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LOVE ON THE STAGE, WAR ON THE PAGE: EVALUATING THE ROLE OF WAR
TRAUMA IN *HOW I LEARNED TO DRIVE*

by

DEBORAH HULL

Under the Direction of Matthew Roudané, PhD

ABSTRACT

Psychological traumas surface in Paula Vogel's portrayal of Li'l Bit and Uncle Peck in *How I Learned to Drive* (1997). Theorizing Peck's fixation on Li'l Bit is necessitated by his drive to recapture his innocence—an innocence he lost as a young man during WWII—this thesis will seek to explain how *Drive* can be viewed as a love story by revealing the motivations behind Li'l Bit's sympathy for Uncle Peck. Recognizing war trauma as the fundamental catalyst for both the action and the tone of the play situates *Drive* in a territory not yet explored. Furthermore, this thesis will explore the dubious relationship between war-traumatized veterans and pedophilic tendencies by examining this theme in other literature, particularly, J.D. Salinger's "For Esmé—with Love and Squalor" (1950) and Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita* (1955), thus, placing *Drive* at the nexus in which American drama and war literature coalesce.

INDEX WORDS: War, Trauma, Paula Vogel, J.D. Salinger, Vladimir Nabokov, Pedophilia, WWII, Memory, American drama

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DEBORAH HULL

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

in the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

2016

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TRAUMA IN *HOW I LEARNED TO DRIVE*

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Dedication

Andy, I watch you husband, at times, watch life out of the side of your eyes, and I imagine this vision to be cast full of everything unseen. This thesis is dedicated to you and your stories and your imagination and your love and your humor; your being makes life more bright, creative, passionate, and fun. To my dearest Priscilla, you offered countless hours of distractions, and there were times when I was writing this thing that I wished I, too, could have curled into a ball, flapped an ear over my eyes, and snored into oblivion—your Basset ways are envious and endearing. For my father—you know as well as I do that we are no sentimental family, but I'll always remember the happy tears in your eyes on my graduation day and your love for me. Also, I am sorry to have put the dog before you in the dedication—but I am going in alphabetical order: Andy, Basset, Dad, Mom—it is not as bad as it looks. Promise. Lastly, I dedicate this thesis to my mother, who would have been so happy that I chose a path in literature instead of law.

And for the rest of my family—Catherine, Miguel, Margaret, and in memory of Ron—your successes and love inspired me through to the end. I love you all.

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Table of Contents

List of Figures.....	vii
1 Introduction	1
2 The Storm Within: A Brief History of War Trauma	10
3 Love on the Stage, War on the Page	20
4 Before Li'l Bit There Was Lolita & Esmé.....	47
5 Conclusion	57
Works Cited.....	60

List of Figures

Fig. 1 <i>Angelus Novus</i>	12
Fig. 2 Billy Rose Theatre Division	25

1 Introduction

Paula Vogel's Pulitzer Prize winning play *How I Learned to Drive* debuted in 1997, and since then, a body of criticism has emerged that showcases the creative and diverse insights her work inspires. *How I Learned to Drive* is a memory play that navigates the adolescent years of Li'l Bit, a woman who reenacts and recounts episodes from her dysfunctional family. Her uncle, Peck, becomes the central focus as he seemingly offers parental support and a haven for emotional stability—but crosses the line with sexual advances. In the same vein as Tennessee Williams's *The Glass Menagerie* and Arthur Miller's *After the Fall*, Vogel's work reconstructs and relates events from the past through the perspective of a first-person narration. Memory plays are subjective by nature: the audience must allow for the possibility of inaccuracies, embellishments, and misunderstandings. The (un)reliability of the narrator, Li'l Bit, and the controversial subject matter have sharply divided critical reactions to *How I Learned to Drive*, but feminist, psychoanalytic, and trauma theoretical models are the most prevalent in current criticism. I will frame this study of *How I Learned to Drive* with trauma theory and new historicism and offer new insights as to how Uncle Peck's portrayal as a war veteran influences the action of the play; furthermore, this overlooked aspect of Uncle Peck allows me to show how Li'l Bit's sympathy for his trauma influences her perception of his actions. This approach comprises a new facet to the existing scholarship and offers a straightforward explanation as to *why* Uncle Peck is portrayed with a sympathetic tone—a question many scholars have attempted, but failed, to answer.

Silently, a subtext of war traces along the contours of *How I Learned to Drive*, but before I examine the evidence that Uncle Peck's wartime trauma parallels Li'l Bit's objectification by

her family, I will first offer a brief overview of the lifelong, adverse effects that can accompany a soldier in the aftermath of war in my chapter “The Storm Within: A Brief History of War Trauma.” Using statistics, psychological studies, historical accounts, as well as the personal accounts of veterans, I will attempt to convey the atrocities of war and how the experience of war can alter a person’s psyche. Admittedly, the length of time between the war and the action of the play—twenty years—seemingly undermines the argument that Uncle Peck’s deviant behavior correlates to his experiences in the war; nevertheless, evidence provided by Johnathan Shay, a psychiatrist who works with war veterans, and trauma theorist Cathy Caruth will help reinforce the argument that trauma can have persistent symptoms. In order to fully conceptualize the fear and brutality of war, I will look to the works of William Manchester, E.B. Sledge, and James Jones, veterans who drew from their own experiences when writing about World War II. My attempt to convey the brutality of war serves to reinforce the idea that veterans like Uncle Peck came home traumatized from war and were silenced by a culture that “expected [men] to be quiet about it and get on with their lives,” thus contributing to the improbability of healing psychic injury (Vogel, *Drive* 67).

How I Learned to Drive articulates a carefully orchestrated construction of “circular and repetitive structures” in order to allude to the parallel traumas of the play (Mansbridge 7). Li’l Bit’s trauma stems from the overt sexual exploitation by her family, but similar to the silence encouraged of “Men in his generation,” Uncle Peck’s trauma becomes relegated to the periphery. Given the lack of attention to the impact of war trauma in the characterization of Uncle Peck in the extant scholarship of *How I Learned to Drive*, my third chapter, “Love on the Stage, War on the Page,” identifies the historical and cultural references in the play that reveal war as a major theme and the source of Uncle Peck’s trauma. In addition to cultural references, unexpected

shifts in Uncle Peck's mood and language also expose war as the source of his neurosis. These close readings of the play build the case that Uncle Peck, though alive, lost himself to the war long ago. Finally, the chapter culminates with evidence pieced from interviews with Vogel that she wrote and possibly revised Uncle Peck's character as a deeply traumatized veteran in discussions on her methodology for playwriting of Vogel's methodology. *How I Learned to Drive* subtly attempts to persuade the audience that World War II victimized Uncle Peck—that he is a “Flying Dutchman,” forever lost in a world that will never understand him (Vogel 86). David Sarvan picks up on this concept of displacement in “The Haunted Houses of Modernity” when he describes Peck as a “ghost,” a “tortured soul who has not yet found peace but who walks the earth seeking satisfaction” and this chapter will hopefully offer new insights into how the war contributes to the “tortured soul” seen on stage (587).

In order to fully conceptualize the longevity of trauma, I will look to the work of other authors, and, in some cases, the lives of the authors themselves, in order to offer precedence and add credibility to my claim that the theme of war and sex predates and influences *How I Learned to Drive*. Paula Vogel purports that this play is “*Lolita* from Lolita's point of view,” and in my fourth chapter, “Before Li'l Bit There Was Lolita and Esmé,” I compare the two works in order to find commonalities that, perhaps, point to Vogel's reliance on the mid-twentieth century novel for inspiration of the theme of war and sex (Vogel, “Charlie Rose”). *Lolita* may not be overwrought with images of war, but a look into Vladimir Nabokov's life will reveal that the author was very much touched by war. The Bolshevik Revolution resulted in Nabokov's loss of the estate and fortune he had inherited when he and his family fled their home country in the midst of the rising rebellion; four years later, Nabokov's father was assassinated because of his outspoken political views; later, in 1940, Nabokov and his Jewish wife boarded the last boat in

France leaving for the United States before the Germans blocked all access of escape; and Nabokov's brother, Sergei, died in a concentration camp in 1945 for his role in speaking out against the Nazi regime. Although I do not go into detail about Nabokov's personal life in this thesis (other than the aforementioned), I do provide evidence that Nabokov never intended for his audience to sympathize with Humbert Humbert, as Vogel does with Uncle Peck—a key difference in the two works. Instead, I argue that a more appropriate antecedent of *How I Learned to Drive*, the subtle references to war trauma throughout the play, and the sympathetic tone, are reminiscent of work by J.D. Salinger. So, in addition to historical evidence and current psychological scholarship, Salinger's short story "For Esmé—with Love and Squalor" offers literary precedence for the story of the traumatized veteran with an attraction to a young girl. Although it is not clear whether the veteran in Salinger's short story has a sexual or asexual attraction to the young girl, it is evident that an unhealthy fixation is present—and the same can be said for Salinger himself. This chapter emphasizes that *How I learned to Drive* follows in the tradition of *Lolita* and "For Esmé—with Love and Squalor" as all three works dramatize, without explicitly stating, war trauma and the inclination toward pedophilia.

A closer look at Salinger's life reveals that the erotic tension in "For Esmé—with Love and Squalor" comes from Salinger's life. According to Jean Miller, a woman who met Salinger at age fourteen and engaged in a friendship/relationship¹ with the thirty-year-old Salinger, said that "he could not have written 'Esmé' had he not met [her]" (Shields and Salerno 237). Both the film and print variations of the 2013 biography *Salinger* offer a portrait of the tortured war

¹ For more information on Jean Miller's relationship with Salinger, see Shields and Salerno 219-42. Although Li'l Bit and Uncle Peck never consummate their relationship, the relationship between Salinger and Miller appears similar: "We were in the backseat of a taxi and I turned and kissed him. I suppose I gave him permission—'It's okay now'—but it would have never have come from him. Well, probably it would have, but I did it first. My daughter thinks it was important to him to wait for me to reach the age of eighteen before we had sex. I don't think that" (Miller qtd. in Shields and Salerno 239). This mirrors Li'l Bit's directions to her uncle that "You've got to let me—draw the line. And once it's drawn, you mustn't cross it" (Vogel, *Drive* 72).

veteran with an attraction to young girls and further provide evidence for the presence of these concurrent mental neuroses (although I by no means purport that experiencing psychological trauma, such as what one might experience due to war, induces one to have pedophilic tendencies). Although the primary focus of my thesis centers on *How I Learned to Drive*, Salinger's wartime experience and his inclination toward befriending young girls, perhaps, links the dysphoric-consumed war veteran to a desire for normalcy and innocence—and shows how a perverted perception of innocence can lead to pedophilia. For instance, Miller said that the “perfect moments” she shared with Salinger “got him away from his melancholy, his angst about the war” and she thinks that “The frivolity and the pure innocence of [the] fourteen-year-old me...is what he was attracted to” (Shields and Salerno 223, 224). Lastly, “For Esmé—with Love and Squalor” presents the philosophical construct through which Salinger and Vogel create sympathetic characters: a deterministic world-view. This concept of determinism—a point of view that purports the inability for one to control his or her destiny, and on a microscale, one's actions—explains Uncle Peck's pursuit of Li'l Bit and, perhaps, stems from his experience in World War II, because a deterministic world-view can alleviate the feeling of responsibility after having to commit atrocious acts; moreover, if Li'l Bit, too, believes in determinism, then perhaps this offers an explanation for Li'l Bit's sympathy of her uncle.

War trauma plays a significant role in *How I Learned to Drive*, and the omission of such scholarship within the wider body of criticism details a need for more critical engagement and, possibly, the reinterpretation of existing scholarship. As previous scholars have shown, trauma shapes the tone and action of the play, and this thesis will continue the critical conversation with new insights into how World War II shaped the context of trauma. Trauma inextricably links Uncle Peck to Li'l Bit, and vice versa. In order to get to the heart of the matter, this thesis

examines the complex relationship found in Li'l Bit's enmeshed family life to show how her environment contributes to her bond with Uncle Peck; it shows how Uncle Peck transfers his trauma onto Li'l Bit; but it also details the natural instinct for survival—in both Li'l Bit and Uncle Peck. It is no surprise that trauma has become the focus of the extant criticism due to the alarming nature of Vogel's play—the story of a young adolescence reliving sexual and emotional abuse shocks audiences and critics alike; however, while Li'l Bit and her trauma take center stage in the extant scholarship, Uncle Peck—a character who shares an equal amount of stage time in the play—either resides in the shadows as the abuser or becomes an exalted, atypical love interest. Mary K. DeShazer, for instance, focuses solely on Li'l Bit's trauma, and turns to feminist critic Lynda Hart for an authorial voice on “the erosion of basic trust, difficulties with body image, alternate aggression and psychic anesthesia, survivor guilt, obsessions with scenes from childhood, and shame” (109). Although Hart's list of trauma-induced neuroses describes Uncle Peck just as well as Li'l Bit, DeShazer fails to recognize the same mental ruination in him. In fact, the entire critical body of work on *How I Learned to Drive* fails to adequately address an equally devastated Uncle Peck, and I will show that locating and understanding the trauma in Uncle Peck helps one to better understand the tone and actions of Li'l Bit.

