization that theatrical signs produced meaning according to the values, beliefs, and ways of seeing operating in their specific performance culture.”^{viii} This notion was extended to feminist

theatre theory by Case, who claimed that semiotics could be used as a tool for revealing the “covert cultural beliefs embedded in communication.”^{ix} Vogel revels in the idea of uncovering our covert beliefs, and then reburying a blurred version of said beliefs in order to create something entirely new.

Vogel fights against Li'l Bit's demarcation as “other” because of her genitalia. The description of Li'l Bit's physical appearance as “well-endowed,” allows her to step into the world ruled by masculine sexual prowess, and out of her place of inferiority.^x Li'l Bit embraces her body, thereby taking—reclaiming—control of her life. Sue- Ellen Case continues in her book, “feminist semiotic theory has attempted to describe and deconstruct this sign for ‘woman’, in order to distinguish biology from culture and experience from ideology.”^{xi} Through Li'l Bit, Vogel is able to demonstrate this dissociation of biology and culture, experience from ideology.

Part II: “Handling Aggressive Drivers”

Simone de Beauvoir posits that women want what they themselves do not have. In her book, *The Second Sex*, she writes,

Woman, it is said, envies man's penis and desires to castrate him, but the infantile desire for the penis only has importance in the woman's life if she experiences her femininity as a mutilation and it is only to the extent that the penis embodies all the privileges of virility that she wishes to appropriate the male organ for herself.^{xii}

By refusing to let Li'l Bit find her femininity as a mutation, Vogel strikes against de Beauvoir's view of feminism. Therefore, Li'l Bit is more than capable, anxious even, of thrusting against the notion that to have a penis is to have the power.

The Cambridge Companion to Simone de Beauvoir continues,

Man's need to be esteemed for his sexual and erotic power lies at the heart of his relation with woman, and here, too, as Beauvoir illustrates throughout *The Second Sex*, woman is called on to admire what she herself lacks. The activity and independence of the male body and of masculine sexuality as contrasted with the passivity and immanence of woman, set the terms of a relationship in which woman finds traits to admire in man that he cannot admire in her.^{xiii}

Accordingly, the men of Li'l Bit's family (Big Papa, Uncle Peck, and even B.B) demonstrate de Beauvoir's point: they are so named for the genitalia that gives them sexual prowess and dominance over women; genitalia that any good woman would want her husband to possess. The opposite can be said for the nicknames of the women (Li'l Bit and the “titless wonder”), who are so diminutively named for their lack in genitalia, and are treated by men in a manner seemingly deserved because of their genitalia's inferiority.

Simone de Beauvoir adds in *The Second Sex*, the man “takes pride in his sexuality only to the extent that it is a means of appropriation of the Other: and this dream of possession only ends in failure.”^{xiv} Similarly, in an excerpt from her essay entitled “Sorties,” Hélène Cixous claims that society is made for men to be constantly proving themselves. She writes,

At first what *he* wants, whether on the level of cultural or of personal exchanges, whether it is a question of capital or of affectivity (or of love, of *jouissance*) – is that he gain more masculinity: plus-value of virility, authority, power, money, or pleasure, all of which reinforce his phallogentric narcissism at the same time.^{xv}

The section entitled “Idling in Neutral Gear: On Men, Sex and Women: Part I,” speaks to Cixous’ claim that men live a phallogentric narcissistic life.

Female Greek Chorus: (*As Mother.*) Men only want one thing.

Li'l Bit: (*Wide-eyed.*) But what? What is it they want?

Female Greek Chorus: (*As Mother.*) And once they have it, they lose all interest. So Don't Give It to Them.^{xvi}

In the eyes of the Mother, once men obtain what it is they want—sex—they move on to conquering the next thing. In a play where the characters are named for their genitalia, it comes as no surprise that the men of the world—both Big Papa and Uncle Peck—are men seeking virility, authority and pleasure, so achieved through the sexual dominance of the women in their lives.

At numerous times in the play, we are privy to moments when Li'l Bit fights against the “typical female experience” of being the weaker, lesser sex. In opposition to this notion of women as weaker, she asserts power over her family, over Uncle Peck, over a total stranger. The most striking thing that all of these instances have in common, is that Li'l Bit—a female—is asserting power over men. Early in the play, Li'l Bit recounts the moment she defended her choice to go to college to Big Papa.

