

Learning to Drive

a play by Ellen Peterson



Focus YOUR LEARNING

Reading this play will help you:

- read and interpret a related poem
- sketch a costume
- write dialogue for a third actor
- rehearse lines

Characters

A STUDENT, over sixteen

A TEACHER, a driving instructor of any age

A bare stage. The light comes up on the STUDENT. The TEACHER is in darkness when not in the scene.

STUDENT:

In the beginning of the Year of Not Pretending I woke up crying and thought: You might as well be happy. There is no time to waste. Just before the beginning of the Year of Not Pretending I learned to drive. I felt it was time. The teacher I found through the Yellow Pages was heavy and

had tired eyes for a young man. He had obviously watched too much hockey.

(A light comes up on the TEACHER, seated on a mat. He strikes a gong.)

TEACHER: Lessons are thirty-five dollars for an hour and a half. I've never taught anyone who needed more than five lessons. I'm a good teacher. I'll tell you what you need to pass the test but I'll also teach you to drive. I'm going to ask you to do things that are illegal to see if you're listening. I like it when people ask questions. Got any?

STUDENT: No.

TEACHER: Okay. There are two pedals, but we use only one foot. The gas is the one on the right. The other is the brake. Can you reach?

STUDENT: Yes.

TEACHER: Adjust the rear-view mirror so you can see as much out the rear window as possible. Start the car.

STUDENT: You mean you want me to drive this thing right now?

TEACHER: What else? Put your foot on the brake, put the car in drive, and pull out onto Main Street.

STUDENT: You're out of your mind.

(Sound of gong. Lights out on TEACHER.)

It was rush hour. Nobody got hurt. I came home and took a nap. During the second lesson I was much calmer.

(Lights come up on TEACHER.)

TEACHER: Change lanes to the left.

STUDENT: Oh Lord.

TEACHER: Signal your intention. Rear-view mirror. And shoulder check.

STUDENT: Signalmirrorshouldercheck. God.

TEACHER: That's when you're supposed to actually change lanes. Well don't just stop.

STUDENT: Oh.

TEACHER: Why did you stop?

STUDENT: I don't know.

TEACHER: Well don't stop in the middle of traffic.

STUDENT: Okay.

TEACHER: Try again. Signal. Mirror.

STUDENT: Signalmirrorshouldercheck.

TEACHER: Don't stop. Why do you stop?

STUDENT: I wasn't sure... There was too much to do all at once! I'll never learn this.

TEACHER: Sure you will.

(Sound of gong. Lights out on TEACHER.)

STUDENT: I pretended that I was all right. That I didn't mind having to go through this. That this hideous feeling of incompetence didn't bother me. I tried to appear eager, and pleased to be gaining a new and useful skill. There's a good reason why most people learn to drive when they're sixteen. When you're sixteen you don't know you can die. If you're much older than that, not only do you know you're going to die, you also know that this is probably where. Lesson three. I approached the third lesson confidently. Nothing much to this driving thing, really. I am a smart, competent person. Lots of people who are much more stupid than me can drive; I can certainly learn to drive. I was feeling cocky and expansive. My teacher and I chatted. *(Lights up on TEACHER)* Do you like teaching?

TEACHER: I guess.

STUDENT: Then it happened. Someone slammed on the brakes. Somehow I don't think it was me.

TEACHER: Didn't you see that?

STUDENT: What? What!?

TEACHER: You didn't see it. Keep your eyes on the road. Don't stop! Why did you stop?

STUDENT: I don't know. Out of the corner of my eye I could see the teacher shaking his head. What had I done? I suppose this was when it came home to me that what I had to learn was potentially deadly, and I had better pay attention. For the next lesson, I decided that my problem was that I was too tense and if I could just relax the whole thing would come naturally. I babbled. I made stupid jokes and counted to three in a different language at each stop sign. I blathered on about the psychology of learning. I realize now that I was, of course, trying to sound smart because he knew how to drive and I didn't. (To TEACHER) You know, I think the problem with driving is that all of a sudden you're, like, two thousand pounds heavier, and what I think you have to do is you have to sort of re-learn the boundaries of where you end, you know?

TEACHER: And watch out for that pedestrian.

STUDENT: Do you find that you have to teach each student differently? I mean, does each student have different things that they understand, or different ways that they learn?

TEACHER: I guess.

STUDENT: Do you ever fear for your life?

TEACHER: There's been a few students who've tried to kill me. The really dangerous ones are the ones who think that they already know how.

STUDENT: I'm glad I don't have that problem.

TEACHER: And the ones who don't pay attention.

STUDENT: Oh. I kind of thought I was getting the hang of it. In the fifth and hopefully final lesson we worked on the details; the difference between simply operating a motorized vehicle, and being able to pull it off on the test.

(The sound of a gong)

TEACHER: Watch out for that pedestrian and don't stop when you make a mistake.

STUDENT: And of course, this lesson was my first glimpse into the mysteries of parallel parking.

TEACHER: You must pump the brake three times when preparing to parallel park, grasshopper.

STUDENT: Is that magic, for good luck?

TEACHER: Whatever. Then move forward until you are lined up with the car in front, this pole. Turn the wheel and back up until you have pole number three right in the middle of your driver's side mirror, turn the wheel the other way and just ease right in.

STUDENT: Perfect. Easy. A dream. Then suddenly, a premonition. It's not going to be like this in the real world, is it? I mean, the poles are never going to be the right distance apart, are they?

TEACHER: No. But you might drive all your life and never have to parallel park again.

(Gong)

STUDENT: As we drove to the test, my teacher blessed me with all the wisdom that remained.