Psychoanalytic and trauma theories are prevalent in Jennifer Griffiths's, Andrea J. Nouryeh's, Graley Herren's, and, to a lesser degree, Jodie Ann Kelsey's scholarship on Vogel's play. Griffith's essay prominently uses psychoanalytic theory, feminism, and “political-historical” evidence in order to flesh out her theory on trauma: unless “the survivor-perpetrator dynamic[s] are addressed,” victims may never regain agency and a cycle of trauma may ensue (92). Nouryeh's essay primarily uses new criticism as a theoretical model to frame her trauma theory, and fleetingly delves into psychoanalytic theory in formulating Li'l Bit's character. She

purports that Li'l Bit uses the audience as a pseudo-therapist in order to work out her trauma on stage—a trauma she attempts to dismantle and understand. Herren's article uses Freud and the DSM-III to flesh out the psychoanalytic model and disavow Nouryeh's perception that Li'l Bit is a "passive recipient rather than an active choreographer of her memories" (106). Unlike Nouryeh, Herren argues that Li'l Bit is a "post-victim" in that she is literally in a "*post*-traumatic future" (107, 112). Lastly, although Kelsey's essay uses psychoanalytic theory to address the trauma experienced by Li'l Bit, the focus remains on the nature of oratory address as a "therapeutic function," rather than the content of the trauma (89). Kelsey's article is an example of form (of delivery) over content (of trauma).

Like the three essays mentioned above, Ann Pellegrini's book chapter "Staging Sexual Injury: *How I Learned to Drive*" also defines Li'l Bit's trauma through the use of psychoanalytic and feminist frameworks. This book chapter most closely relates to aspects of my thesis because Pellegrini focuses on trauma (albeit, only Li'l Bit's trauma) and the unreliability of Li'l Bit in regards to memory. Whereas Nouryeh argues that Li'l Bit, in real-time, displays a coming-to-terms with her trauma, and Herren argues Li'l Bit is very much in control of her traumatized past, Pellegrini offers a compromise between the two arguments. She argues that a fluid memory may make Li'l Bit an unreliable narrator and points to places in the play where Li'l Bit intentionally withholds information. My disagreement is with Pellegrini's assertion that Li'l Bit intentionally withholds information from the audience; I believe Li'l Bit *unintentionally* skews the nature of events in order to protect her fragile psyche. Pellegrini argues that "Where the story of trauma is concerned, then, narrative gets out ahead of both audience and narrator. And yet, telling trauma's story becomes the working condition of coming to know" (415). She acknowledges that Li'l Bit *seems* to be aware of her trauma and *seems* to be letting the audience

in on her secret, but maintains that trauma—and the workings of the faultiness of memory— withhold the absolute control Li'l Bit appears to exert. The main crux of this essay hinges on the possibility of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) in victims of rape. Pellegrini uses Freud's essay "Mourning and Melancholia" to dispel any suggestion that Li'l Bit is merely "mourning" her knowledge as a victim of abuse; she asserts that Li'l Bit is in full-blown "melancholia"—an acute and deep-seated condition whose source resides in a "blindspot" (423, 424). Her definitions of "mourning" and "melancholia" could easily be applied to Uncle Peck's deep-seated war trauma, which I will explore in my third chapter.

Andrew Kimbrough uses new historicism in "The Pedophile in Me: The Ethics of *How I Learned to Drive*" to disavow the typical trauma argument detailed by the aforementioned critical reception. Kimbrough argues that *How I Learned to Drive* is "profoundly ethical" in that "it is radically understanding and inclusive of those whom we identify as different and undesirable" (49). Citing legislation that condoned sexual liaisons between adults and children as young as seven, Kimbrough argues that, historically, Uncle Peck would not have been considered a pedophile; furthermore, he argues that Li'l Bit is complicit in her actions. In order to further support his thesis that *How I Learned to Drive* ethically portrays a sympathetic slant towards Uncle Peck, Kimbrough cites critic James R. Kincaid, who argues "'most adults in our culture feel some measure of erotic attraction to children and the childlike'" (qtd. in Kimbrough 53). Although Kimbrough uses unorthodox evidence to support his thesis, the take-home message is similar to Christopher Bigsby's opinion and Vogel's assertion that *How I Learned to Drive* is a love story—and it is this message of the love story that I hope to dispel in my thesis.

Bigsby has written a book chapter on Vogel's oeuvre in *Contemporary American Playwrights*. In it, he asserts that *How I Learned to Drive* "is not an accusatory play" and that

Vogel writes a play “that is a genuine love story” (326, 319). The connections Bigsby draws upon are found both within the play itself and are reinforced by the responses Vogel has given in interviews. Bigsby’s chapter formulates critical context with the use of Vogel’s biographical details and textual evidence, and although I agree that *How I Learned to Drive* is “about a man whose loneliness is too deep to be filled” (328), there is much to be discussed once war trauma and pedophilia enter the conversation alongside the “love story.”

The extant scholarship on *How I Learned to Drive* begins a critical conversation, and my thesis, by examining the significance of war trauma and the limited first-person narration, will contribute to the body of scholarship. The second chapter of my thesis attempts to communicate the experience of war, and address the feasibility of permanent psychological damage as a direct result from traumatic experience on the battle field.² My third chapter will focus on the textual evidence that Uncle Peck was traumatized by his experiences in World War II. To supplement my argument, in my fourth chapter, I will show how Nabokov’s *Lolita* and Salinger’s “For Esmé—With Love and Squalor” present similar characters and thus offer critical insight into a traumatized veteran with an uncomfortable attraction to a child. Finally, I will examine how *How I Learned to Drive* situates itself within the larger body of contemporary drama and how Vogel’s Pulitzer Prize winning play expands and contributes to the field of American drama.

² William Manchester, in his autobiography, notes the difficulty (rather, impossibility) of communicating the experience of war:

War monuments have never stirred me. They are like the reconstructed buildings at Colonial Williamsburg, or elaborate reproductions of great paintings; no matter how deft the execution, they are essentially counterfeit. In addition, they are usually beautiful and in good taste, whereas combat is neither. Before the war I thought that Hemingway, by stripping battle narratives of their ripe prose, was describing the real thing. Afterward I realized that he had simply replaced traditional overstatement with romantic understatement. War is never understated. (67)

2 The Storm Within: A Brief History of War Trauma

Only the dead are safe; only the dead have seen the end of war.

—George Santayana, *Soliloquies in England and Later Soliloquies* 102

Shortly before committing suicide, cultural critic Walter Benjamin wrote his *Theses on the Philosophy of History* while hiding from the Nazi Gestapo in France in 1940. Thesis IX describes Paul Klee's "Angelus Novus," a painting in which a geometric angel, evocative of Pablo Picasso's cubist style, hovers in the center of the work. In describing this "angel of history," Benjamin reveals the horror of his situation through an analysis of Klee's painting:

His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, make whole what has been smashed. But the storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress.

(Benjamin 257-58)

Benjamin creates an ethereal image, an angel poised in the midst of chaos, trapped in a paralyzing state and unable to turn away from the accumulating destruction in spite of the passage of time—a construct widely thought of as "healing." This portrayal of Klee's painting details a far more harrowing situation than the unfettered angel might inspire if not for Benjamin's perilous circumstances. Psychological trauma often entails feelings of helplessness that can be caused by threatening, potentially mortal, situations—such as war or sexual assault—and has the ability to alter one's psyche and freeze a fleeting moment of terror as a life-defining

event; thus, psychological trauma is arguably worse than death because victims of trauma often find themselves re-experiencing the traumatic events over and over without the hope of relief. Johnathan Shay, a scholar and psychiatrist, explains how “Traumatic memory is not narrative. Rather, it is experience that reoccurs, either as full sensory replay of traumatic events in dreams or flashbacks, with all things seen, heard, smelled, and felt intact, or as disconnected fragments”; this evidence reinforces that “Such emotion is relived, not remembered” (172, 173). Corollary events relating to psychological trauma—such as unhealthy relationships, difficulties at work or school, and substance abuse—are often regarded by others as unrelated symptoms because of the perceived degree of separation that exists between a psychological cause and a negative behavior, behaviors that can also be exhibited by people who do not suffer from psychological trauma. The difficulty lies in the fact that unlike a physical trauma, one cannot see damage of the mind; nevertheless, symptoms of larger underlying problems can sometimes be measured by the conflict surrounding the survivor.

I will refer to this conflict in the wake of trauma as “distress signals.” However, unlike smoke signals, white flags, and flailing arms, distress signals such as depression, anger, resignation, dejection, and reclusion reside in the periphery; these signals can manifest in many ways, but often seem to embody the spirit of lost connections. Benjamin’s description of Klee’s painting showcases the powerful nature of trauma because it allows one to see the dissonance that exists between the severity of the description of the artwork and the artwork itself.

In the same vein as Benjamin’s war-torn “Angelus Novus,” this thesis will show the extent of trauma that resides within Paula Vogel’s *How I Learned to Drive*. I will show that both

Uncle Peck and Li'l Bit are victims of trauma who are attempting to “make whole what has been smashed” while accumulating a “pile of debris” around them as they brave their own personal storms within.



Fig. 1 *Angelus Novus*
(32.2 x 24.2 cm) by Paul Klee, 1920. © 2015 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

How I Learned to Drive silently navigates a world in which the emotional wreckage of war persists long after water washes away the bloodshed, after treaties have been signed, and through years marked by holidays, anniversaries, and memories of a burdensome nature.³ Vogel's play reverberates with the echoes of lost souls as she maps the lingering effects of war through a veteran; but her play also depicts how non-combatants can be affected by war. Sixteen years pass between the end of World War II and the birth of Li'l Bit, yet she becomes another statistic of those affected by the war. Trauma does not adhere to the rules of time, it does not always fade away, and it does not always remain linear. Li'l Bit says "Sometimes to tell a secret, you first have to teach a lesson," and the lesson that has to be taught to understand Uncle Peck is the nature of war (Vogel, *Drive* 7).

The battles fought in the Pacific Theater during World War II caused some of the greatest casualties, in some cases needlessly (Tarawa and Peleliu, in particular). On Peleliu, the 1st Marine Division "suffered a total loss of 6,526 men (1,252 dead and 5,274 wounded). The casualties in the division's infantry regiments were: 1st Marines, 1,749; 5th Marines, 1,378; 7th Marines, 1,497...The army's 81st Infantry Division would lose another 3,278 men (542 dead and 2,736 wounded) before it secured the island" (Sledge 155). An average of 86 American men per day died over the course of 74 days during the battle on the tiny Pacific island of Peleliu; over 10,000 Japanese were slaughtered. This was not the deadliest battle in the Pacific Theater during World War II. The battle of Tarawa claimed 1,009 Marines, and another 2,101 were wounded

³ During the "Christmas 1964 scene" Uncle Peck avoids the family by doing the dishes, and Li'l Bit, after seeking him out, says "We missed you at Thanksgiving...I did. I missed you." Peck replies, "Well, there were... 'things' going on. I didn't want to spoil anyone's Thanksgiving" (Vogel, *Drive* 68, 69, 70, ellipses in original). For more information on how holidays can have an adverse psychological effects in some traumatized veterans, see Paul Fussell *The Boys' Crusade* 90-91, and Jonathan Shay *Achilles in Vietnam* xvii, 116-17 for examples. Also, of note, Li'l Bit, too, has trouble during the holidays after she ends the relationship with her uncle: "I stayed away from Christmas and Thanksgiving for years after" (85).

over the course of three days; 3,426 were killed on Saipan, and 10,364 were wounded; 6,821 men were killed on Iwo Jima; Guadalcanal saw 7,100 casualties; in Okinawa there were over 12,000 casualties of the allied forces, and another 38,000 were wounded. Numbers on a page do little to convey the gravity of experience, of the cost of life, so these statistics offer a compartmentalized image of the devastation of World War II. If one were to consider every single character in every single word read in this thesis up to this point as representative of a casualty of Iwo Jima, we would still be short almost 3,000 deaths.

