

# Sympathy for the Devil: Resiliency and Victim-Perpetrator Dynamics in Paula Vogel's *How I Learned to Drive*

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## Abstract

*This essay argues that Vogel's play stages an intervention against the political-historical limitations of trauma treatment and a corrective measure against the erasure of the perpetrator in survivor discourse. With a survivor who looks directly at the perpetrator's ability to harness power for his own gain and reveals a compassionate understanding of his weaknesses, How I Learned to Drive also dramatizes a deep identification with the perpetrator that does not always align with classical psychoanalysis or some contemporary survivor movements' attempts to redress previous approaches to sexual trauma. The play serves as a warning that unless these painful ambiguities around the survivor-perpetrator dynamic are addressed, efforts to reclaim agency after trauma will be thwarted, and survivor movements risk repeating the failure of earlier trauma paradigms.*

I would say that we can receive great love from people who harm us. . . . We are living in a culture of victimization, and great harm can be inflicted by well-intentioned therapists, social workers, and talk show hosts who encourage people to dwell in their identity as victim. Without denying or forgetting the original pain, I wanted to write about the great gifts that can also be inside that box of abuse. My play dramatizes the gifts we receive from the people who hurt us.

(Vogel 436)

Through this provocative claim about the gifts offered by perpetrators, playwright Paula Vogel positions herself and her Pulitzer-winning play *How I Learned to Drive*

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(1998) within the controversy surrounding the feminist politicization of survivor movements. Indeed, Vogel's statement presents a triangular relationship between survivor, perpetrator, and the therapeutic role in the outcome of abuse. However, here we see a kind of reversal in conventional associations in that the abuser bestows "gifts" while the therapist reinforces damage. This essay argues that Vogel's play stages an intervention against the political-historical limitations of trauma treatment and a corrective measure against the erasure of the perpetrator in survivor discourse. With a survivor who looks directly at the perpetrator's ability to harness power for his own gain and reveals a compassionate understanding of his weaknesses, *How I Learned to Drive* also dramatizes a deep identification with the perpetrator that does not always align with classical psychoanalysis or some contemporary survivor movements' attempts to redress previous approaches to sexual trauma. No stranger to controversy, Vogel focuses her plays often on hotly-contested issues of the 1990s culture wars, including pornography in *Hot N' Throbbing* (1994) and AIDS in *Baltimore Waltz* (1992), and challenges orthodoxies within both conservative movements and feminism. *How I Learned to Drive* situates itself within the late-1990s trauma politics through its staging of a complex, often-unsettling depiction of the victim-perpetrator dynamic. The play serves as a warning that unless these painful ambiguities around the survivor-perpetrator dynamic are addressed, efforts to reclaim agency after trauma will be thwarted, and survivor movements risk repeating the failure of earlier trauma paradigms.

## How I Learned to Drive in the 1990s Culture Wars

To address Vogel's intervention in trauma politics, it is essential to look closely at the cultural moment in which the play emerges, particularly in relation to feminist concerns about power, agency, and traumatic legacies. *How I Learned to Drive* enters a scene of questioning about the feminist use of victim-survivor discourse, particularly related to the lingering damage caused by abuse. In *Sex Wars: Sexual Dissent and Political Culture*, Lisa Duggan notes that this period also marks a transition from a morality-based rhetoric to one concerning damage or harm in the legislation regulating pornography, for example, underscoring the critical role of establishing the long-term consequences associated with sexual violence in multiple forms (10). Internal conflicts arose when self-identified feminists such as Naomi Wolf thrust into public consciousness the term "victim feminism," which accompanied the kind of criticism usually brought forth by more culturally conservative opponents of feminism. These power feminists joined the advancement of the pro-sex or sex-positive feminist critique, which included second-wave thinkers like Ellen Willis. In addition to countering the positions of antiporn activists, Willis and others questioned our understanding and discursive deployment of the pervasive damage caused by incest or other forms of sexual abuse, particularly in childhood.

L'il Bit, the protagonist of *How I Learned to Drive*, is an adult woman who recounts her lengthy, complex relationship with her pedophilic Uncle Peck. She takes the stage

with diverse voices attempting to define her experience as a female sexual-abuse victim and survivor against earlier elisions within psychoanalysis and within an often-divided feminist political framework. According to Alyson M. Cole, this debate did not cover new territory; rather “their challenge to contemporary feminism may be understood as yet another permutation of the long-standing conflict between liberal and radical feminists” (73). Cole explains that “much before anti-victimism became the cause célèbre of the political Right in the early 1990s, feminists were debating the appropriate use of suffering in defining women’s condition(s) and in setting common goals” (74). Before this wave of critique in the mid-1990s, the “use of suffering” involved the increasing visibility surrounding survivor movements and their politicization, including organized public testimony in Take Back the Night gatherings or the publication of Ellen Bass and Laura Davis’s *Courage to Heal*, the controversial text that recognizes the possibility of sexual abuse when evidence exists only in somatic or behavioral symptoms suggesting traumatic history. Critics of survivor movements and its primary cultural texts, including *Courage to Heal* and a number of popular memoirs and TV specials, accused advocates of emphasizing the damage and pervasiveness of sexual abuse for political gain and underestimating the resiliency of survivors.<sup>1</sup> Putting abuse on the map or radar of public consciousness involved famous figures, including Oprah and a former Miss America, disclosing an abuse history.<sup>2</sup> Complicating the understanding of the damage left by abuse, these figures spoke from positions of accomplishment and renown, sending a mixed message. Although their stories promised the possibility of rising from a sexually traumatic history, they also left the public with the message that, even with their considerable achievement, the survivors remain haunted by the abuse.

