In this excerpt from his discussion of Paula Vogel, English theater scholar Christopher Bigsby examines some of the complexities of How I Learned to Drive. He comments on the attractive qualities of Peck and the seductive qualities of Li'l Bit, while also examining the subtleties of the metaphors of driving embedded in the play. He also reminds us that for Vogel, the attraction for pedophiles is not the gender of the prey, but the age. Bigsby sees the play as a complex structure that avoids psychological cliché.

[...] Peck is an attractive man in his forties. He should, Vogel instructs, and despite what she calls “a few problems,” be played by an actor one might cast in the role of Atticus in To Kill a Mockingbird, hence his name (Gregory Peck [played Atticus] in the movie). Li'l Bit is by turns a woman in her thirties or forties and a prematurely developed young girl seen at various moments from the age of eleven through her twenties. The action takes place in suburban Maryland, described by
the older Li’l Bit as near the crumbling concrete of U.S. One, which “winds its way past one-room revival churches, the porno drive-in, and boarded up motels with For Sale signs tumbling down.” Once there had been another Maryland, “before the Malls took over,” but even then innocence had been tainted: “This countryside was once dotted with farmhouses—from their porches you could have witnessed the Civil War raging in the front fields.” This is a moralized landscape, invested with the qualities of a country whose own insistent innocence had itself never been entirely plausible, never quite realized. How I Learned to Drive, indeed, is surely in part about an America which struggles to sustain notions of innocence, spiritual concern, and family values while flooding its consciousness with sexual titillation: a cheerleader culture of prepubescent beauty pageants, eroticized movies and advertisements, as though sex were a language in which it is necessary to become fluent as soon as possible. In such a context, moral affront at Lolita-like affairs becomes more difficult to sustain or at least more profoundly ambiguous. [. . .]

The audience’s attitude to Peck, and to his relationship with Li’l Bit, is in part shaped by the fact of the play’s broken chronology. The first scene finds the young girl at seventeen, “going on eighteen,” allowing what Blanche DuBois (who herself conducts affairs with teenage boys) would have called “little familiarities” at the hands of a man who is, admittedly, more than twice her age. Despite the disproportion between their ages, however, this seems a relationship which if disturbing is relaxed and not overtly exploitative. Though hardly an innocent encounter it is presented as little more than a parodic teenage tryst. If the genders were reversed we would have Tea and Sympathy. Peck partly undresses and fondles Li’l Bit but Vogel instructs that this is to be performed in mime while the mock solemnity with which it is enacted—“Sacred music, organ music or a boys’ choir”—swells as she permits the intimacies—defuses its potential for affront. If anything, power seems to reside with the young woman and not the man whose behavior makes him seem younger than he is, and more dependent.

In How I Learned to Drive we see the effect before we understand the cause, detect the trauma before being told its root. We learn early that at eighteen Li’l Bit leaves college for a string of dead-end jobs because of her fondness for alcohol, spending the nights driving through the countryside “thinking just one notch of the steering wheel would be all it would take” to end it all. However, it takes much of the play to understand what lies behind this suicidal impulse.

Meanwhile, though Peck damages Li’l Bit, she is his lifeline, all that stops him free-falling towards death, and despite his calculated seduction of a vulnerable girl he still offers her an understanding that no one else in her family cares to do, and, ultimately, warns her against himself, thus surrendering the one thing that holds him back from despair, an action that has led Vogel to call him “heroic.” As Vogel observed, “I see him as teaching her ego formation, as giving her the tools to grow up and reject him and destroy him.”

Peck never forces himself on Li’l Bit, though he plots his campaign with the skill of a practiced seducer and there are suggestions that she has not been his only victim. When she storms out of the family home in a teenage fury Peck’s wife, Aunt Mary, observes that “Peck’s so good with them when they get to be this age,” while his approach to the weeping girl is described in a stage note to be “like stalking a deer.”

His method is obliquely exposed in what is one of the most disturbing scenes in the play, when he describes a fishing trip back in South Carolina with a young male
cousin. His strategy with fish mirrors that which he adopts with the young woman he desires: “they’re very shy, mercurial, fish. Takes patience and psychology. You have to believe it doesn’t matter if you catch one or not... you don’t want to get close—they’re frisky and shy little things... easy, reel and then net—let it play.”

And when the fish is landed his comments to his young cousin are a displaced version of his relationship with the young Li’l Bit: “I don’t want you to feel ashamed about crying, I’m not going to tell anyone, okay? I can keep secrets... there’s nothing you could do that would make me feel ashamed of you... you can’t tell anybody... least of all your mom or your sisters. This is something special between you and me.” It is Peck’s apparently genuine gentleness combined with his patient cunning that is the source of his seductive power. He is driven by his sexual need but that very need gives him an insight into the vulnerabilities of others.