In the aforementioned statistics serve to depict the utter destruction witnessed by those service men who survived the war. What did they endure and how did they handle civilian life in the wake of such chaos? In addition to weathering unfamiliar landscapes and climates, illnesses and hardships threatened the soldiers—malaria, dengue, other mosquito-borne illnesses, and trench foot were common ailments; moreover, the men fighting in the Pacific suffered the stench of human decay as torrential rainfall sometimes uncovered rotting bodies. This is the climate of a war zone in the tropics, and these are the conditions men endured in addition to killing, to witnessing death. In his memoir *Goodbye Darkness*, William Manchester describes the first time he killed a man. While on reconnaissance to engage with a potential sharpshooter, Manchester writes, “I could feel a twitching in my jaw, coming and going like a wink light signaling some disorder. Various valves were opening and closing in my stomach. My mouth was dry, my legs were quaking, and my eyes out of focus” (5). The extreme duress Manchester feels during combat abates with the death of the Japanese sniper; however, relief does not accompany his newly won secure position; instead he is left with feelings of absolute despair: “I knew I had become a thing of tears and twitchings and dirtied pants. I remember wondering dumbly: *Is this what they mean by conspicuous gallantry?*” (7, emphasis in original). In James Jones’s *The Thin*

Red Line, a fictionalized tale of combat on Guadalcanal based on the author's personal experience, the character of Private Edward Bead, while defecating in the woods, finds himself in a vulnerable and precarious situation when an enemy operative stumbles upon him. After a hand-to-hand struggle, Bead "Standing above him spraddlelegged to keep his pants up...drove the rifle butt again and again into the Japanese man's face, until all of the face and most of the head were mingled with the muddy ground. Then he threw the rifle from him and fell down on his hands and knees and began to vomit" (Jones 173). Like the passage from Manchester's memoir, this episode highlights feelings of wretchedness that can accompany violent altercations in war. The men in both situations find themselves having bodily reactions to the violence; perhaps the involuntary physical reactions, the literal excretion of waste, symbolizes the body's desire to expel the newly-formed psychological wound. Perhaps the dead have it easiest, because how does one recover from such harrowing experiences? On Okinawa, "when enemy artillery shells exploded...the eruptions of soil and mud uncovered previously buried Japanese dead and scattered chunks of corpses" (Sledge 260). On Saipan, witnesses saw Japanese civilians jump to their deaths from Suicide Cliff and children played hot potato with live grenades because they were encouraged to "never suffer the disgrace of being taken alive" (Manchester 271). Some men watched their friends blown up by artillery: "I crawled around to find whether there were any of my people still alive. There weren't; no one moaned; everywhere I groped I felt only gobs of blood, shards of shattered bones, ropy intestines, and slimy brains...There wasn't even the form of a human body" (Manchester 70). Witnessing death becomes imprinted in the minds of the soldiers to be replayed over and over again in the years to come, and these become the haunting remembrances of a war not too long ago. E.B. Sledge writes that

We didn't talk about such things. They were too horrible and obscene even for the hardest veterans. The conditions taxed the toughest I knew almost to the point of screaming. Nor do authors normally write about such vileness; unless they have seen it with their own eyes, it is too preposterous to think that men could actually live and fight for days and nights on end under such terrible conditions and not be driven insane. (260)

The failure to “talk about such things,” about the atrocities witnessed in war, can exacerbate the debilitating mental effects in war veterans or other trauma victims. Trauma theorist Cathy Caruth expounds on the potential physiological effects of psychological trauma: “modern neurobiologists point out, [that] the repetition of the traumatic experience in the flashback can itself be retraumatizing; if not life-threatening, it is at least threatening to the chemical structure of the brain and can ultimately lead to deterioration” (63). Physiological effects, perhaps, manifest or increase in intensity and frequency if the traumatized person finds himself or herself isolated from the community; and a causal relationship appears to exist between isolation and communication, or a lack thereof. Aunt Mary, in *How I Learned to Drive*, declares “The men who fought World War II didn't have ‘rap sessions’ to talk about their feelings. Men...were expected to be quiet about it and get on with their lives” (Vogel, *Drive* 67). Trauma victims may choose to remain silent for many reasons, but our society reinforces stereotypes of gendered performance, thus, men are often pressured to “grin and bear” emotional pain. The following excerpt shows why some veterans may choose to suffer in silence:

I had just come back [from Vietnam], and my first wife's parents gave a dinner for me and my parents and her brothers and their wives. And after dinner we were all sitting in the living room and her father said, “So, tell us what it was like.” And

I started to tell them, and I told them. And do you know within five minutes the room was empty. They was all gone, except my wife [sic]. After that I didn't tell anybody I had been in Vietnam. (anonymous veteran qtd. in Shay xxii)

This episode recounts the isolation the veteran met with upon returning home. Whether unwilling or unable to endure a verbal reconstruction of the veteran's experiences, the family's response ultimately stigmatizes a man who faces the challenge of reintegrating with society while coping with feelings of displacement, grief, loss, terror, guilt, anger and/or depression; the family's failure to engage with the veteran elicits, from him, a response of turning inward. A study following the recording of oral histories of World War II veterans in New Zealand reveals "the reasons for...silence are complex, but one phrase used by all of [the veterans studied] was that they did not 'feel understood'" (Parr 65). Christopher Bigsby notes that Aunt Mary "lives with a stranger and *seems to understand nothing* beyond the fact of his suffering" in reference to Uncle Peck (326, emphasis added). There are undoubtedly many reasons why a veteran may choose to remain silent, but "what a returning soldier needs most when leaving war is not a mental health professional but a living community to whom his experience matters," for without people willing to engage in the aftermath of trauma, veterans do not have the opportunity to "feel understood" (Shay 198); thus, coping with a psychological wound often entails a network of professionals and loved ones who provide a supportive community for a trauma survivor.

To quantify the psychological devastation caused by World War II is impossible. Terms such as "soldier's heart" or "irritable heart,"⁴ "shell-shocked," and "combat fatigue" dominate the rhetoric of war history, and it was not until 1980 that post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)

⁴ The terms "soldier's heart" and "irritable heart" are often used interchangeably. Jacob Mendez Da Costa coined the term "irritable heart" in his landmark study "On Irritable Heart" (1871), and "the disorder was renamed 'soldier's heart'" during World War I when "the term was applied to the symptomatic and disabled young troops, many from the Western Front" (Wooley 3).

was coined in the third edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM). Psychological and physiological symptoms relating to combat duty have always been apparent, but the degree of persistence, or the ability of a psychological trauma to manifest years after an incident, were not wholly recognized or understood until recent years. For instance, Alison Parr, a World War II historian, says, “In the Second World War veterans PTSD can remain a concealed problem and in this group, particularly, has been under-diagnosed. Among the reasons for this is that doctors may miss it, diagnosing depression or anxiety disorders instead” (Parr 62). This is not to say that all diagnoses of depression or anxiety disorders are wrong; and, in fact, the American Psychiatric Association (APA) reports that a Major Depressive Episode can have lasting effects and contribute to increased anxiety, “material problems, occupational problems, academic problems, Alcohol or Other Substance Abuse” and “the most serious consequence of a Major Depressive Episode is attempted or completed suicide” (APA 352).

Psychological trauma in war veterans was perceived but not classified, and until 1980, no scientific explanation existed that fully encompassed the long-term recurrent consequences of those affected by a severe psychological trauma. It is doubtful that there will ever be a comprehensive study done on the psychological damages of war, as the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA)⁵ protects an individual’s privacy, thus complicating efforts to quantify psychic injury; furthermore, no study could possibly trace all damaging effects war inflicts on both veterans and, especially, non-combatants. Non-combatants may not directly suffer from the source trauma, but the family or those closest to those who are traumatized can suffer the consequences of trauma through proximity. It has even been reported that “children of

⁵ The information that HIPAA protects includes “information your doctors, nurses, and other health care providers put in your medical record,” including “conversations,” thus, making large data mining for studies on war-related psychological traumas unlikely (“HIPAA”).

a veteran with PTSD often exhibit emotional responses similar to but less severe than” the parent, “even if they are unaware of [the] trauma” (Kaiman 39). The setting of *How I Learned to Drive* predates the existence of PTSD and all of the subsequent studies relating to its effects on veterans and non-combatants; nonetheless, the play was written at a time when PTSD was in the public consciousness, and evaluating Uncle Peck through a psychological lens produces a compelling critical analysis. According to the diagnostic criteria in the DSM-IV-TR, Uncle Peck satisfies these indicators for PTSD from Area C:

- (1) Efforts to avoid thoughts, feelings, or conversations associated with the trauma.
- (5) Feeling of detachment or estrangement from others. (APA 468)

Furthermore, Uncle Peck fulfills Areas E and F:

- E. Duration of the disturbance (symptoms in Criteria B,C, and D) is more than 1 month.
- F. The disturbance causes clinically significant distress or impairment in social, occupational, or other important areas of functioning. (APA 468)

Unfortunately, the nature of the memory format of *How I Learned to Drive* precludes one from accessing pertinent information necessary for a diagnosis. For instance, one cannot say with authority that Uncle Peck satisfies the two criteria necessary to be diagnosed with PTSD:

- (1) The person experienced, witnessed, or was confronted with an event or events that involved actual or threatened death or serious injury, or a threat to the physical integrity of self or other.
- (2) The person’s response involved intense fear, helplessness, or horror. (APA 467)

This thesis hinges on the argument that Uncle Peck undoubtedly experienced these two criteria during his service in World War II, and in Chapter 2, I will explicate the evidence that exists in *How I Learned to Drive* that shows Uncle Peck has deep and lasting psychic alterations caused

by the war; however, it would be remiss of one to state that concrete evidence exists that supports these two criteria, and therein lies the difficulty with arguing that Uncle Peck has PTSD. In addition, twenty-one possible criteria spanning six categories delineating the disorder further complicate a diagnosis: in order for one to be diagnosed with the disorder, at least ten of the criteria must be exhibited. Whether the war contributed to chronic depression or contributed to the formation of PTSD may be difficult to determine; nonetheless, evidence that the war changed Uncle Peck exists. Distress signals present in the play lead to Uncle Peck's "one single catastrophe"—the war—and contribute to the trauma of Li'l Bit. I am not arguing that Uncle Peck suffers from PTSD, but in what follows, I hope to show how Uncle Peck, nevertheless, is damaged by the war.

3 Love on the Stage, War on the Page

He's a guy who's been through World War II and suffered terrible things over there... which are only hinted at in the play.⁶

—David Morse

I believe that the things we don't express will kill us. Kill us as a country, kill us as people.

—Vogel, Interview with Mary-Louise Parker 46

How I Learned to Drive may be Li'l Bit's story, but it is Uncle Peck's war-ravaged world that unfurls on the pages. Vogel inundates the subtext of the play with references to war—the Revolutionary War, the Civil War, and particularly, World War II—and like psychological trauma, the locus of tension resides just under the surface. According to Robert McKee, a screenwriting lecturer, "In life our eyes tend to stop at the surface. We're so consumed by our own needs, conflicts, and daydreams that we rarely manage to take a step back and coolly

⁶ In response the question "Who is Uncle Peck?" during an interview with David Morse who played Uncle Peck in the Broadway debut of *How I Learned to Drive*.

observe what's going on inside other human beings....In the ritual of story, however, we continuously see through the faces and activities of characters to depths of the unspoken, the unaware" (254). The "depths of the unspoken" nurture the root of trauma in *How I Learned to Drive* and cradle the action of the play. I posit that to understand Vogel's play—to understand Li'l Bit—one must first strip away the layers until only the essence remains, and all that remains of *How I Learned to Drive* is war. Uncle Peck's status as a military veteran surfaces in the play when he mentions he "was stationed in D.C. after the war," and when his wife, Aunt Mary, "wonder[s], sometimes, what happened to him during the war" (Vogel, *Drive* 26, 67). These two scenes, the birthday celebration dinner with Li'l Bit and Aunt Mary's soliloquy, offer the only direct references to war, and although few in number, these scenes offer access to the hidden undercurrent propelling the action of the play. With a closer examination of the text, the war will surface again and again, thus allowing one to recognize war as the subtext of the play, and an explanation for "Who did it"⁷ to Uncle Peck (Vogel 86).

Vogel's use of dialogue and diction in *How I Learned to Drive* demonstrates an aptitude for constructing a tight, balanced, and cohesive narrative. The play contains cultural references that allude to the commodification of Li'l Bit's body while also having associations with war, thus Vogel succinctly strings along two independent threads that shape the trauma of the play: war and sex.

The double-entendres found in the play enrich and amplify scenes. For example, Big Papa, the grandfather, announces "—Or we could write to Kate Smith. Ask her for somma her

⁷ Christopher Bigsby says that "Peck is a damaged man. Behind him, in the war maybe, lies some kind of trauma, not to be explored, not to be admitted. Or perhaps it is not the war, for as Li'l Bit wonders when he has died, 'Who did it to you, Uncle Peck? How old were you? Were you eleven?'" This chapter will examine evidence found within the text that proves Bigsby to be correct in the former half of his assertion; moreover, when Bigsby later surmises that "Perhaps Li'l Bit is looking for a reason within her *own* experience and the void at his heart was really caused by something else," I hope to offer the evidence that points to this "something else" as the war (Bigsby 326, emphasize added).

used brassieres she don't want anymore—she could maybe give to Li'l Bit here—” (Vogel, *Drive* 15). On the surface, this commentary delineates the systematic emotional abuse Li'l Bit endures from the patriarchal figurehead of the family. Li'l Bit's family freely, and regularly, comments on her breasts, leading the audience to conclude that the value of Li'l Bit resides only in her sweater. Since the commodification of Li'l Bit's body obviously forms a central theme of *How I Learned to Drive*, a play that makes up one half of Vogel's *Mammary Plays*, it is no surprise that the cultural reference to Kate Smith is intended to incite images of the busty American icon for the purpose of highlighting Li'l Bit's breasts; however, Kate Smith was famous for her rendition of Irving Berlin's "God Bless America," and Big Papa's comment perverts the wholesome persona associated with Smith. The imagery of Smith's well-endowed physique seamlessly ties into the action of the play, exemplifying the uncomfortable and emotionally abusive household Li'l Bit endures; however, the cultural reference also alludes to Uncle Peck's traumatic experiences, too.

As a cultural icon of the twentieth century, Kate Smith embodied American patriotism; in fact, in 1939 Franklin D. Roosevelt heralded "...this is Kate Smith – this is America"—a sentiment that the American public echoed with enthusiasm (qtd. in Pitts 19). Biographer Michael R. Pitts purports that "During the war years Kate Smith reached her greatest popularity with fourteen million listeners weekdays on KATE SMITH SPEAKS, [and] 25 million listeners on the KATE SMITH HOUR," two weekly radio shows she hosted (8). Smith symbolized the strength of America, and she used her fame to rally the nation in supporting the war efforts through war bond sales—"her total sales were in excess of \$600 million, the highest amount of sales credited to one individual" (Pitts 9-10). Smith's rendition of "God Bless America" appealed to the American public and encouraged a patriotic sense of duty. The unprecedented popularity

of the song commanded “65 consecutive” performances on the Kate Smith Hour, made “millions in royalties,” and Smith even found herself testifying before Congress to *not* change the national anthem from the “Star Spangled Banner” to Berlin’s song (Pitts 8). This song instilled a sense of patriotic fervor and unified Americans during a time when increasing unrest was propelled by the likelihood of engaging in warfare.