Male Greek Chorus: (*As Grandfather.*) What does she need a college degree for? She's got all the credentials she'll need on her chest—

Li'l Bit: —Maybe I want to learn things. Read. Rise above my cracker background—

Peck: —Whoa, now, Li'l Bit—

Male Greek Chorus: (*As Grandfather.*) What kind of things do you want to read?

Li'l Bit: There's a whole semester course, for example, on Shakespeare— (*Male Greek Chorus, as Grandfather, laughs until he weeps.*)

Male Greek Chorus: (*As Grandfather.*) Shakespeare. That's a good one. Shakespeare is really going to help you in life.

Peck: I think it's wonderful. And on scholarship!

Male Greek Chorus: (*As Grandfather.*) How is Shakespeare going to help her lie on her back in the dark? (*Li'l Bit is on her feet.*)

Li'l Bit: You're getting old, Big Papa. You are going to die—very very soon. Maybe even *tonight*. And when you get to heaven, God's going to be a beautiful black woman in a long white robe. She's gonna look at your chart and say: Uh-uh. Fornication. Dog-ugly mean with blood relatives. Oh. Uh-uh. Voted for George Wallace. Well, one last chance: If you can name the play, all will be forgiven. And then she'll quote: “The quality of mercy is not strained.” Your answer? Oh, too

bad—*Merchant of Venice*: Act IV, Scene iii. And then she'll send your ass to fry in hell with all the other crackers. Excuse me, please.^{xvii}

Li'l Bit stands up for herself against Big Papa, who believes a woman's place is not in an institution of learning, but rather in the home, at the beck and call of the man, barefoot and pregnant.

Butler writes in *Bodies that Matter* about the separation of the phallus from the penis, the phallus as a symbol. She develops the idea of a lesbian phallus, giving women power men tend to associate with having a penis, thereby disrupting what it means to "have" or to "be" the phallus. By locating the phallus with the feminine (more precisely, the lesbian) Butler suggests an extreme change in hegemonic and heterosexual social structures. She states that, "precisely *because* it is an idealization, one which no body can adequately approximate, the phallus is a transferable phantasm, and its naturalized link to masculine morphology can be called into question through an aggressive reterritorialization."^{xviii} The "reterritorialization" of which Butler speaks is the appropriation of a woman—lesbian specifically—of the phallus, subverting patriarchal power. She writes,

The displaceability of the phallus, its capacity to symbolize in relation to other body parts or other body-like things, opens the way for the lesbian phallus, an otherwise contradictory formulation. And here it should be clear that the lesbian phallus crosses the orders of *having* and *being*, it both wields the threat of castration (which is in that sense a mode of "being" the phallus, as women "are") and suffers from castration anxiety (and so is said "to have" the phallus, and to fear its loss).^{xix}

This disruption of heterosexual norms allows anyone (women, lesbians, homosexuals) to "have" the phallus, giving women power denied to them by a heterosexual patriarchy.

The symbol of the phallus gives a woman the same feeling of power that the physical penis gives a man. Consequently, the fear of losing that power is also the same. In a moment of sheer exertion of power and control, a moment of having and being the phallus, Li'l Bit relates meeting a stranger on a bus, and the subsequent sexual encounter.

Li'l Bit: I felt his "interest" quicken. Five steps ahead of the hopes in his head, I slowed down, waited, pretended surprise, acted at listening, all the while knowing we would get off the bus, he would just then seem to think to ask me to dinner, he would chivalrously insist on walking me home, he would continue to converse in the street until I would casually invite him up to my room—and—I was only into the second moment of conversation and I could see the whole evening before me. And dramaturgically speaking, after the faltering and slightly comical "first act," there was the very briefest of intermissions, and an extremely capable and forceful and *sustained* second act.^{xx}

Li'l Bit assumed control of the situation at the very beginning, and never relinquished it. Her control over the stranger from the bus directly opposes everything Big Papa deemed

“womanly.” True, the end goal was Li'l Bit on her back, but she put herself there, not the stranger. She goes on to say,

Li'l Bit: And after the second act climax and a gentle denouement—before the post-play discussion—I lay on my back in the dark and I thought about you, Uncle Peck. Oh. Oh—this is the allure. Being older. Being the first. Being the translator, the teacher, the epicure, the already jaded. This is how the giver gets taken.^{xxi}

Li'l Bit's assumption of power over this stranger from the bus opens to her a world of control and assertion not yet understood. It is in this moment that she realizes the sway of being the one with power in a relationship; she recognizes, and to a certain degree, accepts this commonality with Uncle Peck.