For Vogel, it is clear that Peck does molest his young cousin. Indeed she saw his equal attraction to young girls and boys as a necessary counterbalance to assumptions that pedophiles are gay: “it is the age that is the attraction, not the gender.” When she was invited to delete the scene she insisted on retaining it, not least because she felt she owed a debt to her gay brother to clarify what she saw as a slur on gay men. At the same time the scene had not featured in her own outline for the play. It was a product of the process of writing, but it gave her and the audience what she came to feel was a crucial sense of distance, and became a vital element in the drama.

Vogel reminds her audience of the arbitrariness of the lines drawn by society. What is legitimate at eighteen is statutory rape at the age of seventeen. As Li’l Bit’s grandmother reminds her daughter, “It was legal, what Daddy and I did! I was fourteen and in those days, fourteen was a grown-up woman.” As a gay writer Vogel knows all too well the capricious nature of sexual prohibitions. But, as the play progresses she raises the stakes and the audience is forced to revise its reaction to the early scene, forced to question its liberal or sentimental response as Li’l Bit becomes first seventeen, then sixteen, then fifteen and, finally, eleven. If the line was not crossed in the opening scene then it is later and we are led, little by little, into the heart of that darkness, a darkness which Li’l Bit herself, however, eventually begins to understand or at least to find echoed in her own experience.

At the age of twenty-seven she experiences the same thrill that she imagines, in retrospect, Peck must have felt as she meets a teenage boy on a bus and seduces him, staging a drama in which she is author, director and principal actor: “dramatically speaking,” she explains,

after the faltering and slightly comical “first act,” there was the very briefest of intermissions, and an extremely capable and forceful and sustained [. . .] 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.

In one sense this could be seen as an account of how abused becomes abuser but it is equally an attempt to understand the seductiveness of seduction, the allure of innocence, the compelling nature of power, the fascination that lies in devising a plot that will enfold another’s life. And the fact that Vogel chooses a theatrical metaphor is, perhaps, not without its significance in that the playwright, too, deals in the manipulation of emotions, the seduction of others. She, too, takes her audience to places they have not been, exposes them to experiences which threaten their
composure, moral assurance and, ultimately, therefore, innocence. She, too, works by stealth. The description of Peck's fishing technique could, indeed, be seen as an account of her own dramatic strategy in How I Learned to Drive: "reel and then rest—let it play."

As the play's title suggests, the principal metaphor is that of the driving lesson. On a literal level it is this that enables Peck to secure time alone with Li'l Bit. But beyond this it charts their developing relationship and Li'l Bit's increasing autonomy. When Peck insists that "when you are driving, your life is in your own two hands," he is offering her a lesson in responsibility for her own life. When he speaks of the power it conveys, he is explaining the necessity for her to realize her own strength. Most significantly, when he instructs her in the need to "think what the other guy is going to do before he does it," this is something more than a piece of roadcraft advice. It is, we later realize, a genuine warning against his own planned action, a moment of honesty, a proffered grace. To think ahead, he insists, is to be the only one to survive an impending disaster. Indeed it is tempting to think that perhaps Peck has summoned Li'l Bit into being, or at least forged her into a weapon against himself, precisely to be his nemesis, to punish himself for past, present and future sins. Certainly he trains her to survive without him while simultaneously struggling to hold on to her.

Throughout the play, a Voice, of "the type...that driver education films employ" [ . . . ], offers a commentary on driver skills which likewise comments, often ironically, on Li'l Bit's unfolding relationship with Peck. Thus, at this moment, it remarks that "Good defensive driving involves mental and physical preparation" and asks "Are you prepared?" Another Voice immediately adds: "You and the Reverse Gear." Li'l Bit does not go into reverse any more than does Peck and the drive (automotive and sexual) continues, as does the journey on which they are, apparently mutually, engaged. The question "Are you prepared?" however, echoes throughout the text.

The references to driving thus apply as much to Li'l Bit's relationship with Peck as to road safety awareness, and that fact is underlined by phrases which implicitly comment on the unfolding action: Idling in Neutral Gear, Shifting Forward from First Gear to Second Gear, You and the Reverse Gear (the last displayed as the action moves back into the past), Vehicle failure (displayed as Li'l Bit is incapacitated by drink), Implied consent, Children depend on you to watch them. These comments, in turn, are accompanied by projected signs with equally evident ambiguities: Slow Children, Dangerous Curves, One Way. Indeed, this parallel even infiltrates the stage directions, Vogel referring to Li'l Bit and Peck as "running out of gas," a phrase glossed as meaning "running out of small talk."

Where does responsibility lie in this relationship? Clearly with Peck, but there is a level at which Li'l Bit colludes. There is, in the words of the Voice, an "Implied consent," and this is where the play treads dangerous ground. Plainly in Lolita the young girl is a knowing collaborator in her own seduction. In Vogel's play she is led to such implied consent by Peck's seductive skills, but also by their shared sense of exclusion. She responds to his evident need as he in turn offers her understanding. He exploits her youth and innocence, damages her, but also, in his own terms, seeks her consent and will not transgress the terms of that consent. He indulges his own needs, subordinating hers to his, rationalizing his behavior, and yet, finally, hands her back her life at ultimate cost to himself. Nothing he does justifies his actions but his own vulnerabilities are real. There is a kind of innocence even at the
center of his corrupting power, for there is no reason to doubt that at the heart of his obsession there is love, as at the heart of his love there is obsession. [...] 