A performance of Smith’s patriotic “God Bless America” can be seen in *This is the Army*, a film released in 1943 “for the benefit of the United States Army Emergency Relief Fund” (*This is the Army*). Inspired by two Broadway musicals by Berlin (the 1918 stage production *Yip! Yip! Yaphank!* and the 1942 stage production of *This is the Army*),⁸ the film was produced to revive morale and, in turn, increase the sale of war bonds. This film unabashedly propagandizes the merits of the U.S. Army. The opening scene begins with a camera shot that pans down the New York skyline and settles on a close-up of an Uncle Sam poster—“I Want You for the U.S. Army”—while Berlin’s 1917 song “For Your Country and My Country” plays in the background:

It’s your country, and my country

With millions of real fighting men

It’s your duty, and my duty

To speak with the sword, not the pen. (*This is the Army*)

The song lyrics reinforce the image conveyed on the screen to form a cohesive ideology: support your country, and do your part to help the war effort. The film neglects to depict death and injury, the horrific conditions of war, and the tragedy of grieving families; furthermore, because

⁸ By the time Berlin was drafted into the U.S. Army in 1917, he had already made a name for himself as a composer, and the military drafted him for the purpose of composing a musical in order to raise funds for Camp Upton, a military base in New York. Berlin orchestrated the successful *Yip! Yip! Yaphank*, a musical comedy set on a military base. For more on the life of Berlin, see Bergreen.

the film was almost entirely cast with actors who were active military personnel, it projected military life as recreational and safe, thus, instilling a false sense of security. The film, like the stage production, portrays the Army as an entity that supports the arts with a production in which soldiers can perform skits, tricks, and show tunes to entertain their families and the American public; moreover, the film exudes a sense of duty, honor, and courage through the masculine exuberance for war: veterans of World War I fondly reminisce their service as they listen to Smith perform “God Bless America”; young men excitedly enlist, and celebrate their new status as military men before reporting to basic training; and a young boy can be seen exclaiming “Gee, I hope this is a long war, I want to get in it, too!” (*This is the Army*). A particularly troubling scene involves a worried wife who voices concern regarding her husband’s impending departure to basic training:

WIFE. “I don’t see what the Army wants with you; you’ll never make a good soldier.”

HUSBAND. “Well, I can try it for a few months and see how I like it, and if I don’t like it, I’ll...”

WIFE. “You’ll what?”

HUSBAND. “I can try it a few more months.”

The exchange ambiguously insinuates that the husband can come home if he does not like the Army, and juxtaposes masculine traits—steadfast and calm—with traits traditionally perceived as feminine—fearful and high-strung. However, there was a need to be fearful: three months after the release of *This is the Army* in August of 1943, the Battle of Tarawa was fought in the Pacific. This was the first battle in which there were wide-spread casualties of U.S. forces since the attack on Pearl Harbor in December of 1941, and although U.S. forces gained control of the island, the loss of life provoked public sentiment of the war to change: “In view of this it would

appear that the time has come to steel ourselves against the day when far bigger and far more costly battles will have to be fought in the Pacific than any we have known heretofore, and to prepare for them” (“The Lesson of Tarawa”). In contrast to the propagandist film that illustrated masculine expectations, the Battle of Tarawa stood as a stark reminder to the brutalities of war and highlighted the pressure brought to bear upon young males.

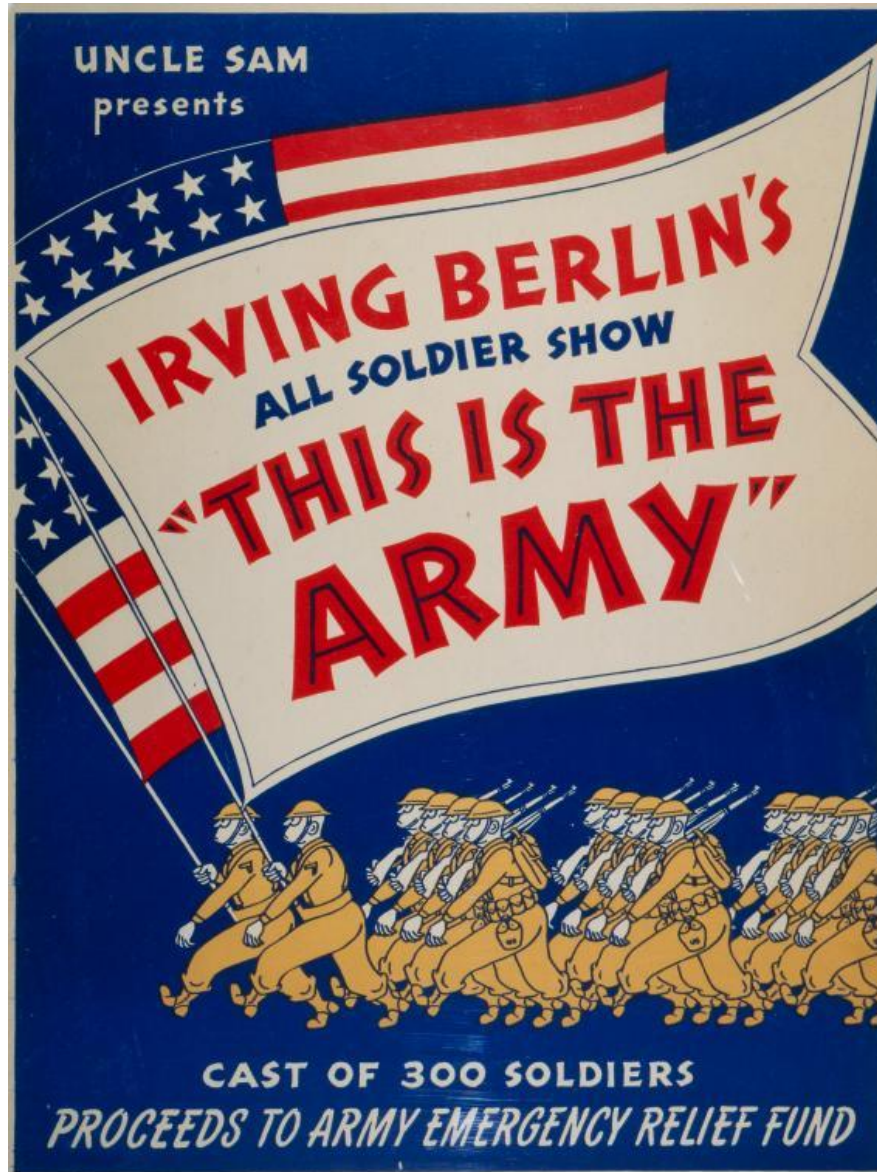


Fig. 2 Billy Rose Theatre Division
The New York Public Library. "Promotional poster for the stage production 'This Is the Army.'" The New York Public Library Digital Collections. 1942.

Societies instruct people through a framework of cognitive and social constructs in order to assimilate the people of a community; and the concept of patriotism, then, helps establish a cohesive social fabric for the benefit of the society at large. The carefully constructed narrative of *This is the Army* presents a snapshot of some of the social constructs that reinforced concepts of ideal masculinity, including the encouragement, through a community atmosphere (in this case, the military) of suppressing one's feelings. Although public awareness of the effects of psychological trauma have increased in recent years, thus relieving, to a degree, the social stigma associated with men voicing their feelings (especially feelings of fear, anguish, embarrassment, and guilt), Uncle Peck's "generation were expected to be quiet about it [the war] and get on with their lives" (Vogel, *Drive* 67). As Shay says, "The culture of the post-World War II period... conferred enormous prestige on the model of rationality recommended by the ancient Greek and Roman Stoics: *any* emotion weakens reason and virtue, so root out emotion from your soul" (*Odysseus* 108).

The film, today, remains an artifact of the brand Kate Smith created for herself, and she propagated American exceptionalism through a wholesome, "American as apple pie" persona; however, her name also conjures associations deeply rooted in the Second World War, and her patriotic tenacity influenced young men like Uncle Peck to enlist in the military, which, in all probability, inadvertently led to psychological deterioration for some of them. Smith's association with the United States military—her performances at military bases around the country, her dedication to selling war bonds, and her patriotic fervor during World War II—could, for veterans with war-induced psychological neuroses, trigger the same sharp, anxiety-fueled reaction as seen in *Li'l Bit* with the mention of her name. Both *Li'l Bit* and *Uncle Peck* are victimized by the cultural reference of "Kate Smith." The objectification of *Li'l Bit*'s body—

Big Papa's vocalization that "She's got all the credentials she'll need on her chest"—shocks many who witness or read the play, and so the reference to Smith, although directed toward Li'l Bit, remains a subtle reminder that in times of war, society views men's bodies—Uncle Peck's body—as a commodity too, and therefore, should invoke the same shock and horror (17). The historical significance of Kate Smith's involvement with the war effort during World War II becomes necessary to understand the subtext of the scene: while Li'l Bit's worth is on her chest, Uncle Peck's worth is on *not* getting things off his chest; his worth as a person resides in his ability to serve as a soldier and keep quiet about his experience, a masculine ideal of twentieth-century American society.

Recognizing the subtext of the play contributes to a richer understanding of Uncle Peck's character, and also reveals a larger theme of the play itself. Christopher Bigsby states that "There are few Vogel plays, indeed, which do not acknowledge the shaping power of such fictions, few which do not respond to, debate with, or incorporate the work of other writers whose own visions have shaped our way of perceiving the world, being themselves mechanisms for interpreting and understanding experience" (307). A definitive link exists between Kate Smith and Irving Berlin, the American dramatist whose stage productions have ties to both World Wars, so perhaps Vogel's *How I Learned to Drive* can be regarded as a part of a larger dialogue that responds to and argues against Berlin's stage productions that fostered images of virtuous war. In what follows, I hope to provide enough evidence to convince my audience that Vogel, indeed, contributes to a conversation about war narratives, and in chapter 4, I will show how *How I Learned to Drive* situates itself among literary predecessors.

Aunt Mary's soliloquy provides two important facts: (1) that the war physically wounded Uncle Peck and (2) that the war psychologically damaged him, too. Mary states "And sometimes

I can feel him just fighting the trouble—whatever has burrowed deeper than the scar tissue” (Vogel, *Drive* 67). Graley Herren’s scholarship on *How I Learned to Drive* acknowledges that “powerlessness,” a feeling often present in trauma victims, “is straightforward: the victim was in a position where he or she felt helpless to prevent the traumatizing event—a condition that applies equally to a soldier in a foxhole or a child in a car” (105). In this one sentence, Herren seems to recognize that Uncle Peck’s war trauma belongs on the same plane as the sexual trauma inflicted upon Li’l Bit; but perhaps Herren was merely illustrating a point, as he makes no further investigation of the paralleled traumas found in *How I Learned to Drive*. Why have scholars uniformly ignored Uncle Peck’s trauma, while widely theorizing on and scrutinizing over Li’l Bit’s trauma? Whether due to the memory format of the play or an audience’s natural tendency to sympathize with Li’l Bit or even the fear of reproach should academia deem scholarship on Uncle Peck—the aggressor, the deviant, the pedophile—to be politically incorrect, there remains an obvious omission in scholarship. Nonetheless, one cannot wholly understand Li’l Bit—her actions, her memories, and her trauma—without first coming to terms with Uncle Peck.

Vogel explores a correlating theme of sexuality and war in *How I Learned to Drive*. I began this chapter with an analysis of the historical significance of Kate Smith to World War II and the perversion of both Li’l Bit’s and Uncle Peck’s bodies to sex and war, respectively, and this repertoire of identifying bodies as commodities continues throughout the play. Vogel often uses place as a signifier that connects the theme of war to a sexual conquest by Uncle Peck. For instance, in response to her uncle’s mention of his hometown county, Li’l Bit incredulously asks, “The name of the county where you grew up is ‘Horry?’ (*Li’l Bit...begins to laugh...*)” (Vogel, *Drive* 28). Presumably, it is the homophonic nature of the word “Horry” with the word “whore” that elicits laughter from Li’l Bit. On the surface, Li’l Bit’s laughter emphasizes her immaturity

and young age; however, the situational irony produced by the Horry/whore phonetic similarities reveals Li'l Bit's true feelings in regards to her relationship with her uncle, especially when one considers that Li'l Bit's trauma first occurred in Horry County. Although the play does not explicitly name Horry County as the site of Li'l Bit's molestation, one can infer this as the locale though the context of evidence provided. Uncle Peck acknowledges that he "get[s] back [to Horry County] once or twice a year," an area located on the coast of South Carolina (34). In "The summer of 1962," Li'l Bit, desiring to "spend an extra week at the beach," argues that her uncle can drive her back home, while her mother voices concern about the predatory way her brother-in-law looks at her daughter (86, 87). When Li'l Bit's mother declares that she is "not letting an eleven-year-old girl spend seven hours alone in the car with a man," one can infer that the location of the beach trip Li'l Bit wants to go on with her uncle is located in Horry County because the distance from Beltsville, Maryland, Li'l Bit's hometown, to Horry County, South Carolina, Uncle Peck's coastal hometown, is close to 430 miles, and would take 7 hours to travel by car—the time quoted by Li'l Bit's mother (87).

