How I Learned to Drive

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF PAULA VOGEL

Paula Vogel was born in Washington, D.C. in 1951, the daughter of an advertising executive and postal secretary. She studied at Bryn Mar, Catholic University, and Cornell. Her first play, *Meg*, was produced in 1977, while she was still at college. In 1988, Vogel's brother died from AIDS; out of tribute, Vogel sends him "a message" in each of her plays. In 1992, Vogel had her major breakthrough with *The Baltimore Waltz*, a play based on her real-life experiences with her brother which deals with the AIDS pandemic. *How I Learned to Drive*, first produced in 1997, made an even bigger splash, tackling often taboo issues such as incest, pedophilia, and sexual abuse. The play was critically lauded and won numerous awards, including the Pulitzer Prize (making her the first openly gay woman to win the award). For many years Vogel has worked in academic positions at universities, the most recent of these being Yale. Since 2008, The Vineyard theater in New York has granted the Paula Vogel Playwriting Award annually to a gifted early-career playwright to write and develop new work.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

How I Learned to Drive investigates issues of family, abuse, incest, and pedophilia. The play mostly consists of Li'l Bit's flashbacks, most of which are in the 1960s. The counter-cultural social revolution of the 1960s, which emphasized liberalization from the repressive attitudes of the preceding decades, brought a significant shift in the way society thought and talked about sex. Sexuality was increasingly seen as a personal issue, rather than one that the government should preside over. This shift came in tandem with second-wave feminism, through which women sought to redefine woman's role in society, rejecting the strictness of prior gender stereotypes regarding domesticity, sexual subservience, and economic inequality (first-wave feminism's focus tended towards women's right to vote). Vogel's play strikes at the heart of these issues, both examining them in their 1960s setting and, by implication, asking whether the progress seen by the 1990s went far enough. As the decades following the sixties saw an increasingly open discussion about sexual abuse—especially instances of abuse within families—Vogel's play examines the way memory functions in the disclosure of experiences that were previously considered too taboo to mention. A young girl at the time, for example, would not have been treated seriously in making a complaint against the behaviors of an uncle; the adult Li'l Bit, from the vantage point of the late 1980s, feels more able to talk about what happened. *How I Learned to Drive* therefore examines not just abuse itself, but the change in the conversation around abuse and the increasing likelihood of victims speaking out. Another key issue is the "gray area" between sexuality and the law: the play asks difficult questions about the way society regulates the sexual behaviors of its citizens. Less than a century before the play's setting, the age of consent in the U.S.A ranged between 10 and 12 years old—in Delaware, it was just 7. The age of consent generally rose over the following decades and by the 1960s tended to be between 16 and 18. Vogel's play is an inquiry into this relationship between sex and the law. With regard to the "statutory rape" law, for example, Peck's behavior towards L'il Bit is illegal one day and *technically* permissible the next—either side of her eighteenth birthday. Overall, then, Vogel's play makes a powerful argument for more conversation, more understanding, and more support around these issues.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Paula Vogel exhibits a wide range of theatrical influences in her work. She cites Bertolt Brecht, John Guare, and Maria Irene Fornes as particularly important to the development of her writing. This particular work can be seen as a "memory play," a term coined by Tennessee Williams to denote a situation in which the the lead character narrates historical events in their life. In its use of the choruses, *How I Learned to Drive* employs a specific technique that goes back all the way to ancient Greece. That said, Vogel's use of the chorus specifically explores the effects of other people's voices and opinions on an individual's psyche, serving a slightly but significantly different function to playwrights such as Euripides, Aeschylus, and Sophocles. Vogel has framed *How I Learned to Drive* as a kind of response to Vladimir Nabokov's influential work, *Lolita*. The play also contains an embedded argument for the importance of theater, when L'il Bit tells her lewd grandfather that, when he gets to the gates of heaven, he is going to be refused entry because he won't be able to place a line from Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*: "The quality of mercy is not strained." This line itself is a fair summary of Vogel's oeuvre: work with an unflinching social conscience that is unafraid to investigate what the playwright calls the "gray areas" of life.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *How I Learned to Drive*
- **When Written:** 1997
- **Where Written:** Alaska
- **When Published:** First performed March 16, 1997
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary

- **Genre:** Drama
- **Setting:** Maryland at various points throughout Li'l Bit's life
- **Climax:** Li'l Bit driving away
- **Antagonist:** Peck
- **Point of View:** First person

EXTRA CREDIT

Popular on stage. *How I Learned to Drive* was at one point the most produced play in the U.S.A.

Churned out. The play was written in a short burst of intense activity over two weeks. Accordingly, Vogel describes the writing of *How I Learned to Drive* as akin to the sensation of "being in love."

PLOT SUMMARY

How I Learned to Drive tells the story of Li'l Bit, now a woman of around thirty-five years, coming to terms with the abusive and emotionally complex relationship that she had with her Uncle Peck. The play works in a non-linear way, using flashbacks, monologues and a heightened sense of the surreal to show how Li'l Bit relates to her memory and trauma. Other than the two characters already mentioned, the play employs three "Greek choruses"—teenage, female, and male—to jump between the roles of a wide range of people that populate Li'l Bit's recollections. An official-sounding voice marks the transition between the scenes, using the kind of headings found in driving instruction.

The play opens with the present-day Li'l Bit setting the scene. Explaining that "sometimes to tell a secret, you first have to teach a lesson," she introduces the first flashback, which takes place in 1969 when she is seventeen. She and Peck are in Peck's **car** on a dark lane in Maryland. Peck touches and kisses Li'l Bit's breasts, though she is reluctant and especially aware that she has an important day at school the following day. He does so as a "reward' for being a "good boy"—based on the fact that he hasn't drunk any alcohol for a week.

This scene breaks to show a typical family dinner in Li'l Bit's household. Her grandfather, played by the male chorus, makes lewd jokes about the size of her breasts. Li'l Bit is determined to get a good education, which the male chorus says she isn't going to need. As Li'l Bit storms outside, Peck comes out to comfort her. Present-day L'il Bit then reveals that she flunked out of school because she was drinking too much and spent the rest of that time period driving through the night.

The next flashback takes place in a fancy restaurant in 1968. Peck is treating Li'l Bit for passing her driving test first time. He orders her oysters and martinis, the latter of which she knocks back one after another despite being underage. The waiter looks on disapprovingly, but Peck pays him off with a big tip. Li'l Bit tries to get Peck to open up about his World War II experiences, but he resists. During this scene, the female chorus delivers a monologue as Li'l Bit's mother, offering absurd advice on how women ought to consume alcohol. Li'l Bit drunkenly kisses Peck in the car afterwards, before freaking out about the inappropriateness of their relationship.

Next, the teenage chorus introduces a scene in which Peck takes Li'l Bit's young cousin, BB (standing for "blue balls"; the entire family is nicknamed after their genitalia), fishing. In this, it is strongly implied that Peck sexually abuses his young relative.

Li'l Bit intervenes to describe a typical conversation between her fourteen-year-old self, her mother, and her grandmother (the last two played by the female and teenage choruses respectively). The grandmother describes her husband's sexual behavior as that of a "bull," wanting to have sex every morning and evening.

Li'l Bit then introduces another brief memory, in which, aged twenty-seven, she has a brief sexual encounter with a man who is ten years her junior. She lies in bed after having sex, wondering if she now understands something of the "allure" that Peck felt for her in her youth.

The story then returns to the previous conversation between Li'l Bit, her mother, and grandmother. Li'l Bit is a year older and asks whether sex hurts. Her mother wants to give her an honest account of the "facts of life," but her god-fearing grandmother strongly disagrees. The mother and grandmother have an argument in which it is revealed that the mother is resentful for her grandmother's unwillingness to provide guidance about sex to her when she was younger. The mother fell pregnant at an early age and had a bad relationship with the Li'l Bit's father.

The action switches to a driving lesson given to Li'l Bit by Peck. He gives her good, solid advice on how to drive, though also insists that she needs to drive "like a man," because women are too fatally hesitant. With her hands on the steering wheel, Li'l Bit quips that she won't be able to "defend" herself; Peck vows never to touch her while she's driving.

The audience is then given a sense of Li'l Bit's time at high school. Her classmates make jokes on account of her big breasts. These, too, cause Li'l Bit confusion: she likens her breasts to hostile "alien life forces" and radio transmitters, sending out siren-like signals to men in order to attract them to "dash" themselves on "these rocks." At the school dance, Li'l Bit refuses to join in any of the fast numbers, afraid that the boys just want to see her "jiggling."

The official-sounding voice announces: "You and the Reverse Gear." This takes the action back to 1965, in which a thirteen-year-old Li'l Bit is being photographed by Peck in his basement. He puts on the kind of music that she likes and gets her to

dance for the camera. When he promises not to "cross **the line**," she naively states the line to be "frontal nudity." He accidentally lets slip that he intends to build a portfolio to one day send to *Playboy*. Li'l Bit is hurt by this, again emphasizing that she wants to get a good education. To placate her, Peck tells Li'l Bit that he loves her.

At this point, the female chorus jumps in as Aunt Mary, Peck's wife. She praises the virtues of her husband: how he does the chores round the house, helps out the neighbors, works overtime to buy her jewelry etc. She knows "what's going on" but blames it on Li'l Bit for being "sly."

The next scene presents the beginning of Li'l Bit and Peck's relationship. It is Christmas in 1964. A moody Peck is doing the dishes in the kitchen, conversing with Li'l Bit. She is impressed with his willingness to do the chores, which he says is what women deserve from men. They touch on his drinking problem; Li'l Bit strikes a deal with Peck, saying they can meet up once a week if he avoids alcohol—as long as, when they do, he doesn't "cross the line." Peck is visibly moved and enthusiastically accepts.

Flash forward to 1969, towards the end of the relationship. Li'l Bit is at college, away from the family home. Every day brings another gift and note from Peck, which seem to be counting down to her eighteenth birthday (when it becomes legal for them to have sex). Soon after, they are in a fancy hotel room. Li'l Bit chastises Peck for sending the gifts, likening it to the behavior of a "serial killer." She explains that she's not be doing well in her education and is "confused." Li'l Bit gulps down the champagne that Peck has bought for her and makes him drink some too. After some awkward small talk, they both have something important to say. Li'l Bit has come because she wants to tell Peck that she doesn't want to see him anymore. Increasingly desperate, Peck asks that she lie down with him on the bed and that they just "hold one another." Li'l Bit, "*half wanting to run, half wanting to get it over with, half wanting to be held by him*," agrees to his suggestion. As they lie there, Li'l Bit feels conflicted and almost kisses Peck, drawing back at the last moment. Peck, in a frantic rush, pulls a ring out of his pocket and proposes to Li'l Bit. She cries out "this isn't happening" before making a swift exit. Soon after she leaves, the male chorus plays the role of bartender as Peck knocks back shot after shot of liquor.

Present-day Li'l Bit explains to the audience that this was the last she ever saw her Uncle Peck. It took him seven years to drink himself to death, she says, losing his job, wife, and driving license along the way. One day he fell down his basement stairs and died. Now that she's old enough, says Lil Bit, she wishes she could ask him: "who did it to you, Uncle Peck? How old were you? Were you eleven?" She imagines his spirit as a "kind of Flying Dutchman," driving the Carolina backroads "looking for a young girl who, of her own free will, will love him. Release him."

The play then shows a brief exchange between Li'l Bit in the Summer of 1962, in which she convinces her mother/the female chorus to let her go and stay with Uncle Peck. Her mother is resistant to the idea, not trusting Peck's motives, but Li'l Bit insists she can handle him. Her mother relents but tells her that if anything does happen it will be Li'l Bit's fault.

The audience then witnesses Peck's first abuse of Li'l Bit. The teenage chorus member speaks Li'l Bit's lines, though the actions remain Li'l Bit's. Peck is driving but offers Li'l Bit a try. Excited and nervous, she takes up the driver's seat but can't reach the pedals. Peck suggests she sits on her lap and just steers. As she does so, he rubs her breasts and brings himself to orgasm; Li'l Bit is horrified, shouting (via the teenage chorus) "this isn't happening."

Li'l Bit then gets out of the car, restored to the present. She describes that moment as the "last day I lived in my body." Now almost thirty-five, she is glad to believe in things that her younger self didn't, "like family and forgiveness." She still doesn't do anything that "jiggles"; the closest thing she feels to "flight in the body" is to drive. She gets in the car and tunes the **radio**, which initially plays back some of the lines from earlier on in the play, such as her grandfather saying, "how is Shakespeare gonna help her lie on her back." Settling on the music that she loves—something like Roy Orbison—she checks the back mirror. The spirit of Peck seems to be sitting in the back. She smiles at him, and floors it.