This however, is not the only instance of Li'l Bit's sexual authority and dominance. One of the first times Li'l Bit says 'no' to Uncle Peck comes after the dinner they had for passing the driving test. Uncle Peck and Li'l Bit are in the car after Li'l Bit has had too much to drink, but she is cognizant enough to dissuade her uncle.

Li'l Bit: What are we doing?

Peck: We're just going to sit here until your tummy settles down.

Li'l Bit: It's such nice upholst'ry—

Peck: Think you can go for a ride, now?

Li'l Bit: Where are you taking me?

Peck: Home.

Li'l Bit: You're not taking me—upstairs? There's no room at the inn? (*Li'l Bit giggles.*)

Peck: Do you want to go upstairs? (*Li'l Bit doesn't answer.*) Or home?

Li'l Bit: —This isn't right, Uncle Peck.

Peck: What isn't right?

Li'l Bit: What we're doing. It's wrong. It's very wrong.

Peck: What are we doing? (*Li'l Bit does not answer.*) We're just going out to dinner.

Li'l Bit: You know. It's not nice to Aunt Mary.^{xxii}

In this instance, a drunk, sixteen-year-old Li'l Bit has enough mental acuity to not only a) put the kibosh on any potential sexual advances, but also to b) remind Uncle Peck of the wrongness of the situation by mentioning Aunt Mary. What better way is there to kill the sexual tension than by mentioning the man's wife?

Butler continues in *Bodies that Matter*, “insofar as women might be said to “have” the phallus and fear its loss (and there is no reason why that could not be true in both lesbian and heterosexual exchange, raising the question of an implicit heterosexuality in the former, and homosexuality in the latter), they may be driven by castration anxiety.”^{xxiii} This anxiety is clearest in the final exchange between Li'l Bit and Uncle Peck—the hotel room on her eighteenth birthday. Throughout the moments leading up to the climax of this scene, Li'l Bit is dangerously close to succumbing to Uncle Peck, until she finally breaks free.

Li'l Bit: —No. (*Peck, in a rush, trembling, gets something out of his pocket.*)

Peck: I'm forty-five. That's not old for a man. And I haven't been able to do anything else but think of you. I can't concentrate on my work—Li'l Bit. You've got to—I want you to think about what I am about to ask you.

Li'l Bit: I'm listening. (*Peck opens a small ring box.*)

Peck: I want you to be my wife.

Li'l Bit: This isn't happening.

Peck: I'll tell Mary I want a divorce. We're not blood-related. It would be legal—

Li'l Bit: —What have you been thinking! You are married to my aunt, Uncle Peck. She's my family. You have—you have gone way over the line. Family is family. (*Quickly Li'l Bit flies through the room, gets her coat.*) I'm leaving. Now. I am not seeing you. Again. (*Peck lies down on the bed for a moment, trying to absorb the terrible news. For a moment, he almost curls into a fetal position.*) I'm not coming home for Christmas. You should go home to Aunt Mary. Go home now, Uncle Peck.^{xxiv}

Li'l Bit's refusal of Peck marks the ultimate severing of their relationship. In *Bodies that Matter*, Butler goes on to write that the, "figure of excessive phallicism, typified by the phallic mother, is devouring and destructive, the negative fate of the phallus when attached to the feminine position. Significant in its misogyny, this construction suggests that 'having the phallus' is much more destructive as a feminine operation than as a masculine one."^{xxv} Li'l Bit's "excessive phallicism," her fear of losing power, losing grip, of giving in to Uncle Peck—her fear of castration—leads Li'l Bit to deny not only her uncle for years to come, but the rest of her family as well.