Meanwhile, beneath his practical competency, his air of quiet assurance, Peck is plainly lonely and disturbed, driven by demons he can neither name nor defeat. His wife can do nothing to address his needs. Aware of his relationship with their niece, she sees it as a temporary infatuation inspired by a manipulative girl. Yet whatever pain lies at the heart of Peck’s life all she can offer is domesticity, routine and what she imagines to be a restorative banality, as if this man could settle for something as prosaic as that. She lives with a stranger and seems to understand nothing beyond the fact of his suffering. The plight of her niece, meanwhile, matters not at all. She offers less love than a baffled and frustrated attempt at understanding.

Li’l Bit, by contrast, does care for Peck. On their last encounter in a hotel we are told that she is “half wanting to run, half wanting to get it over with, half wanting to be held by him.” She comes close to kissing him but tears herself away. He is destroyed. The lifeline cut, he is, finally, lost. As Li’l Bit explains: “It took my uncle seven years to drink himself to death. First he lost his job, then his wife, and finally his driver’s license. He retreated to his house, and had his bottles delivered.” The loss of his driver’s license is simultaneously a fact and a symbol as he loses that power over his direction, that command of his life, which he had once tried to teach the young girl he both abused and loved as they sat side by side and he taught her the ambiguous lessons of life.

Nor is Li’l Bit shown as ultimately damaged. This is not an accusatory play. Indeed, it ends on a note of reconciliation. As Li’l Bit drives off in her car, in the final scene, she looks in her rearview mirror and smiles at the spirit of Peck who sits behind her. She is now in charge of the car. She did, in the end, accept his advice and anticipated the problems coming towards her. She is, as he had urged her to be, the only one to survive the accident. [...] 

Vogel has talked of her alarm at the growth of a victim culture in the United States — the desire to shuffle off responsibility for one’s life by locating some external cause for failure. “I hate the word victim,” she has said. “It’s a buzz word people use these days. We’re all victims just by virtue of being alive.” Li’l Bit’s education is thus not only in the occasional cruelties and disabling selfishness of others, but the knowledge and acceptance of her ultimate responsibility for her own life. She comes to recognize in herself a desire for power as well as that unfocused need which had characterized Peck, until he chose to focus it on a girl whose very innocence made her a *tabula rasa*, a place to inscribe his own desperation. [...] And if Li’l Bit learns from Peck how cruelly exploitative some people are she also learns their potential for something which perhaps could only be called love.

She learns that her own life consists of everything that has happened to her and that a life of blame or regret is no life at all. Ironically, she never accuses him of the crime which in truth he committed. Indeed, in some ways she devises the rules of the deeply suspect games they play. Even as a woman in her thirties (who, after all, narrates this play much as did Tom in *The Glass Menagerie*) revisiting her own past, she does so not to lay blame or make accusations but to understand her life so that she may live it without regret. As a result, the audience does not reject Peck but grants him his own pain, his own bruised dignity, his own curious courage in the face of feelings he struggles to contain. But they do so not because of the man

himself—manipulative, exploitative, dangerous but also compassionate, understanding, self-sacrificing—but because Li’l Bit accepts him in all his confusions and moral equivocations. The man we see is the man she reconstitutes in her memory. She declines the opportunity retrospectively to invent him as pure villain and herself as simple victim, and as a result can take her life in her hands and not, finally, cede it to another, not enshroud herself in a myth that can only leave her the helpless product of circumstance, the residue of process and the result of abuse. As Vogel has said, “I had no interest in a movie-of-the-week drama about child-molesting.” She wished, rather, “to see if audiences will allow themselves to find this erotic; otherwise, they only see victimization without empowerment.” To her, the essence of the play lay not simply in the fact of the relationship but its consequence. As she explained, “it seems to me that one thing that gets left out when we’re talking about trauma is the victim’s responsibility to look the experience squarely in the eye and then to move on. That’s the journey I wanted to craft here” (Playbill, Century Theatre).

How I Learned to Drive plays against our expectations. It seeks to go beyond the labels, the categories which do little to explain ourselves to ourselves. It is about a love affair which, if not mutual, nevertheless, and not entirely paradoxically, does have love on each side. It is about a man whose loneliness is too deep to be filled, who looks for consolation in the wrong place but loves enough eventually to release the object of that love, a man who inhabits a society that is itself deeply confused as to the role of sexuality. The music to which Vogel wrote the play and which she suggests should accompany the action, is, as she has said, “rife with pedophilia,” a word she seldom uses in interviews: “Dream Baby,” “You’re Sixteen,” “Little Surfer Girl,” “This Girl Is a Woman Now,” “Come Back When You Grow Up.” Peck, in other words, is not some aberration, someone to be labeled and filed away. He inhabits an ambiguity that reaches out beyond the parameters of his own special need.