CHARACTERS

Li'l Bit – Li'l Bit is the play's central protagonist and the object of Uncle Peck's sexual advances. A woman approaching thirty-five years old, her first act on stage is to introduce the play, saying that "sometimes to tell a secret you first have to teach a lesson." What follows is built almost entirely from her recollections, told in fragments and jumping around chronologically. The play can thus be read as a journey into Li'l Bit's psyche, through which the audience is asked to experience Li'l Bit's trauma and memories as she goes over what happened with her uncle. In many of these fragments she is very young, ranging between eleven (in the play's penultimate scene) to seventeen. As a young girl, she is sexually naïve but aware of her uncle's attraction to her and, to a degree, encourages the attention. While at high school, she becomes aware of her increasing sexualization as those around her, like Uncle Peck, fixate on her breasts. Though she wants guidance from her mother and grandmother (channeled by the female and teenage choruses), they fail to help her. Over the course of their "relationship" she grows more and more confused, sometimes viewing Peck as a paternal figure, sometimes feeling attraction for him, and often feeling disgust at his actions. She is keen to get a good education, expressing an interest in Shakespeare, but is increasingly destabilized by what happens

with her uncle. Just before she turns eighteen, when her relationship with Peck technically become "legal," she finds the courage to tell her uncle that she doesn't want to see him again. Ultimately, this allows her to move on, and in the final scene, after. checking her tires and adjusting her seat just like her uncle taught her, she drives off in her **car**, feeling a sense of power and freedom.

Uncle Peck – Peck is the only other principal character in the play (the various others in Li'l Bit's life are played by the male, female, and teenage Greek choruses). He is a middle-aged man who, on the surface, is handsome, affectionate, and considerate. According to his own words, he has loved Li'l Bit since the day she was born, when her whole body fit in one of his hands. When Li'l Bit offers to meet once a week with Peck to talk in exchange for him tackling his alcohol problem, his attraction towards his young niece grows. Offering her **driving** lessons, he uses these as an opportunity to touch her. He manipulates her emotionally, often appealing to her sense of moral decency and framing what they're doing as "nothing wrong," particularly in how he frequently persuades her that anything that happens is her own choice. It is strongly implied that Peck has his own repressed trauma, the nature of which is only ever hinted at (it could be his experiences during World War II, or rejection from his mother). Peck's obsession with his niece reaches an unhealthy peak when she nears turning eighteen, at which point he intends to propose to her and legitimize their relationship. When she rejects his offer of marriage, Peck returns to heavy drinking, ultimately losing his wife (Aunt Mary; played by the female chorus), job, and driving license (a symbolic loss of his power over Li'l Bit). He dies from a drunken fall down his basement stairs.

Male Greek Chorus – The male Greek chorus plays a host of male characters whose remarks have embedded themselves in Li'l Bit's psyche. For example, the male chorus takes on the role of her grandfather, Big Papa, who makes jibes about the size of her breasts and dismisses her wish to get a good education. The male chorus also plays a disapproving waiter serving food and margaritas to Li'l Bit when she is taken out for a meal by Uncle Peck to celebrate passing her **driving** test. The waiter overlooks her underage drinking in exchange for a big tip, entrenching an idea of male cooperation when it comes to the objectification of women. The other voices that the male chorus puts on represent boys at Li'l Bit's high school, who obsess over the size of her breasts and tease her for appearance.

Female Greek Chorus – The female Greek chorus plays multiple voices from Li'l Bit's past. The most prominent of these is Li'l Bit's mother, who offers Li'l Bit misguided advice on sexuality and drinking alcohol "like a man." Through these moments, the audience learns that Li'l Bit's mother fell pregnant at an early age and had a bad relationship with Li'l Bit's father. She blames this on her own mother, Li'l Bit's grandmother, for not teaching her about the "facts of life." The female chorus also plays Uncle Peck's wife, Aunt Mary, who praises her husband's virtuous character and places all the blame on his incestuous relationship with Li'l Bit on Li'l Bit herself. Other than these two characters, the female chorus also takes on the voice of Li'l Bit's high school friends, all of whom reinforce the sexual status quo, telling Li'l Bit that she should be grateful for boys' sexual advances. The cumulative effect of these voices is to show the weary world in which Li'l Bit grows up—a place where how things are is simply how things have to be.

Teenage Greek Chorus – The teenage chorus is instructed by Vogel to be significantly younger, or at least younger-looking, than the other choruses. In the most jarring chorus role, the teenage chorus plays Li'l Bit's grandmother, who vividly likens Li'l Bit's grandfather's sexual behavior to that of a "bull" and accepts her husband's view that a woman's main purpose is to "have the table set and the bed turned down." Perhaps, by being played by the youngest actress, Vogel is signaling toward the cyclical nature of behavior within a family—though the grandmother is old, she presents unequal gender roles that, though perhaps changed in one or two ways, are still entrenched. The teenage chorus also plays some of Li'l Bit's high school companions. Most poignantly of all, the teenage chorus plays Li'l Bit's own voice in the play's penultimate scene, which depicts the first instance of abuse by Uncle Peck. This emphasizes just how young Li'l Bit was at this time—eleven—and how, in Li'l Bit's own words, it was the "the last day I lived in my body."

Li'l Bit's Mother – Li'l Bit's mother appears intermittently in the play and is acted by the Female Greek Chorus. She portrays a distrusting attitude towards men, seemingly based on her bad relationship with Li'l Bit's father (who is entirely absent from the play). Like her own mother, Li'l Bit's grandmother, she ultimately believes that what happens to women is their own responsibility. This plays out in the darkly comic interjections by Li'l Bit's mother on the topic of female decorum, in which she memorably instructs Li'l Bit to avoid any alcoholic drinks with "sugar, or anything with an umbrella" and to "drink, instead, like a man." As a character, then, Li'l Bit's mother consistently reinforces the gender imbalances of the status quo. This has its most grave consequence when, in one of the play's last scenes (which is actually one of the earliest chronologically in Li'l Bit's life), she approves Li'l Bit's request to spend more time with Uncle Peck despite being suspicious of his motives towards her daughter—"if anything happens," she tells Li'l Bit, "I hold you responsible."

Li'l Bit's Grandmother – Li'l Bit's grandmother is wife to Li'l Bit's grandfather and the mother of Li'l Bit's own mother. She is acted by the Teenage Greek Chorus. Li'l Bit's grandmother is subservient to Big Papa, fulfilling his two basic needs, which she describes as having "the table set and the bed turned down." That is, she sees a woman's role as the provider of food and sex

for men. At the same time, she also displays an attitude of sexual repression, trying to convince Li'l Bit that sex is painful and denying the existence of female orgasms. She blames Li'l Bit's mother for getting pregnant at an early age, echoing the view that women are the sole figures of responsibility in their lives and that a man can't be blamed for acting according to his "nature."

Li'l Bit's Grandfather – Li'l Bit's grandfather, also called Big Papa, is the husband of Li'l Bit's grandmother and is played by the Male Greek Chorus. He is deeply misogynistic, believing that women have only two responsibilities: providing food and sex for men. He likens the way that he found his wife to a lion stalking a gazelle, viewing the world of sex as animalistic and, essentially, predator vs. prey. This is, of course, suggestive of Uncle Peck's sexual coercion of Li'l Bit.

Aunt Mary – Aunt Mary is Uncle Peck's wife the sister of Li'l Bit's mother. She is played by the Female Greek Chorus. Aunt Mary doesn't appear much in the play but has a brief monologue in which she defends Peck's honor despite knowing about his attraction to Li'l Bit. In fact, she blames Li'l Bit for what happens, calling her niece "sly" and placing the responsibility of Peck's abuse on her alone.

Cousin Bobby – Cousin Bobby, nicknamed "Blue Balls" after his genitalia, does not actually appear in the play and has no spoken lines. His presence is implied, however, in a monologue by Uncle Peck, in which the latter takes Bobby fishing. During this fishing trip, Peck uses similarly coercive language with Bobby as he does with Li'l Bit, trying to pressure the young boy into going to a nearby treehouse—which Peck calls "a secret place"—to have some beer. Vogel strongly implies that Cousin Bobby is abused by Peck and, by not granting Bobby any spoken lines himself, emphasizes the secrecy, embarrassment and shame that most likely followed.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

GENDER AND MISOGYNY

How I Learned to Drive takes an uncompromising look at the way casual misogyny and gender stereotyping affect women, especially the young. From an early age, Li'l Bit, the play's protagonist, is barraged with messages about women's role in society: that they must behave a certain way and get used to being treated as sexual objects by men. She has to navigate these attitudes while at the same time dealing with the psychological pressure of her Uncle Peck's sexual and "romantic" advances. Though the play consists mostly of flashbacks to Li'l Bit's teenage years during the 1960s, its lessons are equally relevant today; the play implicitly argues against these stereotypical gender roles by presenting them in stark, unflinching detail.

Li'l Bit is constantly being reminded that she lives in a man's world—and that she ought to obey the rules and authority of the men who run it. In particular, she is expected to put up with being a sexual object. Some of the flashbacks transport the viewer to scenes around the family dinner table, when everyone seems to accept as a given that women should expect to amount to little more than objects of desire. Li'l Bit, for her part, wants to get a good education and make use of her mind—not her body. Yet her own grandfather presents this attitude as if it were just the natural way of the world, laughing off the idea that Li'l Bit has any use for learning: "What does she need a college degree for? She's got all the credentials she'll need on her chest." Her grandmother does nothing to challenge this view, later adding, "your grandfather only cares that I do two things: have the table set and the bed turned down." That is, a woman is expected first and foremost to take care of the so-called "basic needs" of men: sustenance and sex.

Li'l Bit, then, grows up in an atmosphere in which women are taught to know their place and not have ideas above their station. Vogel shows how suffocating this can be, and this sense of objectification intensifies as Li'l Bit grows older. When her body starts to go through puberty, she finds herself the gravitational center of a universe of unwanted attention. As Li'l Bit's breasts get bigger, they suddenly seem to be all that anyone can concentrate on. Uncle Peck describes them as "celestial orbs" as he lustfully undoes Li'l Bit's bra, an image. suggesting that Li'l Bit's breasts cast a figurative kind of blinding light, blocking out the rest of her identity. This in turn makes Li'l Bit increasingly self-conscious about her body. At the high school dance, she avoids any fast numbers because she fears that the boys just want to see her "jiggling." Even years later as a thirty-five-year-old woman, Li'l Bit still avoids jogging or dancing for the same reason. Vogel thus provides the audience with a clear and powerful thread to trace the way that gender stereotypes and misogyny become embedded in an individual's psyche, and near impossible to shake.

The play does, however, create a way for Li'l Bit to reclaim herself from being totally side-lined for her gender, though it is not a clear-cut victory: she finds freedom, control, and power in the act of driving. In the play's world, driving is presented as a characteristically male activity: Uncle Peck, when he's not fondling his niece's breasts, wants to teach her to "drive like a man." Driving like a man is presented by Uncle Peck as driving with "confidence … aggression … always looking out for the other guy … Women tend to be polite—to hesitate." While this is obviously problematic gender stereotyping, Li'l Bit becomes a skillful and adept driver under his tutelage. And when the play

reaches its closing scene, Li'l Bit has gained perspective on what's happened to her and is ready to move on—not to forget, nor even to forgive, but to take back control of her own world.

Vogel presents this by having Li'l Bit getting in her **car**, putting on the most "important control on the dashboard—the **radio**." She tunes the radio, which initially plays snippets from her harrowing experiences growing up—including lines like, "How is Shakespeare gonna her help lie on her back," something her grandfather asks earlier in the play—before finding the music that she loves. The change in music indicates her determination to move beyond the role that men have expected her to play. In the last line of the play, as the car's engine takes off, Li'l Bit says, "And then—I floor it." Though she cannot hope to erase the memories of what's happened to her, she can decide to move on. Li'l Bit's claiming of the car as her own space takes something back from the expectations placed upon her growing up. It shows her having agency over her world, with the bittersweet implication that it is only in subverting the "male" act of driving that she can find a sense of freedom. Vogel therefore shows the difficulty of escaping gender roles, and the need for them to be broken down—even in small acts of reclamation like this one.

FAMILY AND ABUSE

How I Learned to Drive is a harrowing study in family dynamics. On the one hand, it shows the role that family plays as a support network: Li'l Bit views Uncle Peck as a replacement for her absent father, and she looks to her mother and grandmother for answers to her questions about sex and growing up. But Uncle Peck is first and foremost her abuser, and Li'l Bit's discussions with her family don't seem to help her make sense of her world at all. Overall, the play shows the complexity of emotions when it comes to family: familial loyalty rubs up against the failure of the family to properly take care Li'l Bit. Furthermore, the play draws attention to the uncomfortable fact that most sexual abuse, particularly pedophilia, is more often inflicted by one family member on another than it is by strangers.