Part III: "Maneuvering in Slippery Conditions"

Moving between Li'l Bit's memory—attacking harmoniously and uncompromisingly as memories do—it's hard to tell who is the more skilled seducer: Li'l Bit or Uncle Peck. Vogel doesn't place full blame on any one person; instead, she spreads it among all: Uncle Peck, Li'l Bit's other family members, and even Li'l Bit herself. Vogel's refusal to declare, with any certainty, a guilty party, is simply another way in which she pushes beyond normative standards to create her own form of feminism. Aunt Mary says of Peck and of Li'l Bit,

Female Greek Chorus: (*As Aunt Mary.*) I know he has his troubles. And we don't talk about them. I wonder, sometimes, what happened to him during the war. The men who fought World War II didn't have "rap sessions" to talk about their feelings. Men in his generation were expected to be quiet about it and get on with their lives. And sometimes I can feel him just fighting the trouble—whatever has burrowed deeper than the scar tissue—and we don't talk about it.

(*Sharply.*) I'm not a fool. I know what's going on. I wish you could feel how hard Peck fights against it—he's swimming against the tide, and what he needs is to see me on the shore, believing in his, knowing he won't go under, he won't give up—

And I want to say this about my niece. 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. Yet another one who's borrowing my husband until it doesn't suit her anymore.

Well. I'm counting the days until she goes away to school. And she manipulates someone else. And then he'll come back again, and sit in the kitchen while I bake, or beside me on the sofa when I sew in the evenings. I'm a very patient woman. But I'd like my husband back.^{xxvi}

Aunt Mary recognizes that something in Peck draws him to her niece, but she also refuses to let Li'l Bit off the hook. In much the same way, Li'l Bit's mother is cognizant that Uncle Peck's treatment of Li'l Bit isn't "normal."

Female Greek Chorus: (*As Mother.*) It is out of the question. End of discussion.

Li'l Bit: But why?

Female Greek Chorus: (*As Mother.*) Li'l Bit—we are not discussing this. I said no.

Li'l Bit: But I could spend an extra week at the beach! You're not telling me why!

Female Greek Chorus: (*As Mother.*) Your uncle pays entirely too much attention to you.

Li'l Bit: He listens to me when I talk. And—and he talks to me. He teaches me about things. Mama—he knows an awful lot.

Female Greek Chorus: (*As Mother.*) He's a small town hick who's learned how to mix drinks from Hugh Heffner.

Li'l Bit: Who's Hugh Hefner? (*beat.*)

Female Greek Chorus: (*As Mother.*) I am not letting an eleven-year-old girl spend seven hours alone in a car with a man...I don't like the way your uncle looks at you.^{xxvii}

Much like her sister, Li'l Bit's mother knows that although there is something amiss with Peck, there is also to some extent, something not entirely right with Li'l Bit's behavior towards her uncle either. Li'l Bit's mother goes on to blame Li'l Bit for anything that may happen between the two on their way home from the beach.

Li'l Bit: For god's sake, mother! Just because you've gone through a bad time with my father—you think every man is evil!

Female Greek Chorus: (*As Mother.*) Oh no, Li'l Bit—not all men...We...we just haven't been very lucky with the men in our family.

Li'l Bit: Just because you lost your husband—I still deserve a chance at having a father! Someone! A man who will look out for me! Don't I get a chance?

Female Greek Chorus: (*As Mother.*) I will feel terrible if something happens.

Li'l Bit: Mother! It's in your head! Nothing will happen! I can take care of myself. And I can certainly handle uncle Peck.

Female Greek Chorus: (*As Mother.*) All right. But I'm warning you—if anything happens, I hold you responsible.^{xxviii}

These two passages demonstrate Vogel's insistence on blurring the blame. Aunt Mary and Li'l Bit's mother recognize something askew in Uncle Peck, but neither do anything

about it; rather, they proceed to blame Li'l Bit. By holding multiple people at fault, Vogel is making it apparent that it is impossible to blame just one person for the incidents of those seven years of Li'l Bit's life.

Conclusion: "Objects in Mirror are Closer than They Appear"

How I Learned to Drive draws into focus the signification of what it means to be in the driver's seat, the passenger's seat, and the backseat, and how the semiotics of each work against one another. For much of the play, we see Li'l Bit in the passenger seat both literally and figuratively. She is almost always a passenger with Uncle Peck, as well as the rest of her family; she is a passenger in her own life.