Sexualizing the name Horry reveals, however, only one side of the story: the name Horry is rooted in the history of the American Revolutionary War. Peter Horry served under the famous brigadier general Francis "Fox Swamp" Marion, and was venerated for his commitment to the war effort and his men: "Never were his principles shaken; never, even for a moment, did the thought of submission enter his bosom. No man more eagerly sought his foe; none braved danger with greater intrepidity, or more strenuously endeavoured [sic] to sustain the military reputation of his country" (Lewis 92). Catherine H. Lewis notes that "Men from this area who had served under him [Peter Horry] admired him so much that, when Horry District was formed on

December 19, 1801, the General Assembly honored their wishes to name their new judicial district in his honor” (92).

The only other scene set in Horry County depicts Uncle Peck teaching his young nephew, Bobby, how to fish (Vogel, *Drive* 34). Like the “Summer of 1962,” the scene with Cousin Bobby depicts Uncle Peck’s sexual proclivities toward young children; thus, it stands to reason that Horry County represents, to Uncle Peck, a place where he can reconstruct lost innocence. As insidious and damaging as his actions are, the root trauma, the war trauma, functions as a scapegoat to offer some sort of explanation. Uncle Peck’s feelings of detachment and his desire to reconnect to something pure and innocent can be noted in the opening passage of the fishing scene with Cousin Bobby: “I get back once or twice a year—supposedly to visit Mama and the family, but the real truth is to fish. I miss this the most of all. There’s a smell in the Low Country—where the swamp and fresh inlet join the saltwater—a scent of sand and cypress, that I haven’t found anywhere yet” (34). Vogel’s lack of subtleties aside, Uncle Peck’s real purpose for visiting Horry County is to prey on children; the metaphoric use of water details Uncle Peck’s perception of himself in relation to the world—the murky “swamp” (himself) mingles with the purity of the “fresh inlet” (children)—and exposes that which he lost in the war: his innocence. If we view *How I Learned to Drive* as a war story, this passage reveals Uncle Peck’s attempt to locate, restore, and possess the innocence he lost in the war. For Uncle Peck, Horry County represents a place of incorruptibility, and the locus of his own innocence; it is the place where Uncle Peck, “the Dutchman,”⁹ feels drawn to dock his vessel in search of redemption (86).

⁹ In the play, the reference to “the Dutchman” identifies Uncle Peck as a ghost, “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” (86). Interestingly, the “Flying Dutchman” is also used in the play in reference to Richard Wagner’s opera, *Der fliegende Holländer* (*The Flying Dutchman*) (34). Adopted by the Nazi regime, Wagner stood as a cultural symbol for the malevolent movement responsible for igniting World War II. Vogel, perhaps, intends for her audience to connect Uncle Peck’s trauma that marks him as a “Dutchman” to the war in which he served.

Vogel's use of place as a means to converge notions of sex and war in *How I Learned to Drive* can be found in the car scenes located in Beltsville, Maryland. The setting of the play begins in a car "In a parking lot overlooking the Beltsville Agricultural Farms in suburban Maryland" (Vogel, *Drive* 7); and Beltsville Agricultural Farms, again, is mentioned halfway through the play in a section on "The Initiation into a Boy's First Love" (46). These two scenes follow the overtly sexual narrative of the play: the former scene sets the action and tone of the play as the audience learns of the secretive, sexual relationship between Li'l Bit and Uncle Peck; and the latter scene conveys the progression of a boy's love—the love of automobiles as a stopgap between "a mother's tits" and "a woman's breasts" (46). However, Beltsville Agricultural Farms represents "a Boy's First Love" for one individual in particular: Henry A. Wallace. Even though Vogel's *How I Learned to Drive* predates the honorary renaming of Beltsville Agricultural Farms to the Henry A. Wallace Agricultural Research Center by three years, Wallace was "instrumental in overseeing the extensive land acquisition and construction at Beltsville" and his tenure as the Secretary of Agriculture cements his legacy in the history surrounding the facility ("Henry A. Wallace Exhibit").

The year 1933 saw Adolf Hitler become Chancellor of Germany, and the same year saw Roosevelt appoint Wallace as the United States Secretary of Agriculture. Coincidentally, Wallace also held the position of Vice President of the United States under Roosevelt during the same years as the United States' involvement with World War II, 1941 – 1945. As Vice President, he was appointed chairman of the Board of Economic Warfare (BEW), a newly established agency responsible for locating "sources for the supply of essential war materials, such as rubber and quinine, previously obtained from areas now in Japanese hands" (White and Maze 153). Wallace was prepared to guide the BEW to "do everything possible to ensure victory

in the war” but he also knew that the United States needed to “prepare for a humane and durable peace” and that “If the nation lacked confidence in the nature of the peace, it might not have the courage to defeat the enemy”—a sentiment (on a much smaller scale) that Li'l Bit will need to learn in order to find a “durable peace” after breaking away from Uncle Peck (White and Maze 153).

Because of Wallace’s outspoken progressive ideology in regards to race relations in the United States, his appointment proved divisive. As a child, Wallace’s family housed George Washington Carver while he attended Iowa State University as a student, and while living with them, Carver instructed the young Wallace in the scientific field of botany and helped instill a lifelong love of science and agriculture. The exposure and inclusive environment Wallace’s family provided undoubtedly instilled the progressive views he held, which, unfortunately, proved to be unpopular in America during a time when segregation was still upheld as the law. In 1939, before he was elected Vice President, Wallace proclaimed

Claims to racial superiority are not new in this world. Even in such a democratic country as ours there are those who would claim that the American people are superior to all others...Never before in the world’s history has such a conscious and systematic effort been made to inculcate the youth of this nation with ideas of racial superiority as are being made in Germany today. We must remember that down through the ages one of the most popular political devices has been to blame economic and other troubles on some minority group. (qtd. in White and Maze 130)

His speech warned of the immorality of oppressing minority groups, and seemed to implicate the United States by calling attention to the “ideas of racial superiority,” the current state of racial

policy in the U.S., as the enemy of civilization by using Nazi-occupied Germany as example. Wallace was a man who used his position to speak out on the fact that “there is no scientific basis for racial superiority” and whose morality places him on the right side of history during a time when such beliefs would have provoked outrage amongst his political rivals, as well as members of his own party (Wallace qtd. in White and Maze 129). It was during the war years that Wallace spoke freely of America’s hypocrisy of helping to liberate a segment of religiously-oppressed people overseas while oppressing African Americans, our own citizens, at home, and ultimately lead to Wallace’s removal from office. Wallace was, first, a scientist and humanitarian, and second, a political figure—and during his tenure in the public eye, his identity never wavered.

Wallace’s legacy, like Smith’s, is enmeshed in the history of World War II. He defined himself through virtuous actions and speech, as he strove for peace, both abroad and at home; thus, when Uncle Peck fondles Li’l Bit in the opening scene of *How I Learned to Drive*, while parked in a car overlooking the Beltsville Agricultural Farms, he perverts the memory of a man who stood for peace and justice; he perverts the memory of the men who fought in the war; and he perverts the honor he himself is owed as a veteran. Having this scene take place at the Beltsville Agricultural Farms reinforces the duality of the play, sex and war, and alludes to the duality of Uncle Peck, a man whom “Everyone in the neighborhood borrows” when they need a helping hand, a man who could “be cast in the role of Atticus in *To Kill a Mockingbird*,” a man who otherwise cuts the ideal image of a virtuous person, if not for his sexual deviances (Vogel, *Drive* 67, 4). Even his name alludes to the duality of his nature: “Peck” simultaneously insinuates genitalia and Gregory Peck, the actor who played Atticus Finch in the 1962 adaptation

of *To Kill a Mockingbird*.¹⁰ In her biography of Paula Vogel, Joanna Mansbridge declares “Vogel’s unique dramaturgy—the aesthetic architecture of her plays—is characterized by sharp juxtapositions, formal innovation, and campy humor, and this non-naturalistic technique defamiliarizes subjects like pornography and AIDS by presenting them as products of history, public discourse, and collective political fantasy” (2). *How I Learned to Drive* defamiliarizes the subject of pedophilia through the juxtapositions of honorable historical figures with ties to World War II such as Smith and Wallace with scenes of the sexual exploitation of a young girl. Vogel’s theatre may shock the audience, but she also creates an atmosphere in which a “cultural dialogue” can take place and forces “her audience...to look from the edges of things, rather than from the center” (Mansbridge 2, 7).

Images of the war are embedded throughout *How I Learned to Drive*, and virtuous and courageous figures such as Smith and Wallace keep company with a lesser known, but arguably more instrumental figure of the war years, Ernest Leitz II, the owner and operator of the Leitz corporation.¹¹ Leitz, Inc. created and mass produced the Leica camera, a tool the Nazis used for propaganda. Frank Dabba Smith, who published a short booklet on the Leitz family and their covert heroic actions during World War II confirms that “The Leica was prized by the [German] military for its abilities and was routinely used for intelligence and publicity work,” as such “Photography was greatly exploited as a communications and propaganda device during the

¹⁰ Christopher Bigsby notes the likely origin of Uncle Peck’s name in his chapter on Paula Vogel in *Contemporary American Playwrights*. See page 320.

¹¹ There are few sources available (all out of print) about Ernest Leitz II and his heroic efforts leading up to and during the systematic persecution of Jewish people and other minorities because “Members of the Leitz family who had been active [in their secret relocation program] wanted no recognition of their rescue activity (Smith ii). Even after Leitz’s death, his youngest son Günther Leitz refused to allow any publication of his father’s “Leica Freedom Train”: “My father did what he did because he felt responsible for his employees and their families and also for our neighbors. He was able to act because the government needed our factory’s military output. No one can ever know what other Germans had done for the persecuted within the limits of their ability” (Smith 17). For more information on the Leitz family, in addition to Smith, see Gilbert, and Lipton.

Holocaust,” thus, “the still camera was a tool of choice whether the objective was to inculcate anti-Semitism and report and/or publicize officially approved versions of anti-Jewish activities engaged in by the Nazi state” (4-5, 1). The Leica camera may have been adopted by the Nazi-controlled German military, nonetheless “Behind this ‘whiter than white’ Leica corporate image...there lay another reality: the top management at Leitz was systematically saving Jews. Activities enabling Jews to emigrate began shortly after Adolf Hitler became Chancellor in 1933 and intensified after the nationwide ‘Kristallnacht’ pogrom of 9-10 November 1938” (Smith 5). Leitz along with his daughter, Elise, were instrumental in saving the lives of hundreds of Jewish and other anti-Nazi people. Jewish employees—even members of his community who were not employees but who were thought to be at risk due to the hostile politics of the newly elected Chancellor—were “provided with a brief ‘training’ and legal overseas travel permits as sales agents for Leica products” and were provided passage to “England, Switzerland, America, and possibly Buenos Aires, Shanghai or Hong Kong” along with letters of recommendation and a free Leica camera to assist them in their new start in life (Smith i).

Leitz secured a path to freedom for those who were oppressed and, eventually, persecuted during World War II, and although an audience watching *How I Learned to Drive* on stage may not pick up on the brand of camera Uncle Peck uses during his photo shoot with Li'l Bit, those who read the play—the stage directions—have the ability to grasp a deeper understanding of “The Photo Shoot” scene, including who *is* and who *was* objectified (Vogel, *Drive* 59). One must keep in mind Vogel’s aptitude for details, especially in the midst of the skewed chronology. “Christmas 1964,” in the play, occurs after “The Photo Shoot” of 1965 in which the stage directions note that Uncle Peck “looks through the Leica camera” (69, 59, 59). At first appearance the brand of camera appears inconsequential. Perhaps, the camera could just as easily

have been an American-made Kodak or a Japanese-made Pentax, two popular brands of point-and-shoot cameras of the 1960s; however, the specific brand becomes important when, during the “Christmas 1964” scene, Li’l Bit notices the camera, thus, flagging its importance to the audience:

LI’L BIT. That looks like a really neat camera that Aunt Mary got you.

PECK. It is. It’s a very nice one.

(Pause, as Peck works on the dishes and some demon that Li’l Bit intuits.). (69)

The pause allows Uncle Peck to subtly shift in mood, as he ruminates on what the camera represents to him. Perhaps Vogel intentionally links Uncle Peck’s “*demon*” to the German-made camera, to his experience in World War II. His shift in mood creates a fissure that alludes to his trauma and the war-themed subtext of the play; moreover, it allows Li’l Bit, a highly attuned girl, to become “aware of Peck” and his distress “signals” that “are calling her to him” (58). The camera, perhaps for the reason I’ve theorized, triggers an episode for Uncle Peck; and triggers for trauma survivors do not always follow a linear pattern (much like the format of the play), so they are oftentimes difficult to anticipate or recognize for those closest to a survivor. Li’l Bit does not understand why her uncle’s demeanor shifts, but she can “intuit” the “*demon*” that troubles him and that briefly interrupts their discussion following the mention of the camera.

Without interviewing Vogel, it is impossible to know whether she knew of Leitz’s heroic wartime efforts, and although the historical significance of Leitz’s actions have an obscure print history, there may be a wider cultural knowledge of his history, especially in the Jewish community in which Vogel belongs; nonetheless, Vogel’s inclusion of the Leica camera, with direct ties to Leitz and his corporation parallel Vogel’s perception of Uncle Peck: “the thing I find noble about [Uncle Peck] is I think he taught his niece how to reject him. I think he’s given

her the tools and ego development to destroy him” (Vogel, “Charlie Rose”). This mirrors Leitz in that his company played a large role in helping construct a narrative of propaganda: “the [Leica] camera was viewed as an effective tool for the Nazi mission of proving the racial and athletic superiority of Aryans and conveying the touristic and architectural glories of Germany” (Smith 3). Yet, behind the scenes, Leitz ultimately provides the means for hundreds of Jewish people to break the bonds of oppression as they escape to freedom—just as Uncle Peck provides the means for Li'l Bit to escape her family, including himself.