Vogel shows how emotionally complicated family life can be. It's easy for an external observer to condemn Uncle Peck's sexual grooming and exploitation of Li'l Bit as an evil act, but this has to be seen in the full picture of their relationship to be truly understood. Li'l Bit looks up to Uncle Peck and does have a certain affection for him. He is the only family member to support her wish to get a good education and positions himself as her driving teacher. He also takes her out for meals and buys her presents, acting as a provider. This makes Li'l Bit see him as something of a father figure. This is reciprocated, best summed up by Uncle Peck's grotesque statement to Li'l Bit that she is the "nearest to a son I'll ever have." This gives Li'l Bit a sense of loyalty towards Uncle Peck, which makes it psychologically difficult for her to refuse his sexual advances. Vogel is therefore careful not to oversimplify the abuse at the center of the play by building a sense of the more positive side of the relationship between Li'l Bit and Uncle Peck. She herself has even called the play a kind of "love story."

This in turn makes Uncle Peck's abuse of Li'l Bit all the more horrifying for the audience, as they see how Uncle Peck's behavior is made possible by a complex interplay of emotions and manipulation. This "technique" of Uncle Peck's is grounded in an appeal to the importance of family. Uncle Peck's paternal role in Li'l's life Bit allows him to get close to her physically, away from the other family members. That's why the driving lessons are often the moments when he makes his advances. The **car** is a confined—and locked—space in which it is just the two of them, a situation that could only exist because of his position of trust. Li'l Bit tries to "draw **the line**" with Uncle Peck, indicating that she is aware of his sexual desire for her and the inappropriately incestuous (and adulterous) basis of this feeling (though for what it's worth, they aren't blood related). But Li'l Bit is confused by Uncle Peck's paternalism, ultimately making her sympathetic for him (seen in the way she tries to stop him drinking alcohol). This leads to her reluctance to discourage Uncle Peck's behavior, which in turn only compounds her confused feeling towards him. Uncle Peck's sexualization of Li'l Bit is therefore made possible by his role in the family, underlining Vogel's point that these abusive situations are rarely simple. This in turn is an implicit argument in favor of a greater understanding of the nuances of such scenarios, an understanding which Li'l Bit comes to by the end of the play. She finds the courage to sever her ties with Uncle Peck and, through the distance of a couple of decades, wonders, "who did it to you, Uncle Peck?"

A wider but important point made by Vogel is the way in which a family dynamic can passively facilitate abuse. Li'l Bit's mother expresses concern about Uncle Peck's apparent interest in Li'l Bit when, early on in the play's chronology, Li'l Bit is keen to spend time with her uncle because he "listens" to her. She even tells her mother not to worry, because "nothing will happen." There is an implied understanding between Li'l Bit and her mother, then, that Uncle Peck's attentions are at least partly sexual. A comment by Uncle Peck's wife, Aunt Mary (played by the female chorus), underscores this with dark comedy, saying, "Peck's so good with them when they get to be this age." She later blames Peck's sexual deviances on Li'l Bit being "sly."

Uncle Peck's abuse, then, is hiding in plain sight, but everybody fails to do anything about it. A repeated phrase in the play—"family is family"—sums this up. Vogel suggests that people are sometimes guilty of letting bad behavior pass because of familial loyalty or an unwillingness to talk about it. By skillfully sketching Li'l Bit's family dynamic, Vogel takes abuse out of the realm of abstract "evil" and brings it to life for her audience to bear witness. This is a valuable provocation, forcing the audience to acknowledge that abuse can happen in

environments in which it wouldn't necessarily be obvious or expected.

MEMORY AND TRAUMA

How I Learned to Drive explores the effects of trauma on memory and, indeed, of memory on trauma. Told retrospectively from the viewpoint of Li'l Bit, who was sexually exploited in her adolescence by Uncle Peck, the play presents the way trauma inhabits the memory of its principal character. In fact, the play as a whole can be taken as an argument *against* the repression of traumatic memories; by placing her experiences out in the open, Li'l Bit aims to understand them better and, ultimately, to go beyond them.

Vogel's play has an unusual form. Rather than have a conventional actor-character relationship, in which each actor plays a single role, Vogel uses only two principal characters: Li'l Bit and Peck. Instead of having all of the other characters appear on stage individually (e.g. Li'l Bit's mother, grandmother, and grandfather), Vogel specifies that all of the other characters are to be played by three "Greek choruses." This is a deliberate strategy intended to better represent Li'l Bit's trauma as it is actually felt. Choruses were first used in ancient Greek theater, their main function being to comment on the action, to provide background information, and, by singing, to give musical expression to the play's emotional content.

Vogel modifies the usual role of the chorus. In her play, the three choruses—dubbed Male, Female, and Teenage respectively—allows for a multitude of voices. These voices become a fragmentary background presence, almost like static on the **radio**. They also allow Vogel to make quick transgressions between time and space, and to give the audience content that isn't limited by taking place within the confines of a typical conversation. In one scene, for example, the choruses allow Li'l Bit to relate several different high school experiences in quick succession, seamlessly shifting from the gym changing rooms to the school dance, linked together by the choruses' role in playing different classmates—all of whom comment on her breasts. This mimics the way that memory actually works, with voices popping up unexpectedly without necessarily occurring in a linear, progressive order. The audience therefore gets a more accurate representation of Li'l Bit's trauma. The whole play effectively takes place within her head, characters coming and go as though they were thoughts. The only character other than Li'l Bit to have a prominent role is Peck, her abuser, representing how integral he is to her memory.

But Vogel's use of the chorus is not the only formal diversion from the "traditional" play format. The play begins with Li'l Bit as an adult in the present, introducing the basic premise of what is to follow. What follows is a series of memories or impressions, almost like sketches. And instead of going in chronological order, they are mostly told in reverse. That is, the play starts with a more recent memory, before the audience is taken deeper into the trauma by going further and further back in time. As part of these impressionistic recollections, the audience observes Li'l Bit's trauma in its different stages. On more than one occasion, scenes from Li'l Bit's life show her struggling to process the abuse she has suffered, made all the more difficult because she feels that at times she actively encouraged—almost wanted—Peck to behave that way.

One of these recollections details how Li'l Bit flunked out of college because she had taken to drinking alcohol every day, clearly an attempt to block out the memory of her experiences. Another details an encounter Li'l Bit has with a young man that results in genuinely consensual sex. This takes place in 1979 and Li'l Bit is older than the man. After they have finished, she lies there and thinks of Uncle Peck, wondering if she can now understand his attraction to her. Recollections like these show how far-reaching Li'l Bit's trauma goes into her psyche; her own sexual experiences are violated by the presence of her memories with Uncle Peck.

This technique is shown to be powerfully effective in the play's penultimate scene in which the audience is shown the first instance of genuine abuse. In this scene, Peck lets the eleven-year-old Li'l Bit have a go at driving his **car**. He gets her to sit on his lap because she can't reach the pedals, and against her will touches her breasts before bringing himself to orgasm against her. Unlike the earlier recollections in the play—which are, paradoxically, later in the actual chronology of events of Li'l Bit's life—Peck here doesn't even attempt to coerce Li'l Bit into something resembling consent, and Li'l Bit can in no way be accused of encouraging his behavior; in fact, she cries out, "this isn't happening." The way Vogel manipulates the play's sense of time, then, lulls the audience into a false sense of security or even sympathy regarding Peck before showing his abuse in the clearest, starkest terms. Only by vividly recalling that initial, unforgiveable trauma can Li'l Bit—and the audience—grasp the extent to which Peck abused and groomed her and, in turn, move on.

How I Learned to Drive, then, is a highly original take on how one person deals with trauma during the childhood, and how the resulting memories inform the life that that person goes on to lead. As the play nears its close, Li'l Bit explains how she finally managed to reject Uncle Peck. Then, back in the present, Li'l Bit gets into her car to drive away, appearing ready to move on—with her memories in tow.

SEXUALITY

The play explores the significant impact that sex and sexuality have on individuals' lives, highlighting the extent to which they exert control on people's psychology. Vogel's approach is wide-ranging, showing the audience, for example, the important difference between physical and psychological maturity, while also investigating

society's sexual limits and transgressions. This asks the audience to examine the way sex and sexuality are conceptualized, both in the play's 1960s setting and in the present day, particularly on the issue of how the young come to learn about sexuality. Despite its taboo subject matter, Vogel's play ultimately embraces sexuality as natural and blames a society that treats all sex as deviant—and, in turn, withholds forthright information about sexuality from young people—for enabling sexual abuse and trauma.

How I Learned to Drive works hard to differentiate sexual maturity as a *physiological* process from sexual maturity as a *psychological* process. For the most part of her childhood reflections, Li'l Bit is not all that interested in *having* sex, but she does want to know more about it. Unfortunately for her, conversations with her mother and grandmother—played by the female and teenage choruses—fail to provide her with valuable information. The first conversation culminates in the teenage chorus/grandmother describing the sexual activities of Li'l Bit's grandfather as being like "a bull," suggesting violence and a lack of tenderness. The second conversation winds up with the two choruses arguing: Li'l Bit's mother resents the grandmother for not teaching her more about the "facts of life," blaming this for her early pregnancy, bad relationship, and, ultimately, unfulfilled life. Li'l Bit's character thus demonstrates how difficult it can be to get good, practical help in coming to terms with sexuality when growing up.

Knowledge that Li'l Bit can't avoid is an awareness of her changing body, and how this represents an increasing sexualization (firstly, in the eyes of others). Her breasts practically hypnotize Uncle Peck, and she knows he is governed by his lust. Li'l Bit's disconnect between her attitude toward sex and her knowledge of her body's effect on men is best described when she calls her breasts "alien life forces" or "**radio** transmitters sending out signals to men who get mesmerized, like sirens, calling them to dash themselves on these 'rocks.'" There is a mismatch, then, between Li'l Bit's body and her mind, in which she feels her sexualization to be a kind of invasion—especially when knowledge of sexuality is limited from her and often prioritizes men's pleasure at the expense of women's autonomy.

If Li'l Bit's experiences offer an implicit critique of societal attitudes to sex, Uncle Peck's character explores society's limits and the subsequent transgressions of these limits. Uncle Peck knows full well that his attraction to Li'l Bit is outside of the accepted norm in the society he lives in but finds a way to justify and enable his desires. By doing so, he transgresses two of society's most outwardly visible "**lines**": incest and pedophilia. He is fully aware that what he does would not be deemed acceptable, which is why he is always keen to give Li'l Bit the false illusion of choice when they have sexual contact: "We are just enjoying each other's company, I've told you, nothing is going to happen between us until you want it to." His use of the word "until"—rather than, say, "unless"—is telling, showing that he is psychologically coercing Li'l Bit into accepting his advances. The way he uses private spaces—e.g. the **car**—to facilitate his sexual desires mirrors the way that society more widely considers incest and pedophilia as taboos, in turn driving them underground and out of sight.

Uncle Peck takes special care that whenever he "crosses the line" with Li'l Bit no one else is present—this protects him. But he also longs for the day when his "relationship" with Li'l Bit—if it's fair to call it that—can be made legally legitimate. That's why he excitedly sends her gifts every day in the countdown to her 18th birthday—because that's when she will be legal. There's similar reasoning behind his proposal to her: he hopes to make her "officially" his and retrospectively erase any sense of wrong-doing. And because they are not blood relatives, Peck sees divorcing his wife Aunt Mary and marrying Li'l Bit as a way of making his sexuality socially acceptable.

Though he doesn't get his way, Vogel's depiction of the fine line between societally contemptuous and societally acceptable behavior draws the audience's attention to the instability of these categories. Uncle Peck, according to his (and the law's) logic, could be Li'l Bit's abuser one day and her husband the next. *How I Learned to Drive* works hard to ask these difficult questions about sex and sexuality, offering the audience no false comforts. Society's attitudes to sex tend to become static over time—in turn manifested by its laws—but Vogel seems to be arguing that, rather than trying to block out the existence of abuse, pedophilia, and incest, society should be unafraid to talk about them in order to better protect its young.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

DRIVING/CARS

As the play's title suggests, scenes in *How I Learned to Drive* frequently feature cars and driving. Most broadly, the car represents the complicated emotional relationship between Li'l Bit and Uncle Peck. The car is both where Peck teaches Li'l Bit to drive and the place where he most often makes his inappropriate sexual advances on her, thus reflecting the sexual and paternal dynamic between them. As an object of characteristically male obsession, the car also mirrors Peck's sexual obsession towards his niece. This is drawn out in detail when Peck describes his car as female in one of the driving lessons: "It doesn't have to be a 'she'—but when you close your eyes and think of someone who responds to your touch—someone who performs just for you and gives you what you ask for—I guess I always see a 'she.'" The car then, at least for Peck, means control—the kind of control he wants

over Li'l Bit. When Li'l Bit ultimately rejects him at the end of the play—signaling his loss of control over her—he notably loses his driver's license. Almost contradictorily, the car is also an expression of power and freedom, giving its user the means by which to go anywhere, and fast. Peck sees cars this way, but so too does Li'l Bit. That's why the play ends with her "flooring it" in her car, giving her the sensation of "flight in the body" and symbolizing the way in which she moves on from the distressing events of her childhood.