While it is true that Li'l Bit is in the driver's seat when everything begins with Uncle Peck, the distinguishing feature of that instance is Peck in the seat with her. Although the penultimate scene of the play, it manages to illuminate more brightly what has come before. Li'l Bit says at the conclusion of that scene, "That was the last day I lived in my body. I retreated above the neck, and I've lived inside the 'fire' in my head ever since."^{xxix} In *Gender Trouble*, Butler writes, "Officially, Beauvoir contends that the female body is marked within masculine discourse, whereby the masculine body, in its conflation with the universal remains unmarked."^{xxx} Li'l Bit proceeds from this point on to allow others to use her body as a map for sex and sexuality without ever giving directions herself, losing her own agency. This was the moment—although the "driver"—that Li'l Bit became the passenger for years to come.

It isn't until the concluding scene of the play that we see Li'l Bit totally and utterly in the driver's seat—of her car, but more importantly, of her life. Li'l Bit professes, "And before you know it, I'll be thirty-five. That's getting up there for a woman. And I find myself believing in things that a younger self vowed never to believe in. Things like family and forgiveness."^{xxxi} Li'l Bit is finally able to heed the advice her uncle gave her when she was first learning to drive.

Peck: There's something about driving—when you're in control of the car, just you and the machine and the road—that nobody can take from you. A power. I feel more myself in my car than anywhere else. And that's what I want to give to you.

There's a lot of assholes out there. Crazy men, arrogant idiots, drunks, angry kids, geezers who are blind—and you have to be ready for them. I want to teach you to drive like a man.

Li'l Bit: What does that mean?

Peck: Men are taught to drive with confidence—with aggression. The road belongs to them. They drive defensively—always looking out for the other guy. Women tend to be polite—to hesitate. And that can be fatal.^{xxxii}

Li'l Bit finally gives up the fire in her head, and starts living for the fire in her belly, just like her uncle. She accepts driving like a man. She is finally able to take control of her life. She is finally able to become the driver.

Li'l Bit: I adjust my seat. Fasten my seat belt. Then I check the right side mirror—check the left side. (*She does.*) Finally, I adjust the rearview mirror. (*As Li'l Bit adjusts the rearview mirror, a faint light strikes the spirit of Uncle Peck,*

who is sitting in the back seat of the car. She sees him in the mirror. She smiles at him, and he nods at her. They are happy to be going for a long drive together. Li'l Bit slips the car into first gear; to the audience.) And then—I floor it. ^{xxxiii}

This closing speech and image of the play highlights Li'l Bit's newfound control. Not only do we finally see her in the driver's seat, in complete control, but we also see Uncle Peck in the backseat of the car, indicative of the control Li'l Bit has seized over their relationship and her life—a control that doesn't force her to forget Peck. When Li'l Bit is in the driver's seat, she is not pressed to “get over” Uncle Peck and what they did together, but rather to embrace him by becoming him—a notion that strikes back against feminism. In the introduction to *The Playwright's Voice*, David Savran writes,

As a token of memory, the ghost is intensely personalized, emanating from and materializing characters' fears and desires. For like Uncle Peck, the ghost returns almost ritualistically to tell characters (and audiences) what they know but would rather forget...Thus, *How I Learned to Drive* is about learning that what has been lost can never be struck from one's memory, that Li'l Bit must live always with the unexpectedly comforting reflection of Uncle Peck in her rearview mirror. It demonstrates that Peck, like all ghosts, is also her own reflection, a figure who has taken root inside her and yet stands apart, watching her from a distance. ^{xxxiv}

In those final moments of the play, Li'l Bit sees the spirit of Uncle Peck, and smiles. His reflection suggests that it does not matter where his niece goes, he will follow. In that moment, Vogel manages to illuminate a ghostly presence that will always soothe and unsettle Li'l Bit—a duality the audience acutely feels in regards to the play itself.

Ann Pellegrini quotes Savran in her article, “Staging Sexual Injury: *How I Learned to Drive*,” as posturing that for Vogel, “feminism means being politically incorrect. It means avoiding the easy answer—that isn't really an answer at all—in favor of posing the question in the right way. It means refusing to construct an exemplary feminist hero.” ^{xxxv} Likewise, in his book, Savran goes on to say,

Vogel's women are themselves playwrights who attempt to write their way out of difficult situations and script more creative, bountiful lives. Like Vogel herself, they are committed to redressing a history of oppression by rewriting the scenes they have been handed. So by turning her female characters into playwrights of no mean accomplishments, she suggests that although a triumphal feminist theatre seems an impossibility in our time, one may nonetheless endeavor to stage that impossibility, along with the glittering promises it holds. ^{xxxvi}

Simone de Beauvoir writes that, “if a woman seems to be the unessential which never becomes the essential, it is because she herself fails to bring about this change.” ^{xxxvii} Vogel's feminism takes aim at commonly received ideas, such as allowing women to become complacent with being unessential, as well as the notion of being a victim of sexual abuse. Not only is Li'l Bit able to accept and come to terms with what happened to her, but she is also able to move on, and never lose affection for Uncle Peck. In this moment, Li'l Bit reclaims her body, reclaims her life, reclaims her agency. She is in the driver's seat of her life, and she is ready to floor it.