TEACHER: Whatever you do, keep your eyes open and don't stop when you make a mistake. Also, remember to signal. Signalling your intentions is good. If you go even one kilometre over the limit you'll fail. If any part of your car is over the stop line you'll fail. If you fail to yield the right-of-way to a vehicle entering traffic from an uncontrolled intersection, you'll fail.

STUDENT: Tough world out there.

TEACHER: You don't even know. If he doesn't like you, you'll fail. They have quotas. They have to fail a certain number of people, even if they don't have a reason.

STUDENT: Do you think I'll pass?

TEACHER: How should I know? But what you should do is talk like you do. Be your entertaining self. It'll help you relax, and it can't hurt.

(Gong. Lights down on the TEACHER.)

STUDENT: I was never sure what he thought of me. I could never tell if he meant it when he said I'd be fine or I was doing well,

because of how awful he made me feel when I did something careless. He just left it all up to me.

(Gong)

I was very charming and drove well and passed the test. I was kind of sorry to say good-bye to the teacher—despite the tension and how I hated at first to pay someone to scrutinize my every move, it had turned out to be kind of fun.

(Lights up)

TEACHER: Good-bye. Drive carefully.

(Lights down)

STUDENT: Suddenly there you are. The powers that be have told you you can go ahead. You have the required skills. Freedom! And you realize with painful clarity that you are alone, you are in control of a powerful machine, and you do not know how to drive. The powers that be know nothing. There is only one brake and you're the only one that can use it. You must make all the decisions. Is it now safe to make this left-hand turn? There is no one to remind you about speeding and its dire consequences. No sign on the top of the car that says: "New at this. Thank you for getting out of the way." And there, suddenly, you are. This is lesson six. Time passes and I'm not dead yet. Although driving in traffic still causes a certain amount of indigestion, what I now love is to take my little car very late at night or early in the morning and just drive when no one knows I'm gone. I wonder if other people do this? What I do not like is driving with passengers in the car.

(Lights up on the TEACHER. He is white-knuckled, petrified.)

Scared yet?

TEACHER: *(Through clenched teeth)* Oh no, you're doing fine.

STUDENT: I may be imagining this.

(Lights down on TEACHER.)

It's just that I am scarcely comfortable taking responsibility for my own life in this way. I can't say I'm ready to risk someone else's life, limb, or peace of mind. But it can be

necessary, depending on where you're going. And it's nice, after all these years of depending on others to take me places, to be one of those people who can pick somebody up at the airport, or to say at the end of the night: Does anyone need a ride?

(The TEACHER holds up a sign which reads "No thanks!" and the audience shouts back "No thanks!")

I may be imagining this.

(Gong)

It's fun to come and go as I please. One morning, early, I decide I need a holiday, and look at the map and drive to a place-name I like the sound of. It is a very nice little town in the hills but there isn't anything there to stay for. But getting there was fun. And on leaving town I think the crossroad looks considerably more interesting than the highway. I think of Robert Frost. It is beautiful. Hills, and other unexpected things. Smoky looking trees, and creeks, and farms at the bend in the road. My heart sings. I drive and drive. I turn corners on whims. I am trying to remember the poem... "and sorry I could not travel both/ And be one traveller..." when I round a fated bend and am in the ditch before I know. Nothing to be done. I am oddly not in the least upset. The nearest farm is close. The door is opened by a kid of about nineteen, with tired eyes, who has obviously watched too much hockey.

(Lights up)

TEACHER: Stuck in the ditch?

STUDENT: Pretty much. He can't push me out as the car is up to the windows in snow. So he calls the farmer from up the road, who has been drinking and looks sad. He comes with his truck, hooks the chain to my car, and somehow my car appears to pull his truck into the ditch. I didn't notice the ice. His wife comes with the tractor and they pull first the truck and then me out of the ditch. Thank you so much. Thanks a lot. Can I pay you for your trouble?

TEACHER: If you see someone in the ditch someday, help them out. Drive carefully.

STUDENT:

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(Gong. Lights down on the TEACHER.)

STUDENT: It is New Year's Eve. So in the beginning of the Year of Not Pretending I learned to drive. I try to enjoy the road. Sometimes I even parallel park. So much traffic. All doing the same things every day; never learning and continuing to live. I find that almost no one signals their intentions or comes to a full and complete stop. We pay little attention to each other. We feel we must be moving and we are not. Sitting still while the vehicles move, we are in a dangerous situation and we must learn again and again and again that Robert Frost was right. And for some reason that is shrouded in the mists of wisdom, elderly men in hats are extremely dangerous behind the wheel. You can't tell if they know you're there. People should have to take refresher courses.

(Gong. The end.) ■

Responding...

1. **a)** Find and read a copy of "The Road Not Taken," a poem by Robert Frost. Explain how this poem adds to your understanding of the end of the play.
b) With a partner, discuss and describe the strategies and processes you used to relate the meaning of Frost's poem to the meaning of the play. Listen to what your partner has to say. Identify any strategies or processes that are different from the ones you used. Discuss how you might experiment with these in the future.
2. **a)** Sketch a costume design for the two characters in the play. Try to have each costume suit the personality of the character.
b) Share your costume designs with at least three other students. Listen to their feedback about how well your designs suit the characters' personalities. Make any changes you feel are warranted.
3. **a)** Working in a group of three, add another character, such as a pedestrian or another driver, to this play. Develop dialogue for the third character.
b) Read the play with the new character. Work together to use appropriate diction and tone of voice for the part you are reading. Use feedback from others in your group to improve your reading.