Driving is also reflected by the official-sounding voice that speaks throughout the play from off-stage, reinforcing how deeply Li'l Bit's experiences with Peck have shaped her life and memories. What it says always relates to driving, and generally reminds the audience of the kind of titles that might head up chapters in a driving instruction manual. This voice serves an important function of literally navigating between the play's many different destinations of time and space, and is specifically symbolic because the content, though appearing to be targeted aimlessly at a driver who isn't there, helps the audience make sense of the play's movements between Li'l Bit's memories. For example, when the voice states "You and the Reverse Gear," this is an indication that chronology of the play is going backwards in time. Later, as the relationship between Peck and Li'l Bit heads towards its climax, the voice indicates a shift from second to third and then third to fourth gear. This indicates an acceleration in the action, bringing order to the play's fragmented form. Again, because Li'l Bit invariably connects driving to Peck, the structuring of the play via this voice thus emphasizes how her relationship with Peck has affected everything in her life.

THE LINE

Both Peck and Li'l Bit make frequent references to "the line." Borrowed from the world of driving—as in, the lines marking out the road—the line represents limits. In driving, lines on the road allow for people to move around safely; they are an agreed-upon code that everybody follows for mutual benefit. With regard to the uncle-niece relationship, the line *should* represent the limits of their interactions. That is, there's nothing wrong with Peck acting paternally or affectionately to Li'l Bit, but he crosses a moral line when he approaches her sexually. Li'l Bit, fully aware of Peck's attraction to her (which to an extent is reciprocated), tries to draw the lines over which Peck must not travel. For example, when Li'l Bit is thirteen years old, Peck photographs her in his basement. She insists on the "line" that there be no frontal nudity—though for most of the audience, the moral line here is in fact crossed by the photography session itself. Though Peck is always insisting that he won't cross "the line," he is frequently trying to redefine what the line is in an attempt to coerce consent out of Li'l Bit for behaviors that he knows, deep down, transgress society's lines of acceptability.

RADIO

Radio, as Li'l Bit jokes in a driving lesson with Uncle Peck, is the most important part of the **car**. Of course, she doesn't mean this literally, but for her radio represents an element of personal choice in a world in which much of that choice has been stripped away. Using the radio, she can play the music that best speaks to her and most reflects who she is at different stages in life. But the actual act of tuning the radio also echoes the way Li'l Bit's memories function: they come at her thick and fast, like radio stations do when turning the dial. This is gestured to clearly in the play's closing scene, when Li'l Bit adjusts her radio before driving away. For a moment, the radio plays back some of the play's previous lines—things that people have said that affected her negatively at the time—before settling on the music that she wants to listen to. This act, then, shows the way Li'l Bit has chosen not to pretend that her traumatic memories do not exist, but to choose to focus elsewhere—on the future.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Theater Communications Group edition of *How I Learned to Drive* published in 2018.

How I Learned to Drive Quotes

"It's 1969. And I am very old, very cynical of the world, and I know it all. In short, I am seventeen years old, parking off a dark lane with a married man on an early summer night.

Related Characters: Li'l Bit (speaker), Uncle Peck

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 9

Explanation and Analysis

This is spoken by the present-day Li'l Bit right at the start of the play. She is setting the scene for the secretive nature of her and Uncle Peck's relationship, implying that it takes place somewhere hidden from the glare of their family or society more generally. Notably, their meetings often take place in a car—a symbol throughout the play of their relationship, control, and power.

This moment also sums up Li'l Bit's worldview at the time—she thinks she knows everything but, as is clearly implied, she doesn't. She is not very old, even if she might

feel that she is, suggesting that, though she thinks she understands how the world works, she is actually innocent and naïve. This speaks to how she sometimes presents herself as equal to Peck, or even in control of her interactions with him, when the evidence that accumulates over the play suggests otherwise.

PECK. Don't change the subject. I was talking about how good I am. *(Beat.)* Are you ever gonna let me show you how good I am?

LI'L BIT. Don't go over the line now.

PECK. I won't. I'm not gonna do anything you don't want me to do.

LI'L BIT. That's right.

PECK. And I've been good all week.

LI'L BIT. You have?

PECK. Yes. All week. Not a single drink.

LI'L BIT. Good boy.

PECK. Do I get a reward? For not drinking?

LI'L BIT. A small one. It's getting late.

Related Characters: Li'l Bit, Uncle Peck (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 10-11

Explanation and Analysis

This quote comes during the first flashback to one of Li'l Bit's memories. In this episode, she is sitting in the car with her Peck, probably after a driving lesson. The exchange neatly illustrates the skewed nature of their relationship and how much it deviates from what would normally be expected between a niece and her uncle. Though Peck often behaves paternally, the roles here are reversed (hinting at the perversion of his sexual interests). Li'l Bit is, momentarily, the parental authority, adjudicating over Peck's behavior. The quote shows the transactional nature of their relationship which has mutated out of Li'l Bit's offer when she was even younger to spend time with Peck each week if he agreed to give up drinking. While "the line" in this original deal was that Peck wouldn't touch her, what happens next in this scene shows how this "line" can shift over time depending on the behaviors of those who define it: in this instance, Peck is rewarded with "permission" to touch and kiss Li'l Bit's breasts.

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 has come over during the above and chimes along:)*

PECK. GREEK CHORUS.
Just a little bit. Just a little bit.

FEMALE GREEK CHORUS. *(As mother).* And when you were born, you were so tiny that you fit in Uncle Peck's outstretched hand. *(Peck stretches his hand out.)*

Related Characters: Uncle Peck, Li'l Bit's Mother , Female Greek Chorus (speaker), Li'l Bit

Related Themes:

Page Number: 12-13

Explanation and Analysis

In this brief scene, the female chorus takes on the role of Li'l Bit's mother and recounts the events of her birth. Everyone in the family is nicknamed after their genitalia, demonstrating a strange kind of sexual openness which is not replicated in a willingness to talk about sex in helpful, considerate ways. The fact that Li'l Bit is christened with her genital name at birth symbolizes her early sexualization, both at the hands of Peck and in the leering, teasing behavior of her classmates at high school. The final grotesque touch in this passage is the mention of Peck holding Li'l Bit in a single hand. This underscores the inappropriateness of his attraction to Li'l Bit and his overall desire to control her.

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-oh. Fornication. Dog-ugly mean with blood relatives. Oh. Uh-oh. 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.

Related Characters: Li'l Bit, Li'l Bit's Grandfather, Male Greek Chorus (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 14-15

Explanation and Analysis

This quote comes in a conversation framed by present-day Li'l Bit as a typical mealtime conversation in her family when she was growing up. The male chorus plays her lewd grandfather, who repeatedly makes insensitive jokes about the size of Li'l Bit's breasts. Here, he dismisses her desire for a good education as irrelevant—the only qualifications she needs for life, in his view, are on her chest. He reflects an attitude that Li'l Bit encounters often, which is that women are inferior to men. Li'l Bit's reply is a brilliant example of intellectual one-upmanship, demonstrating erudition, learning, and wit. The particular quote she cites from *The Merchant of Vice* refracts on the play's general inquiry into how individuals should react to others' wrongdoing; "strained" in this case doesn't mean "tired," but "constrained." Mercy, then, is a kind of power.

PECK. Your grandfather's ignorant. And you're right — he's going to die soon. But he's family. Family is... family.

LI'L BIT. Grown-ups are always saying that. Family.

PECK. Well, when you get a little older, you'll see what we're saying.

LI'L BIT. Uh-huh. So family is another acquired taste, like French kissing?

PECK. Come again?

LI'L BIT. You know, at first it really grosses you out, but in time you grow to like it?

PECK. Girl, you are... a handful.

Related Characters: Li'l Bit, Uncle Peck (speaker), Li'l Bit's Grandfather

Related Themes:

Page Number: 15-16

Explanation and Analysis

This quote comes just after the previous one, as Peck gets sent outside to comfort Li'l bit; she has just stormed about because of her grandfather's insensitive behavior. It neatly illustrates the complexity of Peck's relationship with Li'l Bit. On the one hand he is acting with compassion and understanding; on the other, he is exerting control. His advice that she let her grandfather's behavior slide could be read as a subconscious reinforcement that she should let his inappropriate behavior go unchallenged too. Family is family, though on the surface of it a meaningless phrase, actually carries with it the instruction that the status quo is unchangeable—people and families just *are* how they are. Li'l Bit's retort gives the audience further insight into her relationship with Peck, strongly hinting that she is quoting his own words about "French kissing" back at him.

TEENAGE GREEK CHORUS. *(As Grandmother.)* Your grandfather only cares that I do two things: have the table set and the bed turned down.

Related Characters: Li'l Bit's Grandmother , Teenage Greek Chorus (speaker), Li'l Bit, Li'l Bit's Grandfather

Related Themes:

Page Number: 26

Explanation and Analysis

This quote comes during a conversation between Li'l Bit, the teenage chorus as her grandmother, and the female chorus playing her mother. Firstly, the reader must reconcile the contradiction between the young actor playing the teenage chorus (as specified by Vogel) and the elderly voice being channeled. Though there is a big age gap between the two, perhaps the suggestion is that gender attitudes can become so easily entrenched that they pass down unchallenged from one generation to the next. More widely, this quote sets out the kind of atmosphere of misogyny that Li'l Bit grows up in—even the women in her life seem to accept that that's just how things are. The quote paints the grandfather figure—and, by extension, men—as animalistic and primal, wanting only bodily and sexual satisfaction (rather than emotional connection).

> And dramaturgically speaking, after the faltering and slightly comical "first act," there was the very briefest of inter missions, and an extremely capable and forceful and *sustained* second act. 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.

Related Characters: Li'l Bit (speaker), Uncle Peck

Related Themes:

Page Number: 29

Explanation and Analysis

This quote comes from very brief sketch that takes place in 1979 (later than any of the other recollections though still very much one of Li'l Bit's memories). In the sketch, she describes being twenty-seven years old and meeting a man who. is ten years her junior. She knows that he wants to sleep with her and goes through with it, and, though this sex is consensual, the interaction mirrors Peck's attraction to her. The quote shows how deeply embedded the experiences with Peck are in Li'l Bit's psyche: sex with someone else calls to mind sexual activity with him. She wonders, then, if she can understand the same "allure" that he felt for her. The first couple of sentences, which talk about the sex using the language of theater as a framing device, both suggest Li'l Bit's literary intelligence and the artifice of the particular occasion described.

> LI'L BIT. 1967. In a parking lot of the Beltsville Agricultural Farms. The Initiation into a Boy's First Love.
>
> PECK. *(With a soft look on his face.)* Of course, my favorite car will always be the '56 Bel Air Sports Coupe. Chevy sold more '55s, but the '56! — a V-8 with Corvette option, 225 horse power; went from zero to sixty miles per hour in 8.9 seconds.
>
> LI'L BIT. *(To the audience.)* Long after a mother's tits, but before a woman's breasts:
>
> PECK. Super-Turbo-Fire! What a Power Pack — mechanical lifters, twin four-barrel carbs, lightweight valves, dual exhausts —
>
> LI'L BIT. *(To the audience.)* After the milk but before the beer:
>
> PECK. A specific intake manifold, higher-lift camshaft, and the tightest squeeze Chevy had ever made —
>
> LI'L BIT. *(To the audience.)* Long after he's squeezed down the birth canal but before he's pushed his way back in: The boy falls in love with the thing that bears his weight with speed.

Related Characters: Uncle Peck, Li'l Bit (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 32

Explanation and Analysis

This quote comes just before another of Li'l Bit's driving lessons with Peck. She is actually addressing the audience directly, breaking the fourth wall of the memory, while Peck's words are firmly within the memory's world. Li'l Bit draws out the link between men, cars, and sex. She implies that cars represent an obsession for men that comes between birth and the time of their interest in women. This paints cars as a kind of erotic figure and a site of control for men. The final line summarizes the objectification of women—the idea that women are simply something for men to make use of.

PECK. So if you're going to drive with me, I want you to take this very seriously.

LI'L BIT. I will, Uncle Peck. I want you to teach me to drive.

PECK. Good. You're going to pass your test on the first try. Perfect score. Before the next four weeks are over, you're going to know this baby inside and out. Treat her with respect.

LI'L BIT. Why is it a "she?"

PECK. Good question. It doesn't have to be a "she" — but when you close your eyes and think of someone who responds to your touch — someone who performs just for you and gives you what you ask for—I guess I always see a "she." You can call her what you like.

LI'L BIT. *(To the audience.)* I closed my eyes — and decided not to change the gender.

Related Characters: Li'l Bit, Uncle Peck (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 35

Explanation and Analysis

During a driving lesson, Peck has been giving Li'l Bit good advice on how to prepare for the road, but here goes deeper into how he sees the driver-car relationship. He gives the impression that he hasn't thought deeply before about the question of why he sees cars as female, implying that his attitude is embedded deep within his mind—this is the first time he's vocalized his reasoning. His explanation shows a terrible attitude towards women which is demeaning and misogynistic. In this, all of the agency and power belong to the man; the woman/the car is merely an object that responds to whatever the man does. Like he sees cars, then, Peck lets slip here that he wants to control Li'l Bit—wants her to "perform" and give him what he asks for. And Li'l Bit—naïve, confused, and desirous of a father figure—capitulates.