Noah Voelker's article explores the juxtaposition of performance and photography, in which he argues that “The Photo Shoot” scene in *How I Learned to Drive* offers a glimpse into the complex relationship Uncle Peck has with Li'l Bit. The scene shows Uncle Peck's “attempt...to reconcile his sexual desire with his parental responsibilities” through an “asexual” performance on stage while “the images displayed [in the background] are sexual” in nature (Voelker 56). Understandably, Voelker seems drawn to believe that when Uncle Peck does not behave according to audience expectations (i.e., he does not physically try to take advantage of Li'l Bit when he has her alone to himself), his intentions, while distasteful, are not completely exploitative. I feel that Voelker misplaces the motivation of Uncle Peck's “all business” demeanor and “asexual” tone (Vogel 59, 61). He does not, as Voelker states, feel compelled by his “parental role” “to nurture Li'l Bit and help her grow as a person” (56); after all, the very act of Uncle Peck taking photos of his young niece in sexually suggestive poses in his basement negates any possibility of him helping “her grow as a person.” Instead, this scene offers insight into Uncle Peck's war-damaged psyche. One must take into consideration the patterns found throughout the play in order to unravel the true nature of the scene. The stage directions offer clues to help make sense of the action (or lack, thereof): “*Peck fiddles, all business, with his*

camera. As in the driving lesson, he is all competency and concentration. Li'l Bit stands awkwardly. He looks through the Leica camera" (59). I will discuss how the driving lesson contributes to this scene later in this chapter, but for now, moments like this in the play are indicative of Uncle Peck's trauma. If I am correct in assuming that the Leica camera acts as a trigger for Uncle Peck, then his pensive and "asexual" behavior during "The Photo Shoot" becomes indicative of *his* objectification, from his experience in the war, and the reason for his shift in mood.

In a recently published biography on Paula Vogel, Joanna Mansbridge notes that Mark Brokaw's production at Signature Theatre further complicated interpretations of ["The Photo Shoot"] scene by projecting the images of Li'l Bit that Peck was taking on a screen above her, interspersing them with images of *Playboy* bunnies, popular celebrities, and even Alice Liddell, Lewis Carroll's child muse. In this way, the "private secret" unfolding in Peck's basement is contextualized within a long tradition of sexualized images in visual art and media. The audience is invited into the complexity of this coming-of-age scene and divested of the comfort of clear moral responses." (137-38)

Mansbridge identifies the male gaze in Vogel's projected collage of female sexuality; however, this scene also exemplifies the perverted nature of war, and Uncle Peck's own "complexity of this coming-of-age scene..." This scene, on stage, conveys the systematic objectification of women, but a keen observer might notice the "Vargas pinups" in the list that Li'l Bit prattles off in describing "Uncle Peck's turf"—the basement (59). Alberto Vargas drew pinup girls that were "featured in *Esquire* [magazine] from 1940 to 1946, [and] were minimally dressed, sometimes in military or work attire. Their long limbs and slim waists boosted the morale of World War II

soldiers, who cast them on the noses of fighter planes and pinned them to their foxholes” (“Girls, Varga”).¹² In much the same vein as Li'l Bit's hyper-sexualized coming-of-age, Vargas pinups represent, for Uncle Peck, his hyper-masculine coming-of-age during World War II. Uncle Peck directs Li'l Bit into sexualized poses reminiscent of these pinup girls: “take the back of your right hand and put in on your right cheek—your elbow angled up—now slowly, slowly stroke your cheek, draw back your hair with the back of your hand” (Vogel, *Drive* 63). The pictures that Uncle Peck takes of thirteen-year-old Li'l Bit reduce her to a position of vulnerability as she becomes objectified through his lens. Voelker purports that

The spectator of a photograph has the potential to indefinitely view the captured moment, thereby making it a non-unique moment; it is not a fleeting performance.

This difference is crucial for scopophiliacs because they depend on the person (who is being objectified for sexual pleasure) to remain unchangeable and therefore subservient to their “controlling and curious gaze.” (55)

Traumatic experience, like photographs, can capture single moments in time—fostering, as Bessel A. Van Der Kolk and Onno Van Der Hart point out, “somatosensory” responses through “behavioral reenactments, nightmares, and flashbacks” (172). Is it possible that Uncle Peck was experiencing a flashback of the war at the same time that Li'l Bit was subjected to her own immortalized objectification? Perhaps Uncle Peck slips into a moment in time where “His face is turned toward the past,” to his wartime experience, during moments in the play where he becomes “*all competency and concentration*”—a state of mind necessary to survive in a war zone (Benjamin 257; Vogel 59).

¹² The Spenser Museum at the University of Kansas “holds the court records of a series of lawsuits between Vargas and *Esquire* that began on April, 30, 1946. These lawsuits concerned the fact that... *Esquire* successfully laid claim to the Varga name and the Varga signature” since they convinced Vargas (who signed a contract) to drop the S from his name in order to appeal more to the American public; thus ensued a copyright battle between the artist and *Esquire* when the magazine laid perpetual claim to his artwork published under the name Varga (Goddard).

Another example of a sudden shift in mood by Uncle Peck occurs during the driving lesson scene, and I argue that Uncle Peck's use of rhetoric during this scene aligns more closely with the instruction given to men before engaging in enemy combat than the typical advice given to new drivers. The noticeable shift in Uncle Peck's demeanor occurs when he begins his lesson with "*surprising firmness*" and "*commands*" Li'l Bit's attention (Vogel, *Drive* 48). Crossing situational boundaries, Peck transforms the driving lesson into one reminiscent of militaristic orders:

You're going to learn to think what the other guy is going to do before he does it. If there's an accident, and ten cars pile up, and people get killed, you're the one who's gonna steer through it, put your foot on the gas if you have to, and be the only one to walk away. I don't know how long you or I are going to live, but we're for damned sure not going to die in a car. (50)

According to Christopher Bigsby, this passage "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" (323). Yes, Uncle Peck empowers Li'l Bit with the knowledge she eventually uses to "think what the other guy is going to do before he does it," but why? Vogel states that she "think[s] he taught his niece how to reject him," but she does not say that he *intentionally* taught her how to reject him (Vogel "Charlie Rose"). No, the world in which Uncle Peck lives is measured by that "one single catastrophe," and when he says "I don't know how long you or I are going to live, but *we're* for damned sure not going to die in a car," he intends to teach Li'l Bit how to survive with him, not how to leave him (Benjamin 257; Vogel 50, emphasis added). Bigsby's interpretation misses the dramatic irony Vogel crafts with the dual traumas. The rhetorical construction of this passage reveals Uncle Peck's vulnerability: Shortly before his

speech, “*Peck goes silent for a while,*” perhaps an indication that he briefly re-experiences the memories that haunt him—whether they are rooted in his experiences in World War II or of his guilt for molesting Li'l Bit in the same car five years earlier during her first driving lesson remains unknown due to the memory format of the play; however, it is impossible to ignore the militaristic-charged rhetoric that stems from a war long ago.

Jennifer Griffiths views the driving lesson, in which Uncle Peck teaches Li'l Bit how to drive more like a man, as a way in which Uncle Peck “challenges the biological determinism perpetuated within the family’s ‘lessons’ about gender roles and relations” (100). Arguing that “Peck is a sensitive, refined man,” Griffiths explicates how Uncle Peck defies contemporary notions of ideal masculinity, and achieves a “seductive” status “when he displays possible weakness” (100). Additionally, she theorizes that

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. (Griffiths 100)

I agree with Griffiths—Uncle Peck, at times, casts a vulnerable image, one that complicates archetypal masculinity; these qualities combine to create a sympathetic character, and offer an explanation for why Li'l Bit, an “estranged” character in her own right, might encourage her uncle to discuss “whatever has burrowed deeper than the scar tissue” (Vogel, *Drive* 67).

Griffiths’s perception of Uncle Peck as an unconventional masculine figure reinforces the idea

that the war, metaphorically, has pushed Uncle Peck to the margins of society, leading him to use alcohol as a means to cope with his trauma, a common story among war veterans:

LI'L BIT. Why do you drink so much?

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. (Vogel 70)

The term “fire,” indeed, translates to trauma, so when Uncle Peck pinpoints the “fire in [his] heart” as the location of his trauma, as noted by Griffiths, he subtly references the war as the source of his suffering. As I discussed in Chapter 2, the current scientific understanding of psychological trauma is relatively new, but the origins of this field of study have a long history, beginning with the observations of soldiers from battles of long ago.¹³ Vogel seems to draw inspiration from the medical history of wars past in locating Uncle Peck's “fire in [his] heart.” In 1871, Jacob Mendez Da Costa, in a seminal study on the physical maladies of Civil War combatants, wrote “On Irritable Heart.” His study focused on the “increasing numbers of young soldiers [who] were disabled by chest pain, palpitations, shortness of breath, exercise intolerance and the inability to perform sustained physical activity” and laid the foundation for future studies in cardiac disorders (Wooley 2). Irritable heart was, initially, believed to be the consequence of a

¹³ See Jonathan Shay's *Achilles in Vietnam* and *Odysseus in America* for a compelling argument on how our current understanding of the signs and symptoms of combat trauma can be identified in some of the earliest known texts of Western literature.

somatoform disorder, a disorder in which physical symptoms manifest due to a mental illness (in this case, a mental illness caused by war). By the First World War, Da Costa's terminology, "Irritable Heart," was reinvented as "Soldier's Heart," and from there spawned a complex web of study among the medical conditions of soldiers and veterans. In addition to "irritable heart" and "soldier's heart," terms such as "nostalgia," "shell-shocked," "combat fatigue," "neurasthenia," and "PTSD" became the rhetoric used to define the damaged combatants of war, but are now used to define the era in which the medical field attempted to locate and make sense of wounded soldiers. By defining his trauma as a "fire in my heart," Uncle Peck reduces the pain of his wartime experience in order to poetically simplify his trauma for a thirteen year-old girl.

According to Shay, "Veterans use many strategies to numb their pain, to silence the nightmares, to quell guilt" (*Odysseus* 39). *How I Learned to Drive* presents Uncle Peck as a man who does not compulsively drink for no known reason, such as the alcoholic who finds himself in a spiraling addiction; instead, the play suggests that Uncle Peck has been deeply damaged by the war, and "the drinking helps" (Vogel 70). He is the ghost whom his wife knows when "he's having a bad spell because he comes looking for [her] in the house, and just hangs around until it passes" (Vogel 67). Shay cautions that "Veterans in this state say they feel 'dead' and that they watch life through a very dirty window. They are never *in* life. More than one [veteran] has described it as like being wrapped in cotton wool" (*Odysseus* 39). The acknowledgment that Uncle Peck has a "fire in [his] heart" in the same breath as his admission that "the drinking helps" suggests he uses alcohol to "to numb pain" caused by the war. Uncle Peck seeks out that which can temporarily relieve or mask his painful memories from the war, be it alcohol or Li'l Bit, or as Aunt Mary puts it, "Yet another one who's borrowing my husband" (Vogel 67).

Perhaps the most compelling evidence that *How I Learned to Drive* recreates the traumas of two people—the performance on stage that vividly details the traumatic sexual objectification of Li'l Bit and the war-related trauma that remains, mostly, on the page, the quietly enduring trauma that the audience must “intuit” to understand why Uncle Peck, too, is haunted by his past—can be pieced out through the interviews Vogel has given. The war exists on the pages of *How I Learned to Drive*, Uncle Peck suffers silently from trauma sustained during his service in World War II, and the interviews with Vogel and David Morse, who played Uncle Peck, and Mary-Louise Parker, who played Li'l Bit, will offer evidence that the war is the subtext of the play. As the dramaturg of the Broadway debut, Vogel worked with the actors and, at times, revised her play to better fit the acting on stage. In response to her methodology on revising her work, Vogel told Parker “if you’re not getting it [a specific scene or line], it’s not yet on the page” (Vogel, “Paula Vogel” 44). Vogel wrote *How I Learned to Drive* in two weeks’ time while on Douglas Island in Alaska at a writing residency sponsored by the Perseverance Theatre and endowed by the Pew Charitable Trust. She says that the fishing scene with Cousin Bobby “had not featured in the outline for the play...[and] was a product of the process of writing” (qtd. in Bigsby 322). This scene represents one of two in the play that breaks the memory-play format, and the only scene that offers direct insight into the mind of Uncle Peck, as it shows the methodology of a man whose sexual appetite for children can be sated with either gender. Interestingly, Aunt Mary’s soliloquy, the other scene that breaks the memory-play format, was added *after* the completion of the play. This scene offers the most evidence for Uncle Peck’s mental state, that he is “lonely and disturbed, [and] driven by demons he can neither name nor defeat” (Bigsby 326). If one considers that Vogel revises her work “on the page” if an actor or actress is “not getting it,” and if one takes into consideration that Vogel was the dramaturg for

the premier of *How I Learned to Drive* at the Vineyard Theatre, then perhaps this scene was written to add clarity for David Morse, the actor who played Uncle Peck. Whether Vogel intentionally penned Uncle Peck as a war-ravaged man or if Morse transformed him into this character after reading between the lines does not matter, because, as Vogel states when talking to Parker, “I don’t remember what *Li’l Bit* was before I saw you. The same way that I don’t remember what Peck was in my head before I saw David. They’re gone now. They’ve been effaced by your interpretation. You’re seeing something on the page I don’t see anymore” (Vogel, Interview by Parker 46).