At this same point, more scholarly studies, most significantly Judith Herman’s groundbreaking *Trauma and Recovery*, arrived on the scene and offered a perspective about the lasting effect – the damage – of childhood sexual abuse, and applied the existing research on post-traumatic stress disorders to abuses most often suffered by female victims. Crediting feminism as a critical impetus for her research, Herman addresses the gender politics at the heart of classical psychoanalysis, particularly when confronting Freud’s retraction of the seduction theory.<sup>3</sup> Like Jeffrey Masson, whose controversial *Assault on Truth* resulted in his dismissal from the Freud Archives, Herman questions Freud’s reasons for abandoning his previous theories about the prevalence of childhood sexual abuse. The figure that remains in the shadows of psychoanalytic history is the perpetrator, often a close male relative. With his retraction, Freud posited female desire in place of the actual event of sexual misconduct, allowing the testimony of survivors of sexual abuse to go unacknowledged, with survivors themselves blamed for the hysterical symptoms. This “cover story” of classical psychoanalysis, Herman suggests, allows the perpetrators to hide behind a burgeoning cultural discourse.

At this earlier moment within the development of psychoanalysis’ relationship to sexual abuse survivors, Freud responded to the potential scandal that could result from the public acknowledgment of the fathers or male family members/intimates as

1 For an example of this criticism, see Tavis and the responses to it published in the same issue of the *New York Times Book Review*.

2 See “A Miss America Says She Was Incest Victim”; the television drama *Something about Amelia*; Harrison; and Dolores Clairborne.

3 Freud’s use of the word “seduction” has sparked considerable analysis of a corrective nature, objecting to the way seduction implies some consent. For a comprehensive critical overview of the controversies surrounding Freud’s ‘seduction theory’ and its legacy within classical psychoanalysis, see Lothane.

abusers. Freud then chose to focus on the symptoms of abuse as they manifested themselves somatically in female patients while allowing the causal agent, the abuser, to remain unnamed. Christina Zwarg notes, “the haunting power of trauma has to do with the ambivalence Freud feels toward the concept from the moment he separates himself from the seduction theory by cutting trauma roughly in half, brilliantly elaborating the symbolic resonances and somewhat hastily (though never completely) obscuring the psychic burden of the actual events” (1–2). With the redress resulting from feminist critique and discovery related to traumatic stress syndromes associated previously with soldiers’ experience, a vigilant and often compulsive search to uncover the event itself and its agent, the perpetrator, replaces the emphasis on oedipal desire. This turn about, however, does not always allow for the subtle shifts of power in the victim-perpetrator dynamic, particularly in intimate violence occurring over prolonged periods.

Late twentieth-century critiques challenge the shift from the perpetrator toward desire within the hysterical subject. Vogel’s play also addresses another scandal in her cultural moment, one involving the public acceptance of the trauma’s damage as final, and the play connects this scandal with the need to explore complex victim-perpetrator dynamics more carefully. Vogel provides some insight into her position in an interview with Arthur Holmberg:

In the 70s a lot of people at the Women’s Project [an important theater company in New York] thought I was misogynistic. . . . For me being a feminist means looking at things that disturb me, looking at things that hurt me as a woman. We live in a misogynistic world, and I want to see why not just men are the enemy but how I as a woman participate in that system. To say men are the enemy is patronizing. It makes me a victim, and I am not comfortable as a victim. (437)

Vogel positions herself against a kind of cultural feminism that attributes a positive essence to the female nature. Alice Echols describes cultural feminism’s initial promise: “cultural feminism with its insistence on women’s essential sameness to each other and their fundamental difference from men seemed to many a way to unify a movement that by 1973 was highly schismatic” (244). However, by the mid-1990s, many more schisms became apparent, including strong critiques of any brand of feminism that attempted to unify by consolidating difference and that attributed violence to masculinity and pacific nature to femininity.

In this same period of internal conflict within feminism, *The Psychological Bulletin*, the key journal of the American Psychological Association, published the infamous Rind study, “A Meta-Analytic Examination of Assumed Properties of Child Sexual Abuse Using College Samples,” that the APA later condemned. The controversy involved the primary researchers’ affiliations with known pedophilia advocacy groups. It also shook up the consensus that Childhood Sexual Abuse (CSA) had lasting or permanent negative effects on its survivors. This controversial article even resulted in a congressional resolution against the article, its methodology, and its findings.

The critiques centered on the association between the researchers and pedophilia advocates, including the Man/Boy Love Association, making the claim that the researchers wrote to justify a practice rather than provide objective findings. Analyzing these “politics of child sex abuse research,” Janice Haaken and Sharon Lamb identify the need “to steer a middle ground between a socially constructionist or culturally relative position,” which would avoid firm or absolute judgments when discussing childhood sexual abuse and its aftermath, and “an approach that emphasizes universal principles of justice and care on the other” (13–14).