FEMALE GREEK CHORUS. You know, you should take it as a compliment that the guys want to watch you jiggle. They're guys. That's what they're supposed to do.

LI'L BIT. I guess you're right. But sometimes I feel like these alien life forces, these two mounds of flesh have grafted the selves onto my chest, and they're using me until they can "propagate" and take over the world and they'll just keep growing, with a mind of their own until I collapse under their weight and they suck all the nourishment out of my body and I finally just waste away while they get bigger and bigger and — *(Li'l Bit's classmates are just staring at her in disbelief.)*

FEMALE GREEK CHORUS. — You are the strangest girl I have ever met. *(Li'l Bit's trying to joke but feels on the verge of tears.)*

LI'L BIT. Or maybe someone's implanted radio transmitters in my chest at a frequency I can't hear, that girls can't detect, but they're sending out these signals to men who get mesmerized, like sirens, calling them to dash themselves on these "rocks" —

Related Characters: Li'l Bit, Female Greek Chorus (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 38

Explanation and Analysis

This quote comes during a quick succession of recollections that deal with Li'l Bit's experiences in high school. At this young age, she knows that her growing breasts have become the first thing anyone notices when they look at her—she is breasts first, Li'l Bit second. The female chorus, similarly to when it voiced Li'l Bit's mother, reinforces the status quo, indicating that Li'l Bit should actually be *grateful* for her increasing sexualization. Li'l Bit comes up with not one but two highly imaginative metaphors for the disconnect between her physiological and sexual development, likening her breasts first to "alien life forces," the suggestion of another world or civilization underlining just how strange it feels for her to become a sexual object. The second analogy shows that she is smart, portraying an awareness of ancient Greek mythology. Sirens were mythical beings who lured sailors to the rocks with their beautiful songs.

PECK. For a thirteen year old, you have a body a twenty-year-old woman would die for.

LI'L BIT. The boys in school don't think so.

PECK. The boys in school are little Neanderthals in short pants. You're ten years ahead of them in maturity; it's gonna take a while for them to catch up. *(Peck clicks another shot; we see a faint smile on Li'l Bit on the screen.)*

Girls turn into women long before boys turn into men.

Related Characters: Li'l Bit, Uncle Peck (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 41

Explanation and Analysis

This is a quote from a scene that depicts Peck and Li'l Bit in Peck's basement. He is taking photos of her with a semi-professional set-up. The first thing he says here shows his sexual obsession with youthfulness, implying that a twenty-year-old woman (who would still be quite young) is less attractive than a thirteen-year-old. His point about the difference between boys and girls in terms of sexual maturity contains a kernel of truth, which is that girls *do* hit puberty before boys. That said, Li'l Bit has only recently started going through the puberty process. But his words unwittingly contain a more problematic state of affairs: that girls become women before boys become men because they are so quickly sexualized by the men around them.

PECK. Well, Li'l Bit — let me explain it this way. There are some people who have a... a "fire" in the belly. I think they go to work on Wall Street or they run for office. And then there are people who have a "fire" in their heads — and they become writers or scientists or historians. *(He smiles a little at her.)* You. You've got a "fire" in the head. And then there are people like me.

LI'L BIT. Where do you have... a fire?

PECK. I have a fire in my heart. And sometimes the drinking helps.

LI'L BIT. There's got to be other things that can help.

PECK. I suppose there are.

LI'L BIT. Does it help — to talk to me?

PECK. Yes. It does. *(Quiet.)* I don't get to see you very much.

Related Characters: Li'l Bit, Uncle Peck (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 46

Explanation and Analysis

This quote takes place, chronologically speaking, during one of the earliest memories presented in the play. It is Christmas and Peck is doing the dishes, seemingly in a bad mood. Li'l Bit is impressed by his willingness to help out with the chores (and thus subvert typical gender roles). Peck gives an insight into his own internal struggle, suggesting that he somehow views his life as a failure by virtue of his comparison to writers, scientists, and so on. It also illustrates the initial terms of Peck and Li'l Bit's regular meetings, which are offered to Peck in exchange for him not drinking. There is a gentle suggestion that by "fire in my heart" Peck is referring to his illicit sexual obsessions—though that can't be said for sure.

LI'L BIT. — Well, what the hell were those numbers all about! Forty-four days to go —only two more weeks.—And then just numbers—69—68—67—like some serial killer!

PECK. Li'l Bit! Whoa! This is me you're talking to—I was just trying to pick up your spirits, trying to celebrate your birthday.

LI'L BIT. My *eighteenth* birthday. I'm not a child, Uncle Peck. You were counting down to my eighteenth birthday.

PECK. So?

LI'L BIT. So? So statutory rape is not in effect when a young woman turns eighteen. And you and I both know it. *(Peck is walking on ice.)*

PECK. I think you misunderstand.

LI'L BIT. 1 think I understand all too well. I know what you want to do five steps ahead of you doing it. Defensive Driving 101.

Related Characters: Uncle Peck, Li'l Bit (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 49

Explanation and Analysis

This quote comes towards the end of the play in a scene that is also towards the end of Li'l Bit and Peck's interactions together. They are in a hotel room together which Peck has booked in order to "celebrate" Li'l Bit's

birthday. Peck has been sending gifts to her dorm room on a daily basis, each one with a note. Li'l Bit is smart enough to know why he's so excited—when she turns eighteen she will become technically "legal" for him to have sex with. Peck senses an opportunity in which he can legitimize his attraction for Li'l Bit and, by implication, all of the abuse that has come before. Li'l Bit's statement that she is "not a child" is partly ironic, given she is still very young, but also accurately reflects her increasing awareness of the inappropriateness of Peck's behavior. She throws it back to Peck in a way that he can understand—by referencing his driving instructions.

LI'L BIT. Uncle Peck — I've been thinking a lot about this — and I came here tonight to tell you that — I'm not doing very well. I'm getting very confused — I can't concentrate on my work — and now that I'm away — I've been going over and over it in my mind — and I don't want us to "see" each other anymore. Other than with the rest of the family.

PECK. *(Quiet.)* Are you seeing other men?

LI'L BIT. *(Getting agitated.)* I — no, that's not the reason — I — well, yes, I am seeing other — listen, it's not really any body's business!

PECK. Are you in love with anyone else?

LI'L BIT. That's not what this is about.

Related Characters: Uncle Peck, Li'l Bit (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 51

Explanation and Analysis

In the same conversation as the previous quote, Li'l Bit plucks up the courage to tell Peck that she doesn't want to see him anymore. Her erratic speech pattern reflects her distressed state of mind as she confronts Peck and by extension the way he has treated her over the years. The audience garners an understanding of the negative effect that her relationship with Peck has had on her. Peck doesn't understand where she's coming from at all and acts like a jealous lover, suggesting that he sees his attraction for Li'l Bit as reciprocal. Li'l Bit is in a way trying to draw the lines between them more clearly, trying to restore the normal boundaries in an uncle-niece relationship.

PECK. Li'l Bit. Listen. Listen. Open your eyes and look at me. Come on. Just open your eyes, honey. *(Li'l Bit, eyes squeezed shut, refuses.)* All right then. I just want you to listen. Li'l Bit — I'm going to ask you just this once. Of your own free will. Just lie down on the bed with me — our clothes on — just lie down with me, a man and a woman... and let's... hold one another. Nothing else. Before you say anything else. I want the chance to... hold you. Because sometimes the body knows things that the mind isn't listening to... and after I've held you, then I want you to tell me what you feel.

LI'L BIT. You'll just... hold me?

PECK. Yes. And then you can tell me what you're feeling. *(Li'l Bit — half wanting to run, half wanting to get it over with, half wanting to be held by him.)*

LI'L BIT. Yes. All right. Just hold. Nothing else.

Related Characters: Li'l Bit, Uncle Peck (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 52

Explanation and Analysis

This quote is again from the same hotel room conversation. In it, Peck uses his typical strategy of using language to present his desires as perfectly acceptable, underplaying the strength of his sexual feeling and taking the threat out of the situation. The implication is about free will: he is proposing to Li'l Bit that they hold each other and that, if anything were to happen between them, it would be solely because they mutually wanted it to. He tries to redefine them as not uncle and niece but as simply "a man and a woman," attempting to impose a sense of purity on the occasion. Of course, the various recollections presented in the play thus far have shown years of psychological and emotional manipulation on Peck's part, undermining any consent that Li'l Bit could conceivably grant. Vogel's stage direction, which describes Li'l Bit's state of mind in an illogical "three halves," masterfully represents her heady mixture of confusing feelings.

LI'L BIT. Now that I'm old enough, there are some questions I would have liked to have asked him. Who did it to you, Uncle Peck? How old were you? Were you eleven? *(Peck moves to the driver's seat of the car and waits.)* Sometimes I think of my uncle as a kind of Flying Dutch man. In the opera, the Dutchman is doomed to wander the sea; but every seven years he can come ashore, and if he finds a maiden who will love him of her own free will — he will be released.
And I see Uncle Peck in my mind, in his Chevy '56, a spirit driving up and down the back roads of Carolina — looking for a young girl who, of her own free will, will love him. Release him.

Related Characters: Li'l Bit (speaker), Uncle Peck

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 54-55

Explanation and Analysis

This quote comes near the play's end and is spoken by Li'l Bit in the present day. It shows her reflecting on Uncle Peck. It's been years since she last saw him and he is now dead, having fallen drunkenly down the stairs following seven years of alcohol-induced misery after Li'l Bit rejects his marriage proposal in the hotel room. She intelligently looks back on her abuse at the hands of her uncle, understanding that this kind of behavior is so often cyclical and viewing Peck with compassion and understanding. But she also displays how she is distancing herself from the events of her childhood. By likening her uncle to the Flying Dutchman, she makes him less of an immediate presence in her mind and more of a distance, almost mythological figure. She understands the pain of his desire without excusing it.

FEMALE GREEK CHORUS. *(As Mother.)* I am not letting an eleven-year-old girl spend seven hours alone in the car with a man... I don't like the way your uncle looks at you.

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.

Related Characters: Li'l Bit, Li'l Bit's Mother , Female Greek Chorus (speaker), Uncle Peck

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 55-56

Explanation and Analysis

Just before the play comes to its conclusion, the action flashes back to the earliest point in the story's chronology. Here, Li'l Bit is trying to convince her mother—played by the female chorus—to let her spend time with Uncle Peck. Li'l Bit's mother has suspicions about his intentions towards Li'l Bit, of which her daughter seems to be aware. This is shown by her naïve insistence that she can "certainly handle" him and that "nothing will happen." The quote also outlines the fact that Li'l Bit sees Peck as something of a surrogate father, filling the absence left by her actual father. Unfortunately, though her mother here senses what might happen, she never acts on it or brings it up with Peck, exemplifying the way abuse can be facilitated by a family by virtue of no one taking a stand against it. The quote is another instance of sexual responsibility and blame being placed solely upon women, absolving men from responsibility.

TEENAGE GREEK CHORUS. Am I doing it right?

PECK. That's right. Now, whatever you do, don't let go of the wheel. You tell me whether to go faster or slower —

TEENAGE GREEK CHORUS. Not so fast, Uncle Peck!

PECK. Li'l Bit — I need you to watch the road — *(Peck puts his hands on Li'l Bit's breasts. She relaxes against him, silent, accepting his touch.)*

TEENAGE GREEK CHORUS. Uncle Peck — what are you doing?

PECK. Keep driving. *(He slips his hands under her blouse.)*

TEENAGE GREEK CHORUS. Uncle Peck — please don't do this —

PECK. —Just a moment longer... *(Peck tenses against Li'l Bit.)*

TEENAGE GREEK CHORUS. *(Trying not to cry.)* This isn't happening. *(Peck tenses more, sharply. He buries his face in Li'l Bit's neck, and moans softly.)*

Related Characters: Uncle Peck, Teenage Greek Chorus (speaker), Li'l Bit

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: Book Page 57

Explanation and Analysis

This passage is the penultimate scene and depicts Peck and Li'l Bit in his car. She is at her youngest age in any of the scenes, which is why Vogel opts for the youngest actress—the teenage chorus—to speak Li'l Bit's lines (while Li'l Bit does the actions). This is the first moment of abuse in their relationship and is presented in stark unflinching terms, masterfully delayed by Vogel till the end of the play so that any false sense of security or ambiguity surrounding Peck's actions is undermined. Peck offers Li'l Bit a turn at the steering wheel and, as she can't reach the pedals, sits her on his lap. His sexual desire is overwhelming and he touches her, acting completely on his own will without thinking about hers. His orgasm is an extremely uncomfortable moment for the audience and is a visceral evocation of the experience of abuse. He is able to do so because the car is a kind of incubated space, sheltering his actions from their consequences.

LI'L BIT. The nearest sensation I feel — of flight in the body — I guess I feel when I'm driving. On a day like today. It's five a.m. The radio says it's going to be clear and crisp. I've got five hundred miles of highway ahead of me — and some back roads too. I filled the tank last night, and had the oil checked. Checked the tires, too. You've got to treat her... with respect.