In a televised interview with Charlie Rose, when asked “Who is Uncle Peck?” Morse acknowledges that Uncle Peck is “a guy who’s been through World War II and suffered terrible things over there, [and] suffered terrible things as a child, which are only hinted at in the play” (Morse). Although scholars recognize Uncle Peck’s service in the military as the possible catalyst of his trauma, Morse remains the only person who seems to understand the severity of the haunting remembrances of the war that Uncle Peck lives with on a daily basis. Graley Herren asks “Why does Paula Vogel take it so easy on the incestuous paedophile Uncle Peck?” before amending his question to “Why does *Li’l Bit* take it so easy on Uncle Peck?”; nevertheless, he concludes that “the controlling vision of *How I Learned to Drive* ultimately belongs to Vogel, and...the credit or blame for Peck’s relatively benign description must finally land on Vogel’s desk” (103). The rhetoric Herren uses here negates the unbiased allusion that he intends to purport: he only allows himself to see the “unsettling transgression[s]” in Vogel’s play (Herren 112). To be fair, it *is* difficult to see beyond the pedophilia and understand *why* Vogel would construct a play that sympathizes with a man whose sexual proclivities have no place in our contemporary society, but in undertaking the task of “listening” to Uncle Peck’s story, a fuller

picture emerges: Uncle Peck is as damaged as Li'l Bit, and as Bigsby states, they "are two people drawn together by their separate needs, who hold one another's lives in their hands, momentarily killing their loneliness by pooling it" (328). If one delves into the subtext of the play, the evidence for Uncle Peck's war-ravaged world, as I have shown in this chapter, becomes ample; and when audiences fail to "listen" to Uncle Peck, to understand his experience, then they become complicit in perpetuating his trauma. Mary Louise Parker, in an interview with Vogel, verbalizes the successful crafting that enables the creation of a story on stage:

MLP: And you don't come out and say it. You show it. What's wonderful about your writing is that you don't tell and you don't answer; you offer and you ask.

PV: But that's what dramatists do.

MLP: Well, the good ones. (Vogel, Interview by Parker 49)

In any well-crafted story, one must keep in mind that there's the story, and then there is the real story. McKee writes that "An old Hollywood expression goes: 'If the scene is about what the scene is about, you're in deep shit'" (253). The duality of *How I Learned to Drive*—the themes of sex and war—mark Vogel as a dramatist who writes with depth, as her play adheres to the conventions of storytelling, in particular the convention of subtext: "The scene is not about what the scene seems to be about. It's about something else...that will make the scene work. There's always a subtext, an inner life that contrasts with or contradicts [or in the case of *How I Learned to Drive*, compliments] the text" (McKee 255).

Of course, one may argue that almost any place, given enough time, can be connected to some piece of history relating to war; or argue that many people who lived in the early- and mid-twentieth century can be tied to one of the great wars. However, when one takes into

consideration that *every* specific place or cultural reference named in *How I Learned to Drive* is embroiled with war, dismantling the argument, then, becomes unreasonable; the evidence reduces the possibility for happenstance and lends credence to the idea that Vogel intentionally penned the themes of sex and war, and though she persistently defends *How I Learned to Drive* as a love story, the unstated reality, what Vogel may wish for the audience to pick up on, is that this is also a story about war. Indeed, for one to understand this play as a love story, one must first understand this play as a war story.

4 Before Li'l Bit There Was Lolita & Esmé

Everything great is stolen.

—Vogel, Interview by Parker 46

The extant body of Paula Vogel's work depicts ordinary situations or characters and juxtaposes them with taboo or controversial topics: *The Oldest Profession* dramatizes prostitution by featuring the workers as a group of retirees who are forced to navigate a, literally, "dying" profession; the fictional Acquired Toilet Disease (ATD) parodies the hysteria surrounding AIDS and the homosexual lifestyle in Vogel's 1992 play, *The Baltimore Waltz*; in *Don Juan Comes Home from Iraq*, a play that revolves around the theme of betrayal, Vogel depicts a dissociated Marine as he recounts memories of his sexual prowess and of his powerlessness with women, and, by proxy, the military; and pedophilia complicates the love story in *How I Learned to Drive*. By defamiliarizing social constructs—in her telling old stories in new ways—Vogel shocks audiences and, thus, spurs public discourse on important issues. In this chapter I will show how Vogel's *How I Learned to Drive* contributes to the literary tradition of stories of young girls who become the object of obsession for older men, including Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita* and J.D. Salinger's "For Esmé—with Love and Squalor."

Read almost any interview Vogel has given in regards to her Pulitzer Prize-winning play, and when asked about her inspiration, she readily points to Nabokov's *Lolita*:

Paula Vogel: I see it as a kind of coming of age play. A love story....It's drawing on a response to *Lolita*.

Charlie Rose: And so there's some *Lolita* here in terms of—

PV: Yes. Absolutely. I hope there is. I mean, I hope people are seeing the resonances. I just wanted to know what it would feel like to write *Lolita* from *Lolita*'s point of view. (Vogel, "Charlie Rose")

Although a body of literature exists that emphasizes, or at least contains resonances of, pedophilia, Vogel consistently cites *Lolita*—the twentieth century's most infamous novel depicting pedophilia—as the impetus for her play.¹⁴ Due to the initial critical reception *Lolita* garners, Nabokov pens an afterward asserting his position that “a work of fiction exists only insofar as it affords me what I shall bluntly call aesthetic bliss, that is a sense of being somehow, somewhere, connected with other states of being where art (curiosity, tenderness, kindness, ecstasy) is the norm” (Nabokov 296). Nabokov credits “the nerves of the novel” as the substance that creates character: the mementos, the still images, the “favorite hollows” and nooks found nestled between scenes of “philistine vulgarity” as the “secret points, the subliminal co-ordinates by means of which the book is plotted” (Nabokov 297, 297, 296). Vogel, like Nabokov before her, creates “aesthetic bliss” in that the relationship between Uncle Peck and Li'l Bit offers “more...than philistine vulgarity”—her play offers forgiveness and depicts compassion for a

¹⁴ In addition to Nabokov's *Lolita* and two short stories by J.D. Salinger, “For Esmé—with Love and Squalor” and “A Perfect Day for Bananafish,” other examples of literature that include the theme of pedophilia include Mary Renault's *The Persian Boy*, an historical fiction depicting the sexual relationship between Alexander the Great and a young boy named Bagoas; the contemporary novel *Big Ray* by Michael Kimball; and poetry by Edgar Allen Poe, particularly “Annabel Lee,” (a poem referenced in *Lolita* [see pp. 9-13, 100]), a poem critics often cite as having been inspired by his wife, also his cousin, whom he fell in love with when she was 13 years old (see *Lolita* pg. 151).

man who most in society consider the most despised of criminals (Nabokov 296). *How I Learned to Drive* depicts a girl who finds solace in, and offers solace to, a man who protects yet exploits her; it is a play, as Vogel says, about how “we can receive great love from the people who harm us” (qtd. in Holmberg 436).

In addition to the obvious similarities between the names Lolita and Li'l Bit,¹⁵ and the theme of pedophilia—both depict father figures who feel attracted to a young girl on the cusp of puberty, in the words of Humbert Humbert, a “girl-child,” “wayward child,”¹⁶ or “nymphet”—both texts rely on the automobile as a space that acts as both a means for entrapment and escape (Nabokov 16). In *Lolita* the automobile captures the landscape of 1950s America through a chain of off-the-beaten-tracks motels and local area attractions as Humbert hustles Lolita across the country to escape the prying eyes of associations close to Lolita's dead mother, Charlotte. The automobile, moreover, acts as a confined space in which Humbert can forge a closer relationship with his step-daughter: “You see, she had absolutely nowhere else to go” (Nabokov 133). This, too, can be seen in Vogel's *How I Learned to Drive*: the first scene opens with Li'l Bit in a car “parking off a dark lane with a married man on an early summer night” (8), and even though a seventeen-year-old Li'l Bit straddles the line where one might assume that a person of this age begins to assert rational agency, the stage directions emote the underpinnings of an uncomfortable situation. They describe Li'l Bit as “tense” and later, when Uncle Peck fondles

¹⁵ Perhaps Vogel drew inspiration from the opening line of *Lolita* in naming her protagonist: “Lolita, light of my life, fire of my loins. My sin, my soul. Lo-lee-ta: the tip of the tongue taking a trip of three steps down the palate to tap, at three, on the teeth. Lo. Lee. Ta” (7). Could not Li'l Bit, once removed from the contraction of the Maryland drawl, fit neatly into the same opening line? *Little Bit, light of my life, fire of my loins. My sin, my soul. Lit-tle-Bit: the tip of the tongue taking a trip of three steps down the palate to tap, at three, on the teeth. Lit. Tle. Bit.*

¹⁶ In *Lolita*, Humbert defines the term “wayward child” under Massachusetts law as a child “‘between seven and seventeen years of age’ (who, moreover, habitually associates with vicious or immoral persons)” (16). This seems important when one considers that the earliest memories of Li'l Bit's relationship with Uncle Peck begin at eleven years of age—when she is first molested—and that she breaks free from her relationship with Peck on her 18th birthday, when she is no longer a child.

her breasts, the stage directions read “(*Li'l Bit closes her eyes, carefully keeps her voice calm:*)” and she says, more for herself than for her uncle: “It’s okay” (8, 12). The use of the car as a source of entrapment becomes even clearer when the audience learns, late in the play, that the car served as the setting for Li'l Bit’s molestation at the hands of her uncle when she was eleven years old (88-90). Nonetheless, just as Humbert Humbert uses an automobile as a means for escape, a symbol of his freedom, the car serves as a space where Li'l Bit can escape from, if only temporarily, the dysfunction of her family. The stressful dinner scene in which Big Papa asserts his worldview that Li'l Bit has no need for a college degree when “She’s got all the credentials she’ll need on her chest” compels Li'l Bit to hastily exit the dinner, and assert that she “just need[s] to...to drive for a little bit. Alone” (17, 20, ellipses in original). The double entendre suggests that driving for “a little bit”—literally for Li'l Bit—offers a temporary reprieve from her psychologically-damaging family; and Li'l Bit reinforces this motif at the close of the play when she says “The nearest sensation I feel—of flight in the body—I guess I feel when I’m driving” (Vogel, *Drive* 91); and, as Mansbridge puts it, “Driving allows Li'l Bit imaginatively to transform her feelings of isolation into an experience of mobility and control” (140). Uncle Peck, similarly, finds a release from his isolation (although his isolation is war-induced) in “the mobility and control” he experiences in his sexual relationship with Li'l Bit.

Humbert Humbert, at the end of *Lolita*, hopes to gain sympathy from his audience when he muses that “Mid-twentieth century ideas concerning child-parent relationship have been considerably tainted by the scholastic rigmarole and standardized symbols of the psychoanalytic racket, but I hope I am addressing myself to unbiased readers” (268). Of course, at this late stage, after reading the journal of a man who details his “criminal craving” for young girls, hoping for “unbiased readers,” however provoking his pain and suffering at losing Lolita, remains as an

ineffectual request to most audiences (Nabokov 20); nonetheless, the grandiose prose that categorizes Humbert, unbeknownst to him, as a caricature of a great literary writer offers some comic relief in the face of the monstrous image of a man obsessed with a young girl, allowing the reader to inwardly laugh at the unintentional bumbling of his character. Nabokov's razor sharp literary talent shows he can create a character in which *the writing style of the character himself* juxtaposes against the serious nature of the story. *Lolita* clearly adopts the attitude that Humbert is a devious character, and Nabokov never wavers in this tone: "my creature Humbert is a foreigner and an anarchist, and there are many things, besides nymphets, in which I disagree with him" (Nabokov 296). No, the sympathy that radiates off the pages is of Humbert's own device: "Now, squirming and pleading with my own memory, I recall that on this and similar occasions, it was always my habit and method to ignore Lolita's states of mind while comforting my own base self" (Nabokov 270). Only Humbert sympathizes with Humbert. *How I Learned to Drive* also uses black humor to release audience tension; however, where Nabokov criticizes Humbert's actions, Vogel sympathizes with Uncle Peck. Nabokov maintains audience engagement with a first-person narration from a reprehensible character, and Vogel, inspired by this literary marvel, takes it one step further with her pedophilic character by giving him the sympathy Nabokov's character never had. Uncle Peck, then, does not so much resemble Humbert, but instead Richard F. Schiller, also known as *Dick*, the "veteran of a remote war,"¹⁷ the man who gives Lolita love and refuge from a troubled "home" (Nabokov 257, 255).

Although there are many similarities between *Lolita* and *How I Learned to Drive*, the authors' perceptions of the pedophilic character contrast sharply; while Vogel may have had

¹⁷ In addition to the sexual innuendo and allusion to Gregory Peck that Christopher Bigsby first formulates, I postulate that the name Uncle Peck also recalls Dick Schiller (also a not-so-subtle allusion to the male anatomy), the war-veteran that marries Lolita and takes her to Alaska (coincidentally, the place where Vogel wrote *How I Learned to Drive*).

Lolita in mind while crafting *How I Learned to Drive*, I argue Salinger's "For Esmé—with Love and Squalor," the story of a damaged war veteran, indeed, aligns more closely with the sympathetic tone of her play and, thus, Salinger stands as the true literary antecedent.