Although deeply flawed to the American Psychological Association, the American Psychiatric Association, and most scholars in the field, the Rind study becomes compelling *if only* to examine the intense response to it and the questions it raises about our willingness to consider variations to the cultural narrative of childhood sexual abuse. The Rind controversy may also offer insight because it draws attention to attempts to differentiate the levels of damage depending on the agency of the survivor in the experience. According to the Rind study, if the child was coerced, particularly by violence or the threat of violence, the emotional consequences were much more severe. This more (although hardly) nuanced position allows for an acknowledgment that all abuse is not equal, and even more controversial, that a child may have had some agency within the situation, and that the presence of this agency – as real or imagined within the child’s perception – may account for the child’s resiliency in later years. Vogel’s play enters this debate by representing survivor agency and mindfulness in relation to the perpetrator, offering her audience a complicated sense of the potential shifts in power – or perception of power – within the abuse dynamic.

With this questioning of damage in the background, Vogel brings the perpetrator to the scene but in ground-shifting ways, suggesting that measuring damage entails understanding the victim-perpetrator dynamics. These two figures, the survivor-victim and the perpetrator, become central to this period of transformation within the psychoanalytic movement and the larger culture. The increasing knowledge about surviving sexual abuse brought as a logical extension a greater awareness of the nature of perpetrating such acts, and the play does not allow us to slip into reductive readings of the perpetrator.

At this compelling cultural moment, Vogel’s claim that “we” receive gifts from those who harm us gestures toward depicting a powerful, and not debilitated, survivor. The play supports this claim without denying harm but does reject any damage as final, complete, and catastrophic. Perhaps the unexpected—even scandalous—part of returning some power and agency to the survivor in this play includes humanizing the perpetrator in a controversial move that reveals a kind of traumatic intimacy often unacknowledged and perceived as threatening to the survivor movement. The play’s controversy lies in its ability to represent a perpetrator that seduces audiences as well as his victims.

## Complicating the Victim-Perpetrator Dynamic

With headlines such as “A Pedophile Even Mother Could Love,” (Brantley) early play reviews and interviews with Vogel return to the play’s most provocative accomplishment: the depiction of a sympathetic pedophile. For a self-identified feminist writer, this phenomenon seemed particularly intriguing. The pedophile may be the ultimate bogeyman, one that needs to be demystified in order for victims to claim empowerment. If the pedophile remains an all-powerful evil, he becomes impossible to survive, to overcome. Historically, the perpetrator has been a slippery discursive figure. Conservative cultural forces may construct a monster from which women and children must seek patriarchal protection, while feminist movements may show the predator as a reflection of a cultural drive to control and even destroy women’s agency through female bodies. However, as Philip Jencks describes in *Moral Panic*, there are certain cultural moments when the perpetrator’s psyche and profile as the ultimate monster receives intensified attention, including the 1990s when there was a period of heightened awareness of sexual predation.

Indeed, the representation of victims has corresponded with the cultural moment as well, perhaps even more rigidly until recent feminist interventions. In “Constructing the Victim: Popular Images and Lasting Labels,” Sharon Lamb suggests, “our expectations of victims enter into and shape the victims’ own conceptualization of their experience” (109), including the expectation that “for abuse to count, the suffering can never go away” (113). Lamb continues by asking, “Why does [sexual victimization] ‘turn us on’? It is because of the almost archetypal images evoked of victim and perpetrator. The victim is pure, innocent, helpless, and sometimes heroic. The perpetrator is monstrous and all powerful. These images are dichotomized; they are never integrated” (118). Lamb’s analysis forces us to consider the relational nature of victim-perpetrator, as does Vogel’s play, providing a contrast to the representation of the perpetrator as purely powerful and complicating the understanding of this relationship.

Told in a series of memories from Li’l Bit’s adult and teenage perspective, the play’s structure, particularly related to its chronology, allows the audience to witness interactions between an adolescent Li’l Bit and adult Peck without knowing about the initial traumatic event that shaped her perspective and changed her relationship to her body. The play’s “non-linear chronologies complicate the extent of Uncle Peck’s villainy,” according to Amy Elizabeth Cummins (13), a point supported by Christopher Bigsby: “The audience’s attitude to Peck, and to his relationship to Li’l Bit, is in part shaped by the fact of the play’s broken chronology” (321).

In the play’s final scene before entering the present, Peck places Li’l Bit’s hands on the wheel and uses her 11-year-old body to masturbate while directing her to steer the car. The Teenage Greek Chorus, speaking for Li’l Bit throughout the scene, suggesting a kind of traumatic splitting, expresses shock: “This isn’t happening” (90). Commenting on the event as an adult, she explains, “That was the last day I lived in my body. I retreated above the neck, and I’ve lived inside the ‘fire’ in my head ever since”

4 See for example Freud; Caruth; Van der Kolk; and Griffiths.

(90). Now, her relationship to her body remains connected to driving: “The nearest sensation I feel – of flight in the body – I guess I feel when I am driving” (91). Although she expresses a sense of damage and loss, she does not appear doomed to traumatic repetition when she finds herself behind the steering wheel. Trauma scholars from Freud to the present have emphasized the connection between the belatedness of traumatic response to the propensity to repeat the earlier trauma.<sup>4</sup> The traumatized subject lives with disconnected memory systems in relation to the abuse and finds herself thrust unknowingly into a painful past when she encounters triggering circumstances in her present. However, whereas classical psychoanalysis discounts the significance of the sexual abuse event, Vogel’s survivor attributes the bodily symptoms to a very specific event within her history. The reverse chronology of the play, however, allows Vogel to address problems with traditional psychoanalysis’ discounting of the abuse relationship while also suspending our judgments about the victim-perpetrator dynamic and the survivor’s capacity for managing trauma’s belatedness.