Related Characters: Li'l Bit (speaker), Uncle Peck

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 57-58

Explanation and Analysis

This is the last scene of the play, in which Li'l Bit addresses the audience in the present day. She outlines how, over the years, she has moved on from—but not forgotten—her experiences with Uncle Peck. She has come to understand the importance of family and forgiveness, things she rejected when she was younger. Paradoxically, it is the symbol that directly represents her abuse that grants her a true sense of freedom: the car. When she's driving, she feels "flight in the body" that she has always resisted from things like running or dancing because of the size of her breasts. The way she checks the car responsibly is a direct result of Peck's teaching, and her words about respect are repeat of what he said earlier. This shows that, strangely enough, she can reclaim her past by confronting it head on. She gets in the car and floors it, signaling not a destruction of her memories but a break with the past, the start of a journey to a new place in which she takes control of who she is, and isn't defined by someone else's eyes.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

HOW I LEARNED TO DRIVE

An official-sounding voice announces, "Safety first —You and **Driver** Education." Li'l Bit, a "well-endowed" woman of around thirty-five years of age, comes on stage. She announces that "sometimes to tell a secret, you first have to teach a lesson." She sets out the opening setting of the play: a moonlit summer night in Maryland in 1969, when she is seventeen years old and thinks she "knows it all." She is parked on a dark lane with her married Uncle Peck.

The voice announcement recurs throughout, marking transitions between Li'l Bit's different recollections using the types of phrases associated with driving instruction. Framing the narrative like this underlines the extent to which Li'l Bit's trauma and memories are linked to learning to drive—with her Uncle Peck.

Peck and Li'l Bit are in his **car**. He tells her he loves the smell of her hair and, learning that its Herbal Essences shampoo, talks about buying some. As he starts to describe using the shampoo in the bathtub, Li'l Bit asks him to stop: "Be good … Stop being bad." Peck professes his innocence, saying he has the "mind of a boy scout."

Peck is supposed to be an authority figure in Li'l Bit's life, and, to the extent that he teaches her to drive, he is. But this dynamic is twisted by the sexualization of their relationship—which is why they switch roles here, with Li'l Bit playing the moral authority and Peck, for want of a better word, flirting.

Peck insists that he has been "good" and wants to show Li'l Bit how good he is. She tells him not to "go over **the line**" and then calls him a "good boy" when he tells her that he hasn't had any alcohol the entire week. When he asks for a "reward," Li'l Bit allows him "a small one." Peck undoes her bra with one hand, begging to give her breasts "just one kiss."

Like the off-stage voice, "the line" recurs throughout the play and is borrowed from the vernacular of driving, e.g. white lines on the road. The line represents the point of transgression which, of course, Peck is already crossing. This also introduces the idea of Peck's suppressed vulnerability relating to alcohol.

Peck rubs Li'l Bit's breasts, saying "I tell you, you can keep all the cathedrals of Europe. Just give me a second with these—these celestial orbs." As he kisses her nipples, she insists that they have to go as she has a graduation rehearsal the next morning. She also asks him not to call her "Li'l Bit" anymore, because she's "a big girl now."

Peck's comparison of Li'l Bit's breasts to cathedrals is a suggestion of the primacy of being young—to him, no cultural achievements can match the body of a beautiful teenager.

Back in the present, Li'l Bit explains how members of her family are nicknamed for their genitalia. Her mother was called "the titless wonder" and her cousin was branded "B.B.," which the play's three Greek choruses explain stands for "blue balls." The female chorus, taking on the voice of Li'l Bit's mother, explains that Li'l Bit got her nickname from the appearance of her vagina when she was born. According to the female chorus, Uncle Peck could hold Li'l Bit in one hand back then.

Li'l Bit lives in a difficult home environment which is, on the one hand, crudely sexualized; on the other, it is a suppressed environment in which Li'l Bit struggles to learn anything useful about coming-of-age in relation to sexuality. The female chorus's mention of Uncle Peck is intentionally grotesque, underscoring the inappropriateness of his sexual attraction to his niece.

The off-stage voice says, "**Driving in First Gear**." The scene is now a typical family dinner in 1969, and Li'l Bit's family is commenting on the size of her breasts. The male chorus, in the voice of her grandfather, "Big Papa," makes lewd jokes about them, saying she'll need a "wheelbarrow" and that "her tits turn the corner" five minutes before she does.

This scene is one of many instances in which Li'l Bit faces misogynistic comments, particularly relating to the size of her breasts. The male chorus is, in essence, saying that she is defined by her physical appearance.

As Li'l Bit gets increasingly infuriated with her grandfather, Peck cautions her not to "let him get to you." Li'l Bit makes an impassioned plea that she wants to get a good education in order to "rise above my cracker background"—she wants to learn Shakespeare. The male chorus, speaking as her grandfather, asks, "how is Shakespeare going to help her lie on her back in the dark?"

Li'l Bit categorically doesn't want to be defined by her appearance, wanting to use her mind in life rather than her body. She wants to escape the kind of background that doesn't value women, exemplified by the male chorus. His point—as Big Papa—is that Li'l Bit's only use is as a sexual object.

Li'l Bit retorts that Big Papa is going to die soon, and that when he's at the gates of heaven he's going to be met by a "beautiful black woman in a long white robe." When he fails to recognize "The quality of mercy is not strained" as a quote from *The Merchant of Venice*, she says, he'll be condemned to hell.

This is a beautiful moment in which Li'l Bit demonstrates her intellectual superiority, even at her young age, over her grandfather. The particular quote in question is relevant to the play as a whole—in order to move on with her life, Li'l Bit has to treat her memories with mercy by letting them live, rather than blocking them out ("strained" in the Shakespeare is short for "constrained").

In these situations, explains Li'l Bit in the present, she would then storm out of the house weeping. Her Aunt Mary, Peck's wife voiced by the female chorus, would send him after her, commenting that "Peck's so good with them when they get to be this age."

Li'l Bit's intervention into the memory shows that this is just an indicative incident, one of many. Aunt Mary's words, spoken by the chorus, are highly ironic, given Peck's interest in Li'l Bit is, though partly paternalistic, deeply sexual.

Peck would then have a heart to heart with Li'l Bit, reassuring her while also insisting that "Family is… family." He says that she'll understand what that means as she gets older; in reply, she asks if family "is another acquired taste, like French kissing? … You know, at first it really grosses you out, but in time you grow to like it?" Li'l Bit takes Peck's **car** keys, insisting that she wants to go out for a drive alone.

"Family is family" may be a tautological phrase, but that doesn't make it meaningless. It implies an acceptance of the status quo, because that's just the way things are. *Li'l Bit's reply insinuates that Peck used similar logic on her with kissing. In this instance, the car represents a temporary liberation from the suffocating home environment.*

The action cuts forward to 1970. Li'l Bit explains that she got kicked out of her "fancy school" and that rumors were flying around as to why—they assumed her dismissal was to do with sex. But, she explains, it was actually because she was drinking whiskey every day. Kicked out of school, she worked dead-end jobs. During the night, she took long **drives** through the country, and, despite being drunk, "never so much as got a ticket. He [Peck] taught me well."

The way the action shifts around rapidly between different time periods is Vogel's way of emphasizing that trauma and memory do not function in a reliable, linear way. They're unpredictable, erratic. This particular recollection hints at Li'l Bit's struggle to process her relationship with Peck and how this struggle negatively impacts her life. Again, the car represents freedom—but it has mixed connotations, because she can only drive thanks to Peck too.

The off-stage voice cuts in, announcing, "**You and the Reverse Gear**." In this scene, Li'l Bit is at a high-end restaurant with Peck, celebrating passing her driving test. He suggests that she have oysters to start as well as a cocktail, despite not being of legal drinking age. He insists that this is a more "European" kind of establishment and that she'll get away with it. He promises not to drink himself.

This particular announcement signals that the action is going backwards in terms of the play's chronology. Peck is perhaps trying to get Li'l Bit drunk to make her more pliant to his desires. His suggestion of oysters is also a queasy moment for the audience, given that they have a reputation as an "aphrodisiac." Peck is trying to coerce Li'l Bit into consent.

Here, the female chorus interjects as Li'l Bit's mother to give "A Mother's Guide to Social Drinking." It instructs that a lady must never get "sloppy" and stay away from "ladies drinks" like margaritas, melon balls, and black Russians—"anything with sugar, or anything with an umbrella. A woman should drink "like a man."

The advice Li'l Bit receives in the play is almost invariably bad and more often than not is about maintaining the status quo. Drinking, says the voice, should be done on a man's terms—like so many other things in the play.

Back in the restaurant, Li'l Bit orders a dry martini, which Peck calls a "drink fit for a woman of the world." Li'l Bit tries to question Peck about his service during World War II, but he resists her questioning. Li'l Bit knocks back more drinks and gets drunk. The female chorus interjects again to instruct that a woman should make herself vomit in the bathroom if she has had too much to drink.

Vogel again drops a hint that Peck's behaviors might somehow be explained—rather than excused—by his own underlying trauma. His refusal to talk about his WWII experiences implicitly supports the play's position that people ought to talk more openly.

Li'l Bit has one more drink, allowed by the waiter because Peck implies that he will pay him extra. Li'l Bit and Peck discuss his mother. He says she wanted him to be "everything my father was not" and to "amount to something." Li'l Bit says drunkenly, "I'll bet your mother loves you, Uncle Peck."

This again hints at Peck's own trauma, perhaps related to his relationship with his own mother. Li'l Bit plays the role of caregiver and sympathizer, underscoring the emotional complexity of her relationship with Peck.

Having left the restaurant, Li'l Bit and Peck sit in his **car**. He intends to take her home, but she asks if he is going to take her upstairs (to the hotel rooms above the restaurant). Li'l Bit's tone changes as she insists that what they're doing is "wrong," saying "it's not nice to Aunt Mary." Peck insists that he will be the judge of what's "nice" to his wife.

Peck's position is a hypocritical one, implying that it's up to him with Aunt Mary would approve of his relationship. Implicit in his statement is that men have control over women.

Peck asks Li'l Bit: "have I forced you to anything?" He tells her that they are just enjoying each other's company and that nothing will happen between them "until you want it to." Li'l Bit drunkenly kisses him before pulling back, saying, "someone is going to get hurt." He fetches a blanket from the back seat and gives it to her to sleep under; though suddenly scared for a moment, she calms down and goes to sleep.

Peck is constantly trying to legitimize his behavior. He may not violently force Li'l Bit to do things against her will, but he undoubtedly coerces her psychologically. His choice of words is usually careful in this way. Li'l Bit's kiss shows her conflicted her feelings.

The teenage Greek chorus then introduces an anecdote about Uncle Peck teaching cousin Bobby to fish. Peck plies Bobby with alcohol. When Bobby catches a fish and gets upset at the fish's pain, Peck tells him not to cry and sets it free. He then suggests that he and Bobby go to a nearby tree house. It's a "secret place" he says—and Bobby can't tell anyone that they've been there.

Perhaps in order to prevent the audience from feeling too much sympathy for Peck, the teenage chorus introduces this anecdote. It is all told using Peck's words and shows how he uses language and logic to make his intentions and actions seem perfectly natural and acceptable. There's a strong sense of coercion here, too.

Li'l Bit then addresses the audience, introducing what she calls "On Men, Sex and Women: Part 1." This takes the form of a conversation between the fourteen-years-old Li'l Bit, the female chorus playing her mother, and the teenage chorus playing her grandmother.

The title of this scene as introduced by present-day Li'l Bit is intentionally comic. It has the air of a thesis, implying wisdom and knowledge. The ensuing conversation, though, arguably contains neither of these.

The female chorus/Li'l Bit's mother states that men only want one thing, "and once they have it they lose all interest. So Don't Give It to Them." The young Li'l Bit isn't sure what she's referring too. The teenage chorus/grandmother explains how Li'l Bit's grandfather has sex like "a big bull," every morning and evening and even some lunchtimes. He only wants her to do two things: "have the table set and the bed turned down."

The female chorus' advice does not provide Li'l Bit with useful guidance about sex—it merely says to avoid it. This is contradicted by the same character later advocating for Li'l Bit to be told more about the "facts of life." The teenage chorus/grandmother's account of sex with Li'l Bit's grandfather paints sex as something animalistic and primal, not allowing for a consideration of tenderness or love. She is also firmly entrenched in her gender role.

The female chorus/mother and the teenage chorus/grandmother debate the existence of orgasms, with the latter insisting she's never had one and that they're made up. The female chorus reveals that Li'l Bit's grandmother was fourteen—and still a believer in Santa and the Easter Bunny—when she met Big Papa; the male chorus chimes in as Big Papa to describe how he "picked your grandmother out of that herd of sisters just like a lion chooses the gazelle."

This reinforces the idea of sex as animalistic and primal while also emphasizing that it takes place on the man's terms. It has pseudoscientific implications, gesturing towards Darwinism and survival of the fittest.