Whether intentional or not, Vogel's theme of a war-damaged veteran who turns toward children for sexual solace resembles work by Salinger. Although an author of fiction, Salinger was, indeed, a very autobiographical writer, especially in connection to his wartime experience. I specifically cite "For Esmé—with Love and Squalor" as the literary antecedent because this story fosters sympathy for Sergeant X despite his atypical attraction to a young girl. As unorthodox as it may appear, one cannot fully understand Salinger's work without understanding Salinger himself, a man who returned mentally broken from service that involved stints on D-Day, the Battle of the Bulge in the Hürtgen Forest, and the liberation of Kaufering Lager IV (part of the Dachau complex). Scholar Andy Rogers, in his work on *The Catcher in the Rye*, positions Salinger as a man who exorcises his war-induced demons, if only temporarily, by writing himself as Holden Caulfield, a character that "has far more in common with a traumatized soldier than an alienated teenager" (10). Rogers continues, "protagonists of Salinger's find an irresistible and unsettling company in the company of young girls, girls who are invariably too young to have had any adult understanding of World War II. . . . Pedophilia serves the rather utilitarian psychic task of excising the war" (11). The innocence that these young girls possess represent the *tabula rasa* (Biggsby 327) that Salinger and his fictional creation, Sergeant X, lost in the war, and the closer these men—both real and fictional—can get to these girls, the better they feel. After the war, it is only when Sergeant X holds Esmé's letter that he can finally rest: "You take a really sleepy man, Esmé, and he *always* stands a chance of again becoming a man with all his face—with all his f-a-c-u-l-t-i-e-s intact" (Salinger, *For Esmé* 173). Similarly, one can see this same

dynamic in Vogel's *How I Learned to Drive* when Uncle Peck seems to sigh in relief upon seeing Li'l Bit: "I live all week long for these few minutes with you—you know that?" or after Li'l Bit moves to college and Uncle Peck sees her for the first time: "God, it's good to see you! I've gotten so used to...to...talking to you in my head" (13, 77, ellipses in original). If Rogers is correct in postulating that "[p]edophilia," for characters deeply damaged by the war, "serves the rather utilitarian psychic task of excising the war," then Uncle Peck's attraction to Li'l Bit, although grotesque, must be understood as a lifeline and his only hope for redemption from an experience that untethered him from life:

Sometimes I think of my uncle as a kind of Flying Dutchman. 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. (Vogel, *Drive* 86)

In what follows, I will show how Salinger's short story depicts a young girl who comes to a veteran of her own volition, just as Li'l Bit does on "Christmas 1964" when she "*watches him for a moment before seeking him out*" (68).

There are two definable parts in Salinger's "For Esmé—with Love and Squalor": before the war and after the war, and like the divide in the story, the protagonist too, becomes divided when, in a direct relation to his war experience, he suffers a psychiatric breakdown. The first part of the story depicts an American soldier temporarily stationed in London to receive intelligence training before being shipped off to Normandy. On his last afternoon in the city, he takes a walk

in the rain and “ignored the flashes of lighting all around....They either had your number on them or they didn’t” (Salinger 134). This attitude encapsulates his lack of agency in his own life, and foreshadows the unavoidable chance of death that looms over him as he gets closer to the war; moreover, this deterministic world-view offers him a moral reprieve from his actions, whether in the war or his attraction to young girls.¹⁸ In the first half of the story, the narrator, while seated in a church hosting a “children’s-choir practice,” pays particular attention to a girl, Esmé, “about thirteen, with straight, ash-blond hair of ear-lobe length, an exquisite forehead, and blasé eyes that...might very possibly have counted the house” (134, 136). The soldier’s fixation, although not overtly disturbing, does feel unsettling. Why would an adult man fixate on a young girl of thirteen? What made him compelled to go inside a church to watch a children’s choir? Why did he feel compelled to leave “before the coach’s dissonant speaking voice could entirely break the spell the children’s singing had cast”? (137). This afternoon represents, for the soldier, his last moments before the war leaves him “a man divided against his own youth” (Manchester 10); so, perhaps, the impending loss of self, of his own innocence, propels him to hold fast to the resonances of the children’s voices and, especially, Esmé—a memory that will connote the theme of innocence when none exists in him; nevertheless, the peculiar attention paid to Esmé in the choir hints at pedophilic desires. The “squalid...part of the story” begins the second half where the soldier, now referred to as Sergeant X, exclaims, “I’ve disguised myself so cunningly that even the cleverest reader will fail to recognize me”—a line that draws attention to the devastating effects of the war that left him “rather like a Christmas tree whose lights, wired in a series, must all go out if even one bulb is defective,” and the severity of his mental state post-war

¹⁸ The narrator’s deterministic world-view can also be seen earlier in the story when he states “...I’d packed all my belongings into my barrack bag, including a canvas gas-mask container full of books I’d brought over from the Other Side. (The gas mask itself I’d slipped through a porthole of the *Mauretania* some weeks earlier, fully aware that if the enemy ever *did* use gas I’d never get the damn thing on in time.)” (133).

allows the audience to feel compassion for a man who can only find solace in the mementos and memories of Esmé, a girl too young to understand adult sexual relationships (156-57, 161).

Vogel's *How I Learned to Drive* strives for the same audience compassion for Uncle Peck, a man who, like Sergeant X, navigates themes of war trauma and pedophilic tendencies. The philosophical concept of determinism (versus free will) serves as the method in which both Vogel and Salinger attempt to create this sympathy, thus "For Esmé—with Love and Squalor" stands as the most appropriate antecedent for *How I Learned to Drive*. Both Uncle Peck and Sergeant X feel as if they have no control in life, that they are powerless to control the forces that "irresistibly propel [them] into the future," and this deterministic attitude, although leaving no control, also absolves them of responsibility (Benjamin 258). Sergeant X, before the war, throws away his gas mask because he feels that he would "never get the damn thing on in time" and walks through a storm because "the flashes of lightening....either had your number on them or they didn't" (Salinger 133, 134). It is this belief of lack of agency that can enable a soldier to cope with feelings of his own base inhumane actions during war (or pedophilic urges) by removing the sense of responsibility. If man does not have a choice, then neither does he have responsibility of his actions; thus, allowing one to feel compassion for a veteran (or pedophiliac) who was compelled to act without choice. Like Aunt Mary, Li'l Bit feels that Peck cannot control himself,¹⁹ and that he was a victim long before he was a perpetrator. When Herren asks, "Why does *Li'l Bit* take it so easy on Uncle Peck?" it is because she feels compassion for her uncle who radiates distress signals through his quiet suffering (103). Li'l Bit may not fully understand the war as the crux of his suffering, but as witness to the suffering of Li'l Bit, the

¹⁹ In Aunt Mary's soliloquy, she says "I wish you could feel how hard Peck fights against it—he's swimming against the tide, and what he needs is to see me on the shore, believing in him, knowing he won't go under, he won't give up—" (67); thus, she, too, feels that her husband cannot control what he does.

audience must intuit (in conjunction with the evidence in the subtext of the play on the page) that Uncle Peck felt just as powerless with his experience in the war, as his niece did when she was molested by him.

The idea of free will versus determinism features heavily in Vogel's play. I have already discussed the driving lesson scene in *How I Learned to Drive* as reminiscent of militaristic rhetoric; however, I have yet to argue that Uncle Peck, above all else, tries to impart the importance of *control* to Li'l Bit.²⁰ He recognizes that free will, the ability to forge one's own destiny, is the greatest freedom, and he wants to teach Li'l Bit the control he either never had or lost to the war. Although Vogel does not explicitly state that Uncle Peck's life is governed by events or feelings out of his control, she touches on this idea in her interview with Charlie Rose: "I think he falls more and more in love [with Li'l Bit]. I think he actually gets himself in more and more trouble; but the thing that I find noble about him is I think he taught his niece how to reject him. I think he's given her the tools and ego development to destroy him. I think—from my point of view with Peck—it's heartbreaking" ("Charlie Rose"). (Of course, as I stated earlier, giving Li'l Bit "the tools and ego development to destroy him" does not mean he did so intentionally). Here, Vogel insinuates that Uncle Peck *cannot* help himself as he falls in love with his niece, even though this desire will ultimately cause his destruction without his ability to see how his lessons will play out in the future. The "ego development" that takes place during the driving lesson where Uncle Peck laments, "Manual gives you *control*"—a subtext that, perhaps, bemoans his own inability to take control of his life—will become Li'l Bit's ticket to navigate her own affairs as she grasps the wheel to become her own person (Vogel, *Drive* 49, emphasis in original). Learning to drive a "manual" literally allows the driver to make decisions

²⁰ Uncle Peck uses the word "control" four times during the driving lesson, thus connoting the importance of his lesson (see pp. 47-50).

with dedicated outcomes, a metaphor for free will; whereas, cars equipped with an automatic transmission only allow for partial control. For example, situations can occur when an automatic car, unprovoked by the driver, may shift gears mid-turn, which can result in disastrous consequences, a metaphor for determinism. The driving lesson teaches Li'l Bit to become an active participant in her life as Uncle Peck teaches her to make her own decisions, to determine her own fate, and their relationship comes to an abrupt halt, in an ironic twist, when he begs: "Of your own free will...tell me what you feel" (81). Li'l Bit finally asserts her agency and leaves him. Despite the fact his intention in teaching her agency was to make her love him, he accepts that her feelings are beyond her control (a misidentification on his part as he did succeed in teaching her agency), and thus, her choice to leave him is beyond his control. The story of Uncle Peck exemplifies enduring sadness—he accepts that life happens to him and his loss of love that will be the ruin of him. Even though Uncle Peck's characterization tests the limits of one's compassion, a dubious reader has to accept Li'l Bit's compassion for him.

5 Conclusion

In any war story, but especially a true one, it's difficult to separate what happened from what seemed to happen. What seems to happen becomes its own happening and has to be told that way. The angles of vision are skewed.

—Tim O'Brien, *The Things They Carried* 67-68

Inciting "angles of vision [that] are skewed," Vogel's theatrical overture compels audiences to confront personal biases and reevaluate feelings that have been reinforced through long-sustained cultural narratives. Her plays offer new ways for audiences to consider perspectives beyond the stereotypical binaries associated with gender and sexuality, and *How I*

Learned to Drive deconstructs the victim/perpetrator binary through a series of fragmented memories that shift back and forth in time, an effect that mimics the disorientating reality for survivors of trauma.

The critical response to Uncle Peck's war trauma is largely absent, and underdeveloped when mentioned, but in describing *How I Learned to Drive* as a love story, Vogel unabashedly advocates for Uncle Peck. She does not equate war-trauma to a predilection for pedophilia, but Vogel does want her audiences to see the traumatized veteran as having a deep seated desire for human connectedness. During an interview with director Blanka Zizak, in response to her preparation for writing one of her latest plays, *Don Juan Comes Home from Iraq*, Vogel states "thinking about all of the time that these veterans have given us and to go back and revisit their experiences and to tell us, is incredible generosity" (Interview with Vogel)—and if one looks at the evidence, this sentiment resonates in the subtext of *How I Learned to Drive*, too.

Reprising the fragmented, memory-play format, Vogel's 2014 war-ravaged theatrical, *Don Juan Comes Home from Iraq*, revisits themes seen in *How I Learned to Drive*, albeit in an inverse form. Based on reviews from the premier staging at Philadelphia's Wilma Theater, themes of sex and war take center stage (instead of residing in the subtext).²¹ A war-damaged veteran, Don Juan, becomes haunted, not by the war, but "by the fate of a woman he became involved with after meeting her in Philadelphia between deployments"²² (Isherwood). This play depicts the psychological unraveling of a soldier who is "both abuser and victim" as he works to navigate emotions of hostility and uncertainty in a landscape that exudes betrayal—betrayal of

²¹ Theatre Communications Group has slated a September 13, 2016 publication release of *Don Juan Comes Home from Iraq*.

²² Perhaps Vogel's female catalyst, Cressida, intends to conjure the Cressida from the *Illiad*, the love interest who incites the demise of Troilus, set amidst the Trojan War?

one's country, one's partner, one's trust (Isherwood). True to form, Vogel's play aims to create awareness and promote discussion on issues that plague society through an historical perspective, with a vaudevillian twist. As a playwright, Paula Vogel has cemented her place in American drama, but perhaps, in addition to her service as a mentor of playwriting,²³ she will become better known as an artist whose work brings to light the hardships some veterans face upon returning home.

When one thinks of war literature, names such as Ernest Hemingway, Joseph Heller, Kurt Vonnegut, Norman Mailer, and James Jones often come to mind—these are the authorial voices of World Wars I and II; however, American drama offers a different medium in which war narratives can be expressed, relived, and remembered, and should be included in the body of war literature. In addition to Vogel, other playwrights include Lynn Nottage (a protégé of Vogel's) and Janine Nabers. Like Vogel before her, Nottage received a Pulitzer Prize for her play *Ruined*, a work set amid civil war in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, that explores emotional and physical turmoil inflicted on women, non-combatants who must negotiate between sexual exploitation and survival; but, perhaps, it is Janine Nabers *Serial Black Face* that most closely resembles Vogel's *How I Learned to Drive*, as it features a Vietnam veteran who marries a woman in order to get closer to her underage daughter.

With the advance of psychological studies and cultural and artistic movements (with help from the internet/technology, movies, and literature), society's understanding of war trauma has become common place, the coin of the realm. Most are familiar with the term PTSD, and trauma studies are now a prominent field of study, but the full effects of war on the psyche are not truly understood. As studies progress, people will return to *How I Learned to Drive* to question, criticize, and reaffirm its portrayal of sexual behavior and its relation to trauma.

²³ Vogel taught at Brown University for 24 years before taking a position at the Yale School of Drama in 2008.

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