“To be sure,” Ann Pelligrini writes, “*How I Learned to Drive* does not shrink from showing Li’l Bit’s woundedness, but, no less significantly, it neither assigns her wounding to any one event nor makes injury the whole of her story, the hole in herself” (416). Echoing Pelligrini, Graley Herren confirms, “It is not just that Vogel subverts our comfortable demonization of the incestuous paedophile; it is also that she declines to define her victim completely in terms of her victimization” (114). In addition to acknowledging the critical response to Vogel’s resistance to rigid victimization paradigms, I wish to extend this analysis to include a critique of classical psychoanalysis’ alignment of complex bodily and psychic defenses with pathology. Li’l Bit traces the precise moment when she disconnects from her body to Peck’s violation, and this awareness resists dominant depictions that turn such coping strategies into disease. In this way, Vogel presents what Janice Haaken describes as a more “progressive” view emerging with late twentieth-century trauma theory, which entails “normalizing psychiatric conditions that historically have been viewed as reflecting some form of personal dysfunction.” According to Haaken, “The contemporary trauma model represents a revolt against biological psychiatry, with its traditional emphasis on pathological symptoms as deficits as well as a reaction against Freudian psychoanalysis . . . [and] goes much further in asserting the ‘internal wisdom’ and essential ‘normalcy’ of the patient’s symptoms in light of the magnitude of what has been endured” (63). Li’l Bit endures a traumatic event but also asks us to recognize her capacity for creating meaning from this experience and her response to it.

Supporting this complex relationship to the traumatic event are the final moments in which Li’l Bit and Peck acknowledge each other, when she in the driver’s seat and he in the backseat, with the stage notes declaring, “They are happy to be going on a long drive together” (92). The sentiment expressed here reflects Li’l Bit’s ability to incorporate the whole complex, seemingly contradictory relationship as she moves through her current life. In *How I Learn to Drive*, we witness the navigation of this tricky terrain in the interactions between Peck and Li’l Bit, which usually center on

coercion, negotiation, and control. Almost every interaction between Li'l Bit and Peck includes his asking her to remain conscious of exactly the level of control she has within their relationship. He appears to want her to feel choice, and seduces her by invoking the concepts of free will and choice within all their questionable interactions.

Throughout the play, in Li'l Bit and Peck's encounters, we witness the intensely self-conscious nature of their dynamic. He has expertly created this dynamic; he has seduced her into believing she is more powerful than in fact she is. Although this dynamic may happen often, where abuse survivors imagine themselves much more in control and responsible within the abuse relationship, the play seems to suggest that this sense of power, however problematic, may offer some link to resiliency. Indeed, although popular understanding claims that acknowledging one's powerlessness within the situation relieves unnecessary guilt and pain, through Li'l Bit, we can imagine an alternative narrative when a child's sense of control allows her to remain intact.

Peck asks, "Have I forced you to do anything?" and reassures, "Nothing is going to happen between us until you want it to" (32). Although we learn at the play's end that an act of force began this relationship, these later moments suggest a great deal of negotiation and shifting dimensions of power and complicity. "Simple compliance," Judith Herman offers, "rarely satisfies" a perpetrator in relation to his captive. Instead, Herman continues, "he appears to have a psychological need to justify his crimes, and for this he needs the victim's affirmation. Thus, he relentlessly demands from his victim professions of respect, gratitude, or even love. His ultimate goal appears to be the creation of a willing victim" (75). In the case of Li'l Bit, the willing victim part, however, is unmistakably linked to her resilience, and part of what Mary K. Deshazer refers to as Li'l Bit's "hybrid 'reality' of pain and pleasure" (113) can be found in her exploration of power dynamics, particularly related to sexuality.

Demonstrating the "gift" of learning to survive includes examining the nuances and ambivalence in the relationship and in the perpetrator's psyche, which is of course rather dangerous territory, particularly when survivors struggle for acknowledgment, and the forces of familial and cultural denial do not yield easily. Li'l Bit's resilience comes from her ability to remain aware of the shifts in power and to see herself as having some control within the situation. It becomes clear that Peck needs her approval or her "consent." He poses no physical threat to her at this moment and repeatedly reminds her that she makes choices in the situation.