The action flashes forward briefly to 1979, when Li'l Bit is twenty-seven. She meets a man who is ten years her junior on a bus and ends up having sex with him. Afterwards, she lies on her back and thinks of Uncle Peck, wondering if she feels the same "allure" that he did for her.

Peck's actions towards Li'l Bit reverberate through time. 1979 is much later than most of the play's action but shows that Li'l Bit's memories function like a constant hum in her mind. The sex in this instance is undeniably consensual, and so is markedly different from anything Li'l Bit did with Peck.

The play moves on to "On Men, Sex and Women: Part II." This time, Li'l Bit is fifteen years old. She tentatively asks her grandmother and mother, played by the same choruses as before, what it's like to have sex. The female chorus/mother tells her that sex hurts the first time, and that "there's a little blood." Grandmother/the teenage chorus, terrified, says, "it's agony! You think you're going to die! Especially if you do it before marriage!" Li'l Bit wonders why it's so unfair: "Why does everything have to hurt for girls?"

Li'l Bit's grandmother is a god-fearing woman, which is why she's taking a line in this which is intended to put off Li'l Bit from having sex before marriage. Though Li'l Bit's quote here is expressly about sex, it echoes across the other gender issues presented in the play.

The two choruses argue, with the mother wanting to give Li'l Bit the information that her own mother failed to do. The teenage chorus/grandmother shouts that, "if she [Li'l Bit] stops and thinks before she takes her knickers off, maybe someone in this family will finish high school!"

This reveals that the grandmother is disappointed in Li'l Bit's mother for falling pregnant early in life. This constitutes a kind of slut-shaming.

The argument intensifies, revealing that female chorus/mother resents the teenage chorus/grandmother for not telling her more about sex. If she had known more about "the facts of life," she wouldn't have had to marry Li'l Bit's father. The teenage chorus/grandmother says it was her own fault. The male chorus interjects to say, "You Made Your Bed; Now Lie On It!" The choruses break into a Motown song.

This offers the reverse perspective of the above, as the mother blames the grandmother for not being a better role model/confidante. The interjection from the male chorus offers a viewpoint that crops up throughout the play: that a woman is always responsible for everything that happens to her.

The choruses' song fades into the same song playing on the **radio** in Peck's **car**, in which he sits with Li'l Bit. It is 1967. As Peck talks enthusiastically about his first car, Li'l Bit addresses the audience on the topic of "a Boy's First Love": cars. A boy loves a car, she says, "long after he's squeezed down the birth canal but before he's pushed his way back in: The boy falls in love with the thing that bears his weight with speed."

The transition to this 1967 scene is made possible by Vogel's use of the Greek choruses, which allow her to jump suddenly—but seamlessly—between different points in time and space. They also allow for communication between different points in time, as in this instance, where present-day Li'l Bit highlights the eroticism in Peck's youthful attraction to his car.

This scene is one of Li'l Bit's driving lessons with Peck. He asks her what the first thing is to "adjust," to which she quips "my bra strap?" She tries to tune the **radio**, saying it's the most important part of the **car**; he switches it off and insists that she concentrate. He instructs her on seat position, the angling of the mirrors, and how to hold the steering wheel. She half-jokingly asks how she can "defend" herself with both hands on the steering wheel; he promises, "I will never touch you when you are driving a car."

Li'l Bit uses humor partly to help her deal with her experiences, but it also shows a certain amount desensitization (in this instance at least). Peck's absurd promise highlights the transgressive nature of their relationship in relation to society's norms. The car is again presented as a site of the erotic.

In a serious tone, Peck insists on how important it is to him that Li'l Bit learn to **drive** well. He tells her that she is the closest thing to a son that he has. He launches into a long speech in which he praises the "power" and freedom that comes with driving. He also outlines what he sees as the differences between male and female drivers: "men are taught to drive with confidence—with aggression. The road belongs to them … Women tend to be polite—to hesitate. And that can be fatal." He promises to teach Li'l Bit to drive "like a man."

The perversity of Peck telling Li'l Bit that he looks on her as a kind of son recalls the earlier comment that he could her old her in one hand when she was born. Despite that, what he says after stays with Li'l Bit and throughout her life she continues to view the act of driving similarly to her uncle. Peck associates control with men.

Li'l Bit promises to take Peck's teaching seriously. In return, he says, she'll be able to pass her driving test the first time. He implores her to get to know the **car**—"this baby"—inside out: "Treat her with respect." When Li'l Bit asks why the car is female, he replies: "It doesn't have to be a 'she'—but when you close your eyes and think of someone who responds to your touch—someone who performs just for you and gives you what you ask for—I guess I always see a 'she.'" Li'l Bit addresses the audience, saying that at this moment she closed her eyes and "decided not to change the gender."

Peck's gendering of the car means that he sees men as the drivers and women as the vehicle: that is, men are the active agents of control and women are the passive recipients, the objects. Li'l Bit's decision not to change the gender reflects her complicated feelings towards Peck.

Li'l Bit recounts some of her high school experiences, all of which involve her breasts. The male chorus, pretending to be a student called Jerome, feigns an allergy attack. Li'l Bit, concerned for his wellbeing, asks what he's allergic to. Jerome grabs her breast, and to much laughter says, "foam rubber." The teenage chorus tells the angry Li'l Bit that "rage is not attractive in a girl."

As in the earlier conversation around the dinner table, Li'l Bit is defined by her breasts. This particular episode places Li'l Bits' natural compassion—she wants to help Jerome—side by side with her objectification. Vogel equates objectification with a basic lack of humanity. The teenage chorus' line reflects society's role in supporting gender stereotypes.

The next high school vignette takes place in the gym showers. The female chorus and teenage chorus trick Li'l Bit into showering first. They are amazed to see that her breasts are real; the female chorus says Jerome owes her fifty cents.

This shows that Li'l Bit's treatment was part of a sustained campaign of objectification by her classmates—even the female ones.

The next vignette begins with the off-stage voice saying, "Were You Prepared?" Li'l Bit is talking to the female chorus about feeling self-conscious. Meanwhile, Peck is setting up a tripod and staring at her. The male chorus plays an awkward boy called Greg, who asks Li'l Bit to dance. She rejects him, telling the female chorus that she doesn't do "fast dances" because she thinks the boys only want to see her "jiggle."

Here, Vogel mixes two memories together. One is in the foreground: the dance. Peck is setting up in the next memory to come. With this technique, Vogel underscores both Peck's constant presence in Li'l Bit's mind and the way memory has its own logic. Li'l Bit's avoidance of "jiggling" continues to the present day.

The female chorus tells Li'l Bit that she should "take it as a compliment that the guys want to watch you jiggle. They're guys. That's what they're supposed to do." Li'l Bit complains that she feels like her breasts are "alien life forces" that "have grafted themselves onto my chest" so that they can "suck all the nourishment out of my body and I finally just waste away while they get bigger and bigger and—" The female chorus says Li'l Bit is the strangest girl she's ever met.

The female chorus's lines emphasize the way unequal gender stereotypes are propagated by an acceptance that they are merely the "facts of life." Li'l Bit's imaginative image for her breasts is a sci-fi-inspired way to demonstrate that she feels that her whole identity is being subsumed into her objectification as a sexual object.

Li'l Bit then puts forward another metaphor for her breasts: "maybe someone's implanted **radio** transmitters in my chest … they're sending out these signals to men who get mesmerized, like sirens, calling them to dash themselves on these 'rocks.'" There is a bleeping sound and Li'l Bit feels herself pulled by an invisible force towards both Greg and Peck. When Greg asks her to dance on a "slow number," she rejects him again, the force taking her over to Peck.

Li'l Bit's second inventive image also displays her erudition, showing an awareness of Greek mythology (sirens were dangerous creatures who lured sailors to their deaths).

Suddenly it's 1965 and Li'l Bit is in Peck's basement. Peck is adjusting the camera on his tripod. He puts on music that he knows Li'l Bit will like, reassuring her that no one is going to come down to the basement and that he won't cross "**the line**." Li'l Bit says, "that's right. No frontal nudity." Peck is surprised at her candid manner, wondering where she picked that up. Li'l Bit defensively insist that she "reads"; Peck laughs this off, sarcastically saying that he reads *Playboy* for the interviews.

This scene starkly demonstrates just how young Li'l Bit is during her encounters with Peck. At this point she is thirteen. Knowing she is looked at increasingly sexualized way, she tries to seem defiant and in control, spelling out the conditions of "the line."

Peck trains the camera on Li'l Bit and asks her to respond to the music with her body, "almost like dancing." He tells her to pretend she's alone on a Friday night with her mirror. Li'l Bit is self-conscious at first but starts swaying to the music as Peck takes pictures.

Peck uses music to make Li'l Bit feel comfortable—but only for his own gain. The whole set-up gives him a quasi-legitimate reason to ogle Li'l Bit.

Peck tells Li'l Bit that "for a thirteen-year-old, you have a body a twenty-year old woman would die for." Furthermore, says Peck, she's "ten years ahead" "in maturity" of the "Neanderthal" boys she goes to school with. He adds that "girls turn into women long before boys turn into men."

Peck here plays the role of a sexual authority. He also reminds the viewer that his sexual desires are specifically nubile, implying that he prefers a thirteen-year-old body over a twenty-year-old's (which itself is a youthful age). The play implies that Peck is right about girls turning into women before boys turn into men—firstly, puberty does start in girls earlier than boys. But the implied meaning is that girls are forced to "grow up"—that is, face their sexualization—earlier than boys because of the way they are objectified.

As Peck tells her that she looks "beautiful," Li'l Bit praises the beauty of Aunt Mary (Peck's wife). Peck says that Aunt Mary's beauty doesn't "cancel" out hers. To make Li'l Bit laugh, Peck gets her to think of "Big Papa chasing Grandma around the living room." Her laughter makes for a "great" shot.

The image of Big Papa chasing Grandma reinforces the earlier idea that sex is an animalistic activity between predator and prey. Peck is also using an appeal to Li'l Bit's family sensibilities to make her a more willing participant.

"If we keep this up," says Peck, "in five years' time we'll have a really professional portfolio." Li'l Bit is shocked, wondering what he's referring too. He says that she needs to be eighteen to submit for *Playboy*, realizing that he's made a mistake in saying so. Li'l Bit vehemently insists that she would never want to be in *Playboy*, longing instead to go to college.

Li'l Bit has clearly been concerned about Peck's motives for doing the shoot, and here he forgets his story. His verbal slip—from a man normally so careful with his use of language—exposes his real intentions.

Peck is adamant that there's nothing wrong in what they're doing. As Li'l Bit continues to complain about Peck's intentions with the photographs, he tries to calm her down, telling her that he's "very proud" of her: "I think you have a wonderful body and an even more wonderful mind." Li'l Bit says that she thought the photos were just for him. He promises that, if in five years she still doesn't want anyone to see them, he'll keep them private.

Peck uses his position as a father figure to keep Li'l Bit on his side. It's noticeable that, despite him saying that her mind is more *wonderful than her body, "mind" comes second in his sentence. His syntax thus reveals the true hierarchy in Peck's mind between Li'l Bit's body and intelligence.*

Li'l Bit has her eyes firmly closed. Peck asks her to look at him and tells her that he loves her. This startles her, opening her eyes. "I have loved you every day since you were born," says Peck. Li'l Bit's resolve weakens, and she continues with the shoot.

Arguably Li'l Bit's anger subsides here not because she is glad of Peck's amorous feelings, but because they closely map on to her longing for a father figure. The fact that he has loved Li'l Bit since she was born, meanwhile, further highlights the deeply inappropriate nature of his pursuit.

The off-stage voice indicates a shift in the action, calling out: "**Idling in the Neutral Gear**." The male chorus presents the female chorus as Aunt Mary, who speaks to the audience "on behalf of her husband." The female chorus/Aunt Mary praises the virtue of Peck's character: how he does the chores round the house, helps out the neighbors, works overtime to buy her jewelry, etc.

The female chorus' intervention as Aunt Mary paints a picture for how abuse can be hidden and even tolerated within a family environment. Peck is, on the surface of it, a good man.

The female chorus/Aunt Mary says that she knows Peck has "troubles." She mentions Peck's war experiences and how he never talks about them, "burrowing" them "deeper than the scar tissue." She tells the audience that she knows "what's going on." However, the female chorus/Aunt Mary doesn't blame her husband: he "fights against it." She instead blames Li'l Bit for being such a "sly one." Aunt Mary can't wait till Li'l Bit goes off to college so that she can get her "husband back."

The female chorus removes Peck's pedophilia from being his responsibility by linking it to "troubles" brought on by external events and his repression of emotions. In a roundabout way, she has a good point: that trauma can beget trauma if isn't handled well. But she intends this as an excuse for Peck, instead placing the burden of responsibility solely on Li'l Bit—which is obviously incorrect.