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- ⁱ Savran, David. "The Haunted Stage." Introduction. *The Playwright's Voice: American Dramatists on Memory, Writing, and the Politics of Culture*. New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1999. Print. 236.
- ⁱⁱ Carlson, Marvin A. "Semiotics and Nonsemiotics of Performance." *Theatre Semiotics: Signs of Life*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1990. 3-10. Print. 7-8.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Case, Sue-Ellen. *Feminism and Theatre*. New York: Palgrave MacMillian, 2008. Print. 116-7.
- ^{iv} Butler, Judith. *Bodies That Matter: on the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* New York: Routledge, 1993. Print. 2.
- ^v Carlson, Marvin A. "The Semiotics of Character Names in the Drama." *Theatre Semiotics: Signs of Life*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1990. 26-39. Print.
- ^{vi} Carlson, Marvin A. "The Semiotics of Character Names in the Drama." *Theatre Semiotics: Signs of Life*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1990. 26-39. Print.
- ^{vii} Vogel, 3.
- ^{viii} Carlson, Marvin A. "Semiotics and Nonsemiotics of Performance." *Theatre Semiotics: Signs of Life*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1990. 3-10. Print.
- ^{ix} Reinelt, Janelle G., and Joseph R. Roach. "Semiotics and Its Heritage." *Critical Theory and Performance*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 2007. 13+. Print.
- ^x Vogel, 9.
- ^{xi} Case, Sue-Ellen. *Feminism and Theatre*. New York: Palgrave MacMillian, 2008. Print. 118.
- ^{xii} Beauvoir, Simone De. *The Second Sex*;. New York: Knopf, 1953. Print. 753.
- ^{xiii} Card, Claudia. *The Cambridge Companion to Simone De Beauvoir*. Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge UP, 2003. Print, 156.
- ^{xiv} Beauvoir, Simone De. *The Second Sex*;. New York: Knopf, 1953. Print. 181.
- ^{xv} Cixous, Hélène, Susan Sellers, and Jacques Derrida. "The Newly Born Woman." *The Hélène Cixous Reader*. London: Routledge, 1994. 44. Print
- ^{xvi} Vogel. 25-6.
- ^{xvii} Vogel 14-5.
- ^{xviii} Butler, 86.
- ^{xix} Butler, 84.
- ^{xx} Vogel, 29.
- ^{xxixxi} Vogel, 29.
- ^{xxii} Vogel, 22-3.
- ^{xxiii} Butler, 85.
- ^{xxiv} Vogel, 54.
- ^{xxv} Butler, 103.
- ^{xxvi} Vogel, 44-5.
- ^{xxvii} Vogel 55-6.
- ^{xxviii} Vogel, 56.
- ^{xxix} Vogel, 58.
- ^{xxx} Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge, 1990. Print. 12.
- ^{xxxii} Vogel, 58.
- ^{xxxiii} Vogel, 34-5.
- ^{xxxiii} Vogel, 58.
- ^{xxxiv} Savran, David. *The Playwright's Voice: American Dramatists on Memory, Writing, and the Politics of Culture*. New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1999. Print. xviii-xix.
- ^{xxxv} Reinelt, Janelle G., and Joseph R. Roach. "Staging Sexual Injury: How I Learned to Drive." *Critical Theory and Performance*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 2007. 413+. Print.
- ^{xxxvi} Savran, David. "The Haunted Stage." Introduction. *The Playwright's Voice: American Dramatists on Memory, Writing, and the Politics of Culture*. New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1999. Print. 265-6.
- ^{xxxvii} "The Second Sex." *A Critical and Cultural Theory Reader*. Ed. Antony Easthope and Kate McGowan. Toronto: University of Toronto, 2004. 51-54. Print. 53.

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