From the perspective of examining the perpetrator's modus operandi, these effusive acknowledgments of her will and agency appear to be trickery, a strategy that also mocks and betrays. However, when looked at in relation to her background and current environment, any acknowledgment of her free will offers a radical departure from the gender determinism and essentialism found in daily family interactions. The family they share, but to which they do not claim a belonging, appears as a grotesque performance of gender essentialism. Indeed, nicknamed after genitals, each member has sex roles reinforced through the values that define male sexuality by its irresistible carnal urges and represent courtship as predation, such as in the scene when Li'l Bit

discusses sex with her grandmother and mother around the kitchen table. Conjuring scenes from National Geographic, grandfather describes his courtship of his wife: “I picked your grandmother out of the herd of her sisters just like a lion chooses the gazelle – the plump, slow, flaky gazelle at the edge of the herd” (37). The women in the family reinforce these associations: “They’d still be crouched on their haunches over a fire in a cave if we hadn’t cleaned them up” (39), and “Men are bulls! Big bulls!” (38). With these messages, Li’l Bit begins with the understanding that men are ruled by primitive drives and controlled by untamed desires. Women’s lot is suffering and passivity, “flaky gazelles” ready for the pounce. These voices drown out Li’l Bit’s mother’s gestures toward a more enlightened, sex-positive message. In the family scenes, Li’l Bit’s intellect faces constant assault. The strategy is to demean her by sexualizing her, making constant references to her breasts at the dinner table, followed by speaking dismissively about her intellectual interests. Her grandfather asks, “What does she need a college degree for? She’s got all the credentials she needs on her chest” (91), a sentiment the grandfather/Male Greek Chorus echoes later with “How is Shakespeare going to help her lie on her back in the dark” (91). She is clearly alone and alienated in her family home and community.

Compared to the crass, overtly predatory sexual advances of Grandpa, Peck is a sensitive, refined man. Peck offers her an alternative view beyond “on her back.” David Savran notes that in spite of the abuse, Peck is the “only member of her family who makes a real effort to understand, nurture, and help her grow up” (264). In his own way, he addresses the painful restrictions she feels within the traditional family. He tells her, “Men are taught to drive with confidence – with aggression. The road belongs to them. They drive defensively – always looking out for the other guy. Women tend to be polite – to hesitate. And that can be fatal” (50). Emphasizing these differences as “taught” Peck challenges the biological determinism perpetuated within the family’s “lessons” about gender roles and relations.

Interestingly, given the struggle around defining contemporary masculinity, Peck is seductive when he displays possible weakness. The “fire in his heart” is due to some mysterious background, which the play links to his war background, positioning him as a survivor and outsider. Although the play seems to connect him to stereotypical aspects of masculinity with the car, war, and centerfold worship, he also seems on a more intimate level to be set apart and profoundly estranged from a conventionally masculine subject position.

Depicting the biological family as a source of alienation and self-loathing, the play joins several representations of the pedophile/victim relationship that raise the vulnerabilities created by a family’s unwillingness to acknowledge a young person’s unique identity, which often manifest in neglect, derision, or physical abuse. In other plays such as John Patrick Shanley’s *Doubt*, films like Michael Cuesta’s *L.I.E.*, and fiction including Scott Heim’s *Mysterious Skin* and Gregg Araki’s 2004 film adaptation of it, children turn to pedophiles for their only sense of belonging and worth. These narratives test our boundaries profoundly and disturbingly when we witness an intimacy, the only intimacy available to the child, between pedophile and child victim.

Targeted for this isolation, the child finds a way to have certain core needs fulfilled within this relationship, which each text then forces its audiences to witness as a devastating criticism of the lack of love and support in these children's lives from familial and community sources.

Peck responds to this isolation as both a predator and compatriot. Uncle Peck idealizes women. He appears to be the perfect husband. His wife describes the envy of her neighbors who always want to borrow her husband. He tells Li'l Bit that all women are beautiful, erasing the exceptional and potentially isolating quality of beauty. When Li'l Bit walks into the kitchen and finds Peck at the kitchen sink, she remarks on his difference: "You're the only man I know who does dishes. . . . I think it's really nice" (68). He responds, "I think men should be nice to women. Women are always working for us. There's nothing particularly manly in wolfing down food and then sitting around in a stupor while the women clean up" (69). Peck asserts himself as someone critical of conventional views on gender identity. He is a thinker, which appeals to her, and he appears to challenge conventional gender roles. Washing dishes makes him appear exceptional, empathetic, and safe. An unexpected ally in the hostile domestic space, he appears to align himself with women in the highly-charged division of labor while also suggesting his guile as a predator.

Whether part of his master plan to gain her confidence, or a moment of real identification with women's marginalized status, this gesture feminizes the perpetrator. We also learn about him as traumatized subject who feels removed from his environment, a stranger in his own patriarchal home. The mutual strangeness offers Peck an opportunity and supports his predatory drive to know his victim, to exploit her weaknesses to his advantage. All the while, he imparts the skills that accompany this keen reading, this vigilance. If she pays careful attention, he provides critical information about her to make her stronger in the end.