The action shifts back to Christmas 1964 (with the off-stage voice repeating, "**You and Reverse Gear**"). Li'l Bit is in the kitchen with Peck. The latter has an apron on and is doing the dishes, in a quiet "brooding" mood. Li'l Bit says that it's "really nice" that he does the dishes. He thinks "men should be nice to women" and that it's only fair that he plays his part.

Vogel is careful not to portray Peck as a monster, and this scene is part of that overall project. By seeing a man act atypically for his gender, Li'l Bit is impressed by Peck and feels sympathy towards him.

Li'l Bit seems concerned with Peck's well-being. She asks him why he drinks so much. He explains that, while some people have a "fire in the belly" (like politicians and stockbrokers), and others have a "fire" in their heads (like writers, scientists or historians), he has a "fire" in his heart. "Sometimes the drinking helps," says Peck.

Peck shows the Li'l Bit and the audience a small glimpse of his own trauma—though not of its causes, just its effects. He clearly feels he has failed to amount to much (as implied in the earlier restaurant conversation), which perhaps exerts a subliminal influence on his lust for youth.

Out of sympathy for Peck, Li'l Bit offers to make a deal with him. She proposes that they meet once a week to talk about whatever is "bothering" Peck—as long as he stays sober. She doesn't want her mother or Aunt Mary to know. It has to be in public, she says: "You've got to let me—draw **the line**. And once it's drawn, you mustn't cross it." Peck is clearly moved and accepts the conditions of the deal. They wish each other a Merry Christmas.

Peck and Li'l Bit's relationship, then, actually starts from her own suggestion. This is in no way intended by Vogel to blame her for what happens, but instead to highlight the complicated mix of seemingly contradictory emotions involved in the relationship. Even at this early age, Li'l Bit is aware of a potential sexual element that she is keen to prevent.

The official-sounding voice announces: "**Shifting Forward from Second to Third Gear**." It's late 1969. The male and female choruses read out notes and gifts from Peck to Li'l Bit. They are sent to her college dorm room, and include chocolates, roses, a tape of *Carmina Burana* and a copy of *Liasons Dangereuses*.

The shift up a gear signals an acceleration towards the climax of the relationship and, more widely, the ending of the play. All of Peck's gifts show a woeful misunderstanding of Li'l Bit's age and intellect.

The messages from Peck grow increasingly desperate, counting down the days to Li'l Bit's eighteenth birthday (when he plans to visit her) and asking her to send him a reply. Eventually, Li'l Bit reads out a message to Peck telling: "Don't come up next weekend for my birthday. I will not be here."

The relationship is inherently unequal and unstable, with Li'l Bit feeling nothing of the loyalty and commitment to Peck that he imagines. This, of course, is a particularly significant birthday—as becomes clear shortly.

The off-stage voice announces: "**Shifting Forward from Third to Fourth gear**." It's December 10, 1969. Li'l Bit and Peck are in a "very nice" hotel room, an ice bucket with champagne in the corner. Peck is sitting on the bed while she paces up and down the room. She chastises him for sending all of those gifts, saying it "scared the holy crap" out of her, "like some serial killer!"

The acceleration of the action continues. Peck is again trying to bestow on Li'l Bit the kind of romantic gestures of one lover to another. She knows the reason behind is excited impatience for her to turn eighteen.

Li'l Bit accuses Peck of wanting to her celebrate her birthday because it makes her legal to have sex: "statutory rape is not in effect when a young woman turns eighteen. And you and I both know it." Peck says that she misunderstands him, but she insists that she knows what he wants to do "five steps ahead" of him doing it—which she compares to "Defensive **Driving** 101."

The reasons for Peck's behavior become clear. Because of the function of the law in relation to sex and society, Peck senses that one day could make all the difference between "officially" transgressive sexual behavior and a legitimate relationship.

Peck asks why—if she's so "pissed off"—Li'l Bit wanted to meet in the hotel room instead of a restaurant. She explains that she doesn't want to have "this conversation in public." Li'l Bit gets Peck to open the champagne; he "makes a big show of it." She frantically knocks two glasses back and says she thinks he should have some too.

Peck took Li'l Bit's "enthusiasm" for the hotel room as a signal of her sexual and romantic interest in him. But really, she's just ashamed—and, in part, concerned for his wellbeing. While he views the champagne as a gesture of celebration, for Li'l Bit it represents a way of helping her through a horrible situation. The fact that she suggests he drink some too reflects that she is no longer sympathetic to his quest for sobriety or excuses for his behavior.

Peck toasts to Li'l Bit's birthday and asks how her schooling is going. She explains that she thinks she is "flunking out." Making small talk, she asks about Aunt Mary and then about Peck's new **car**. He proudly explains that it's a "Cadillac El Dorado"—and that it's for her.

Li'l Bit is clearly struggling to process her relationship with Peck, and this struggle is inflicting on everything in her life. His gift of a car is an attempt to win favor and also a way of implying his authority.

The small talk fades away. After a brief silence, both Li'l Bit and Peck try to speak; they both have something to say. Peck goes first, explaining how much he's missed her. She interrupts his speech to tell him that she's "getting very confused" and isn't "doing very well," continuing, "I don't want us to 'see' each other anymore."

Both the characters have very different intentions in this scene, with Li'l Bit wanting to end their relationship and Peck wanting to cement it. Li'l Bit is coming to realize the inappropriateness of Peck's behavior.

Peck, hurt, asks if Li'l Bit has been seeing other men, and if she's in love with anyone else. Agitated, she says it's not about that—and that "it's not really anybody's business!" He tells her that she's scared. As Li'l Bit starts trembling, Peck repeats the line that he has loved her since the day he held her in his hand. Li'l Bit, getting more exasperated, says, "I can't see you anymore Uncle Peck."

Peck thinks of himself as a legitimate lover threatened by potential others. This, of course, is not how Li'l Bit sees it, which is why she rejects his question about other men. Peck is right: she is scared. But of him specifically, not of being his lover.

Peck downs his champagne and asks Li'l Bit to open her eyes. All he wants, he says, is to lie down on the bed with her and for them to "hold one another—Nothing else." He wants to hold her and for her to just see how she feels. Li'l Bit agrees, described by the stage directions as "*half wanting to run, half wanting to get it over with, half wanting to be held by him.*"

Peck's drinking of the champagne indicates his destabilization as it begins to dawn on him that things won't go to plan. His proposal just to hold her is another instance of him coercing her into sexual activity by presenting it as inherently harmless. The "three halves" of Li'l Bit's mental state indicate her level of confusion.

Peck and Li'l Bit hold each other on the bed. The male chorus and the female chorus (who is still in the voice of Aunt Mary) recite a surreal "Recipe for a Southern Boy," describing Peck's physical characteristics in an increasingly climactic way: "A gumbo of red and brown mixed in the cream of his skin … A curl of Elvis on his forehead … His heart beating Dixie … The whisper of the zipper—you could reach out with your hand and—"

The choruses function to increase the sense of sexual tension. Peck is not an unattractive man, on a purely aesthetic level, and Li'l Bit undeniably feels a degree of physical attraction toward him. This, though, could well be based on years of coercive behavior on his part.

Li'l Bit leans in to kiss Peck, but "wrenches herself free." She lies in response to his question, saying she felt "nothing." Peck, now trembling too, gets out a ring and proposes to Li'l Bit, saying that at forty-five he's not too "old for a man" and that he will divorce Aunt Mary to be with her. She exclaims: "This isn't happening." She tells him to go home, and that he has gone "way over **the line**." Li'l Bit leaves, and moments later Peck is depicted ordering shot after shot of alcohol from the male chorus (playing the role of bartender).

Peck plays his last card as he senses Li'l Bit slipping away: a marriage proposal. This is clearly an absurd proposition for Li'l Bit, a nauseous mix of romanticism and paternalism. Though she accuses him of going over the line here, the viewer knows that he has already gone over the line on many occasions before. The interaction with the bartender shows that Peck, now he no longer has the transactional affection of his niece, turns to drink to drown his sorrows.

Back in the present, Li'l Bit addresses the audience. She explains how she never saw Peck again. Over the seven years after her rejection, she goes on, Peck drank himself to death, losing his job then his wife, "and finally his **driver's license**." One night he drunkenly fell down the stairs, hit his head, and died.

Peck never recovers Li'l Bit's rejection and is ultimately killed by the same thing that comforts him: alcohol. The sequence with which he loses his life over seven years deliberately culminates in his driver's license, underscoring how important the driving lessons were as an opportunity for him to get close to his niece.

Now that she's old enough, says Li'l Bit, she has a question she wishes she could ask Peck: "Who did it to you, Uncle Peck? How old were you? Were you eleven?" She says she's come to think off him as "a kind of Flying Dutchman," a spirit **driving** "up and down the back roads of Carolina—looking for a young girl who, of her own free will, will love him. Release him."

The Flying Dutchman analogy displays Li'l Bit's intelligence and erudition, but also hints at her increasing wisdom and perspective as she reflects on what has happened. Viewing Peck through the prism of a myth shows that she is attaining an increasing sense of distance from the relationship and its traumatic effects.

The off-stage voice announces a shift back in "**reverse gear**" to the summer of 1962. Li'l Bit is trying to convince her mother (played by the female chorus) to let her spend more time with Peck—she says that he "listens to me when I talk." The chorus insinuates that Peck's motives are less than innocent: "I am not letting an eleven-year-old girl spend seven hours alone in the car with a man… I don't like the way your uncle looks at you."

This moment shows that, even though Li'l Bit and her mother can discuss Peck's potential attraction to her with relative frankness, her family was still unable or unwilling to prevent Peck's actions.

Li'l Bit tries to reassure the female chorus/mother that "nothing will happen!" She says that just because her mother lost her husband doesn't mean she doesn't "deserve a chance at having a father." The female chorus/mother tells Li'l Bit that if "something happens" she will hold Li'l Bit responsible.

Li'l Bit is too young to take responsibility for what happens when she spends time with a middle-aged man. But, just as Li'l Bit's grandmother held Li'l Bit's mother responsible for her own sexual behavior, so too does Li'l Bit's mother place the onus of responsibility on her own daughter (thereby not breaking the pattern that seems to be at play within the family).

The action then reverts to 1962, the "first **driving** lesson." On the backroads of Carolina, Peck offers to let Li'l Bit drive, even though she is well under age. For this scene only, Li'l Bit's lines are spoken by the teenage chorus, though the actions remain hers.

This scene takes the audience back to the earliest point in the chronology of Peck's sexual behavior towards Li'l Bit. Li'l Bit's voice is played by the younger chorus as a way of emphasizing her age at the time and as another demonstration of her increasing emotional distance from the abuse.

Li'l Bit can't reach the **car**'s pedals, so Peck gets her to sit on his lap and steer. As he tells her what to do, he starts fondling her breasts. She asks him to stop; Uncle Peck clenches. As a tearful Li'l Bit/the teenage chorus says, "this isn't happening," Peck "moans softly."

By saving the first occasion of abuse for the end of the play, Vogel reframes what has come before. In this scene, Peck makes no attempt to elicit Li'l Bit's permission for his actions and shows him unable to control his sexual desire. Li'l Bit's words are exactly the same as the ones she says in the hotel room, drawing a link between the start and the end of the relationship. This link seems to show that, despite moments of affection and confusion on Li'l Bit's part here and there, the relationship is inherently abusive.

Peck and the teenage chorus fade away. Li'l Bit steps out of the **car** as the off-stage voice announces: "Driving in Today's World." The present-day Li'l Bit tells the audience that "that day was the last day I lived in my body." She feels lucky, now she's a bit older, to have started believing in things her younger self didn't, "like family and forgiveness."

The play comes to an end as it began, with Li'l Bit in the present day. The audience has been on a journey deep into her trauma, and with the previous car scene, has witnessed the starting point of the abuse. Over time, and through processing what she has been through, Li'l Bit has learned to value what she didn't before.

Li'l Bit says she has still "never known what it feels like to jog or dance. Anything that … 'jiggles.'" Moving towards the **car**, she explains that the nearest feeling she has to "flight in the body" is driving her car. She's checked the oil and tires—"you've got to treat her … with respect"—and has a long highway ahead of her.

With the above in mind, Li'l Bit reminds the viewer that her experiences can never be fully left behind. Instead, she has to negotiate her relationship with them and take control (as portrayed figuratively in her checks with the car).

Getting into the **car**, Li'l Bit checks "the most important control on the dashboard—the **radio**." As she tries to find the station, the female, male, and teenage choruses speak back lines from earlier in the play, e.g. "How is Shakespeare gonna help her lie on her back in the—" Li'l Bit checks her mirrors and adjusts her seat. The spirit of Peck seems to be sitting in the back of the car. She smiles at him, before flooring it.

The car here represents both Li'l Bit's freedom and the impossibility of "un-experiencing" what's come before—because her freedom is based on the very environment in which Peck was able to abuse his position. The tuning of the radio is symbolic too—she can't forget the voices of the past, but she can choose to prioritize others. With the music on that she loves, she thus takes agency of the situation. She can't forget what happened with Peck, but through better understand her trauma, she can—literally—move on.

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