If Peck seduces by allowing Li'l Bit to feel recognized, she returns the favor by seeing something in him beyond his relatively unconventional ideas about gender. The issue of coercion is complicated again here by the child victim's recognition of the perpetrator as a traumatized subject himself. Perhaps this radical maturity is too much to take, but it is undeniable as shaping the play and the dynamic between characters. The kitchen scene illustrates her capacity to recognize his woundedness and to see herself as a person in possession of a certain power over the situation. Trauma research suggests that victims, particularly children, tend to sympathize with abusers and begin to see themselves, paradoxically, as capable of healing.<sup>5</sup> They also become expert "readers" of shifts in mood and energies charging a space. Vogel attempts to show a more powerful Li'l Bit – with a sense of her own ability to assess and assist – while she also depicts a common dynamic that results in later damage, when the survivor can feel guilty for being complicit in some way in her own abuse. Li'l Bit engages in the magical thinking associated with traumatized children, who imagine themselves as more in control to survive the situation, reading Peck, recognizing shades of vulnerability; however, the play suggests that this ego defense can become

5 For two important works on these issues see Freyd and Terr.

a successful strategy for recognizing oneself as powerful and competent in its extended metaphor of defensive driving as an essential skill.

Complicating the issue of consent and coercion, the perpetrator's representation as a broken subject becomes apparent only through veiled allusions to Peck's war background and his substance abuse. Vogel's play shows the child abuse survivor gaining power by understanding her perpetrator as weak and fundamentally dependent on her for sustenance. Peck has "some demon that Li'l Bit intuits" (69), and this inner turmoil strengthens the connection between them. From the opening scene, we get a sense of Peck's history of trauma. He is a war veteran who has survived but refuses to tell his story or to acknowledge his place as a survivor plagued by this legacy, indicating his historical relationship to the understanding of gendered traumatic experience, which has only recently been validated or recognized in terms of its long-term consequences. Although the psychological consequences of violence or violation have been long studied in relation to soldiers, individual veterans have not benefited (theoretically) on a large scale until recently, largely because of gender politics around admitting psychic suffering. In the play, Aunt Mary, Peck's wife, captures this issue when describing Peck's hidden truths:

I know he has troubles. And we don't talk about them. I wonder, sometimes, what happened to him during the war. The men who fought World War II didn't have "rap sessions" to talk about their feelings. Men in his generation were expected to be quiet about it and get on with their lives. And sometimes I can feel him just fighting the trouble – whatever has burrowed deeper than the scar tissue – and we don't talk about it. (67)

Interestingly, her observations seem to suggest a connection between the cultural response to his trauma and a major concern within the feminist survivor movement, which emphasizes the silence surrounding abuse and the isolation exacerbating the original harm.

Indeed, Peck's own trauma history remains shrouded in silence. It seems that while the female body suffers from overexposure, Peck's war experiences do not surface fully. When asked about his experience, he turns "suddenly taciturn," commenting briefly: "I . . . I did just this and that. Nothing heroic or spectacular" (26, ellipsis in original). In a linguistic no-man's-land, he defines his experience as a kind of absence: "I served in the Pacific Theater. It's really nothing interesting to talk about" (26). Instead of talking, he drinks – "I have a fire in my heart. And sometimes the drinking helps" (70)– and pursues his niece.

Vogel does not provide a great deal of information about Uncle Peck's background but leaves actors and audiences alike to fill in the gaps. This desire to search for clues to explain his behavior reveals much about our need to fix/name the demon, particularly when the character appeals to us. In an interview with Charlie Rose, David Morse, who played Uncle Peck in the acclaimed Vineyard Theatre production,

describes his imagining Peck's boyhood and war experiences as filled with brutality. Like Morse and Li'l Bit, we are led to play armchair psychiatrist to imagine a history to explain the behavior.

In addition to the war trauma, Li'l Bit questions whether his behavior is linked to his own sexual abuse history, adding to the sense that she considers him a traumatized subject. At one moment, Li'l Bit looks back as an adult and asks, "Now that I am old enough, there are some questions I would have liked to ask him. Who did it to you, Uncle Peck? How old were you? Were you eleven?" (86). When she speculates about his history of sexual abuse, she suggests a perspective informed by popular understanding about cycles of abuse. She may speculate because she feels close and connected to him – and to tolerate this love of her own betrayer, she has to contextualize it, to maintain the relationship through identification with his survivor self. This gesture serves to make Li'l Bit appear more sympathetic toward her abuser and more in control of her own sense of that history. However, this particular effort to de-victimize Li'l Bit by providing her with insight and compassion also invokes a potentially dangerous stereotype regarding the victim-turned-abuser myth.

By asking these questions, Li'l Bit voices a popular understanding that perpetrators have abuse histories themselves. Referred to as the "vampire theory"<sup>6</sup> – once bitten by trauma, one is at risk for assuming the role of victimizer – it perpetuates the very myth about permanent damage that Vogel attempts to refute in her play. However, by allowing Li'l Bit to voice this possible causal analysis, the play differentiates between survivors who negotiate their abuse narratives actively and those who become compelled to repeat earlier abuse dynamics without a sense of awareness or control. Through the representation of Peck, we see the cost when one's status as a trauma victim remains unacknowledged by self and society. Efforts to understand him lead her – and the play – in complex directions. The play flirts with dangerous ideas related to trauma survivors and perpetrators repeatedly, and we see this issue again, when Li'l Bit describes her seduction of the high school student she meets on the bus trip. In this scene, Li'l Bit identifies with Peck's power turned into vulnerability – "this is how the giver gets taken" (41). Her one-night encounter with the adolescent addresses a stage in her recovery in which she equates a seduction scene – the high school senior tries to win her and gain sexual experience – with her experience. She has knowledge of the dynamics of seduction and must play naïve for the game to work. Although Li'l Bit appears to have power over the actions and seems strong in her reflection on this scene's relationship to her earlier sexual encounters with Peck, she also may also appear contaminated with knowledge provided by the violation. The audience, however, can see the limitations of her identification with Peck in this scene, and we witness a survivor's experiment within a relatively controlled environment. In Li'l Bit's brief encounter with the high school student, who is close in age and exercising self-perceived command, she isolates and examines the seductive pull of innocence, albeit in a way that reveals a detachment from her own body that she confirms at the play's end.

6 For an early discussion of the "vampire syndrome" in trauma studies, see O'Brien. See also McCormack et al.

The theme of seduction relates not only to the potential transmission of a psychic state that desires acquisition and dominance. Li'l Bit learns about the nature of boundaries, consent, and the political-historical subject through her encounters with Peck. In the restaurant-inn scene, Peck tells Li'l Bit:

You might be interested to know the town history. When the British sailed up this very river in the dead of night – see outside where I am pointing? – they were going to bombard the heck out of this town. But the town fathers were ready for them. They crept up all the trees with lanterns so that the British would think they saw the town lights and they aimed their canons too high. And that's why the inn is still here in business today. (22)

However, in Li'l Bit's situation, no "father" exists to save her; instead she has only a father figure in Uncle Peck, the man who describes loving her since he could hold her in the palm of his hand, and this source of paternal care preys on the territory he could protect. Peck's story about using the power of illusion resembles his attempts to gain access to Li'l Bit and to sustain his own fragile psyche through deception and false illuminations about their relationship.

Li'l Bit is left to her own devices to think up a strategy to protect her "borders," and perhaps, again, she learns more through Peck's actions than through his words when she engages in strategies of illusion, including seduction, that allow her to survive his immediate attack. In *Consent: Sexual Rights and the Transformation of American Liberalism*, Pamela Haag charts seduction's link to patriarchy and the social contract throughout modern history. Females have been viewed under the law as property, and, "seduction was initially deliberated in civil suits in which the violation of a daughter/servant's chastity was taken to be a violation of the father/master's 'private' right to her labor and services" (3). In this context, does the fatherless Li'l Bit have no property rights, or when considered in relation to the questions raised by second-wave feminism, does she represent a new female subject not beholden to the same influences? With no one to protect her, but also no one to claim her, she must protect and claim herself. Fatherlessness here could signal a relationship to consent that is different and representative of the period. The absent father within classic psychoanalysis resulted, according to feminist reconsiderations, from a cover-up intended to preserve the integrity of the patriarchy. The father-absence here can suggest the historical period critical of patriarchal dominance. Lack of a father figure may signal vulnerability in conventional cultural narratives, but in this period marked by feminist ideologies, the absent father marks a site of feminist opportunity for redefining boundaries of subjectivity and rights of consent.

Clearly, sexual abuse and the traumatic consequences entail the violation of the victim's boundaries. The play suggests the constant negotiation and control of boundaries related to Li'l Bit's body and psyche. In the opening scene Peck asks her, "Are you ever gonna let me show you how good I am?," to which Li'l Bit

responds, “Don’t go over the line now” (10). In the photo shoot, she restates her limits with exposing her body, refusing “frontal nudity,” about which Peck comments, “I know. You’ve drawn the line” (60). These negotiations always introduce the sense of choice, making her feel complicit if anything happens.

When she maps out the plan to help Peck manage his drinking by meeting with him, she tells him, “We can meet once a week. But only in public. You’ve got to let me – draw the line. And once it’s drawn, you musn’t cross it” (72). The constant negotiation of boundaries confuses rigid distinctions between coercion and consent here. She asserts control and gains a sense of power not usually associated with the victim-perpetrator dynamic. She also plans a deception: “I’ll tell Mom I’m going to a girlfriend’s. To study. Mom doesn’t get home until six, so you can call me after school and tell me where to meet you” (72). After making these arrangements and demarcating the space of their encounters very carefully, she asks for his approval, “Would that help?” and “bestows a very warm smile on him.” In this interaction, we see Li’l Bit as the initiator or as the one in control. She not only complies; she devises the plan.

Peck tells her that he’s “been good all week” and refrained from drinking. He wants a reward. This moment introduces the dynamic present throughout the play. Li’l Bit’s body/sexuality keeps him stable. He has convinced her that she is capable of and responsible for rescuing him from himself. As her only source of support, she must comply with this arrangement to continue to receive this support. “I live all week long for these few moments with you,” he tells her, “you know that” (13). Again, these gestures instill in her a sense of her own power but also make her feel responsible. In this way, we see echoes of “traumatic bonding,” the emotional pull associated most often with domestic violence syndromes. Donald G. Dutton<sup>7</sup> suggests that this dynamic is not isolated to domestic partners, and that “‘traumatic bonding’ – the development of strong emotional ties between two persons, with one person intermittently harassing, beating, threatening, abusing, or intimidating the other” (190) – is found in other circumstances. In Dutton and Susan Painter’s work on “traumatic bonding,” intermittent torture followed by efforts of redemption characterizes the victim-perpetrator relationship. The victim attempts to leave, but the perpetrator draws her back into the relationship by making her feel responsible for the perpetrator’s well-being or by emphasizing the relationship’s positive aspects once the immediate threat of abuse has subsided. This “traumatic bonding” appears to operate at some level within Li’l Bit and Peck’s relationship. However, she is able ultimately to see that her survival does not depend on his well-being, and she makes a final break.

## The Road to Resiliency

In the end, Peck’s boundaries dissolve with Li’l Bit’s decision to leave their arrangement behind her. The dissolution of the relationship results from a breaking of

7 See also Dutton and Painter.

their pact, when Peck attempts to legitimize their relationship. After he conveys his desire to her, she responds,

“What have you been thinking! You are married to my aunt, Uncle Peck. She is my family.” “You have – you have gone way over the line”(85), she utters fatally. She rejects his efforts to “legitimize” their relationship. She has in fact learned more about him than he could imagine. He has spent so much time mentoring her into an awareness of her boundaries, and his own dissolve when she finally seals off herself. He cannot, it becomes clear, survive the rejection.

Until their final encounter, he exists through dreams and idealizations about their relationship. She has become a force that saves him, rejuvenates him, connects him to this world, invoking, ironically, Judith Herman’s discussion of a “healing connection” to anchor the survivor to his or her life. Without her, he drowns, the death by liquor serving as a kind of perverse metaphor for this dissolution. He has no order, no meaning without her. After this rejection, Peck isolates himself completely, living on food his wife drops off and never leaving home. The illusion of a sustaining relationship shattered, the rejection also forces him to face his past deeds. Peck’s demise reinforces the play’s challenge to paradigms that depict the perpetrator’s power over the victim as rigid and overwhelming.

Instead, *How I Learned to Drive* reveals fluidity in the power dynamic that surpasses trauma’s inflexibility. We witness Peck’s attempts to construct the relationship but also see his failure to contain Li’l Bit within his scheme. Since holding her at birth – “Now that’s a fact. I held you, one day old, right in this hand”(14) – Peck has worked on reinforcing this connection. He has always held her “in the palm of his hand,” always had power over her, living with the deluded sense that she was created for him. This image may suggest his desire to possess and control innocence; however, it also signals her growth by comparison. The dissonance of the moment is that not only does Peck appear disturbed by revealing his desire for someone he once held as an infant, but it also emphasizes the development of Li’l Bit and her relative largeness now. She is dynamic, while he remains dependent on her for sustenance. It seems that their pact has only served to transfer his dependencies. His fire needs constant attention. When she removes his source of comfort/stability, he remains whole by fixating on the promise of a reunion. This was not a relationship of mutual growth. She in fact has grown, exists apart from him, and has transformed his need and feeding off her into something from which she has gained an odd sustenance, strength, and resiliency. Certainly, resiliency here does not come always in conventional forms.

The final scene also demonstrates her resiliency and shows the interconnectedness of their roles in supporting this strength within her. Their roles have shifted as represented by the positioning. She has become the driver, claiming this role in her life, while Peck sits in the backseat. Although she appears to have incorporated his presence and to feel his influence, he remains clearly vulnerable to her choices, her abilities, and her agency, even if only within her memory.

## Conclusion

In a PBS interview with Elizabeth Farnsworth, Vogel places her play in relation to the controversy around victimhood when she tells Farnsworth:

I also feel that having watched a kind of climate of victimization occur, having watched younger women and younger men I teach, I sometimes feel that being in that kind of mind set of victimization causes almost as much trauma as the original abuse. And so in many ways I think I felt that it's a mistake to demonize the people who hurt us, and that's how I wanted to approach the play.

The question raised is why is it a mistake? Vogel makes clear that the survivor's sense of the experience in many ways connects to her retrospective understanding of the perpetrator.

Andrew Kimbrough claims that Vogel's "play testifies to the radical and self-implicating belief that community begins when we recognize that what we find most abhorrent and intolerable in others is really that which we find most fearful and shameful in ourselves" (49). The play's depiction of its perpetrator, however, does not seem to reflect this kind of projection entirely, and the community's faults do not seem to mirror the perpetrator. It seems more accurate or productive when interpreting Vogel's contribution to the cultural discussion, however, to examine also the ways in which a community enables the abuse and its damage through gender stereotypes and an incomplete understanding of the survivor's journey into resiliency. *Li'l Bit* engages the "shameful and fearful" parts of herself directly, apart from community influence, develops a mindfulness about power dynamics, and reduces the debilitating impact on her experience as an individual survivor.

The trauma survivor of *How I Learned to Drive* must engage with the perpetrator, and resiliency takes shape within the context of their complex relationship. *Li'l Bit* receives power from the site of true pain, and the extended metaphor alluded to in the play's title supports this reading. Uncle Peck's car contains her most terrible moments while also providing her with opportunities to hone her strengths and strategies for control, agency, and "defensive driving." With the emphasis on defensive driving in her lessons, she learns that she cannot control other drivers, only her own response and the reflexes she develops when she faces difficult truths. Resiliency here means navigating complexities with greater agility than allowed by the rigidity of unresolved trauma and inflexible cultural responses to it.

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