Coal Black Horse Study Guide

Coal Black Horse by Robert Olmstead

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Plot Summary

In May 1863, Robey Childs lives with his mother Hettie Childs in the countryside of what today is probably known as West Virginia. His father has gone away to war, enlisting in the Union Army. The Childs' farm is very remote and almost entirely isolated from the outside world. One night Hettie has a dream, or vision, in which she sees that Thomas Jackson has died and that her husband, Robey's father, must be located and brought home before July. Robey sets off along the path that his mother discloses, even though most people he encounters advise him otherwise. In the village nearby his home, Robey secures a coal black horse that will be his companion for most of the remainder of his journey.

Robey proceeds south to a pass, then east across the Allegheny mountains, and then north toward Gettysburg, Pennsylvania. As he travels he encounters the remains of past battles; dead men, rotting horses, and discarded materiel. One day he meets a louse-ridden runaway who shoots him in the head, grazing his skull, and steals the coal black horse. Robey recovers and continues his travel on stolen horses. He then meets a young girl in the company of an older couple and witnesses the older man, a preacher, rape the young woman. He determines he must not intervene because he must find his father. Shortly thereafter he is captured by Union forces who hold him briefly as a spy before releasing him. The Union forces forthwith are attacked and driven back and in the confusion Robey manages to recover the coal black horse.

Finally, Robey arrives at Gettysburg and witnesses the litter of war; the exact date is not given but it is already July; when Robey finds his father, he discovers his father has been shot through the face and head. Though conscious and articulate, his father is mortally wounded. Over the next three days Robey tends to his father and scavenges food and water from the environs, often running into various unsavory characters including two scavengers who are desecrating corpses and murdering the injured to steal gold dental fixtures and so forth. Robey in turn kills one of the scavengers and takes the loot from the other one. That night his father explains, or attempts to, the high purpose of the war. Robey listens but silently disagrees. When his father dies he buries him along with all of the battlefield loot and hundreds of letters he has gathered from the wounded and dying.

Robey then retrieves the girl, Rachel, and in her escape she stabs the minister with a pitchfork. The two teenagers then flee south, traveling mostly be night. They reach the Potomac River and cross over on the Union pontoon bridge. Returning home, Robey finds the village near his home burned and vacant. However, his mother is alive and the farm is well. Hettie tells Robey that Rachel is pregnant; although surprised he is not dismayed. Over the next few months Hettie battles sadness while Rachel battles madness. Robey returns to work the fields and watch for the men that he is sure will come. When the remaining scavenger returns, Robey hills him with a rifle shot. Later, when the Reverend comes, Robey also kills him. That night Rachel delivers twins and tries to kill them by throwing them into a mountain creek. Robey rescues the infants and the new family, atypical in many respects, gets off to a shaky start.

Chapters 1 and 2

Chapters 1 and 2 Summary

In "Coal Black Horse", Robey Childs is a fourteen-year-old young man living with his mother Hettie Childs on a remove family farm in hill country. They live in what is probably today known as West Virginia. The novel opens on the specific date of 10 May 1863. The Childs farm is located high up on a flat area on top of a hill or mountain that is removed and isolated. The nearest neighbors live on other hilltops some distance away. The closest town is tiny—one general store and one blacksmith—and is about a six or eight hour horse ride away. Robey's father has gone off to war, having joined the Union Forces fighting against secession. Robey has remained home to work the farm and take care of his mother. When Hettie awakes on 10 May 1863 she declares that she has had a vision, or premonition, of the future. She declares that Thomas Jackson is dead and that Robey's father's purpose in the war is complete. She declares that Robey is to leave instantly to retrieve his father, and she emphatically cautions him that he must find his father before July.

In Chapter 2, Robey takes the family horse on a nighttime ride down a steep and rocky road into a town in an area called Greenbrier. He sleeps for some of the trip, having left at a moment's notice because of his mother's precognition. In the town, he calls upon Morphew's General Store and tells Morphew of his mother's visions. Morphew admits Hettie is visionary but rather doubts that Thomas Jackson has died. Morphew points out that Robey's family horse already is lamed in one foot. When Robey explains his purpose, Morphew notes that some few days ago a soldier had left behind a magnificent coal black horse of huge stature and strength. He offers to let Robey 'borrow' the horse to continue his journey. Morphew also packs a large sack of food and supplies and gives Robey two .44 caliber Colt's Army revolvers. A local child watches this all while walking around on his hands, upside down. Robey notes the boy's coveralls have been modified so the pockets are sewn on upside-down so as the boy walks on his hands they can carry things. Morphew notes the boy never stops walking on his hands. Morphew feeds Robey, and Robey sleeps a few hours before departing.

Chapters 1 and 2 Analysis

The novel is historical fiction inasmuch as it is set in the American East during the Civil War in the United States of America. Some people and most major events described in the novel clearly are fictionally represented historic persons or events. However, within the novel significant events are not necessarily identified as such when their significance only became great through a historic retrospective. The setting of the Childs family farm, like most other geographic and biographic details in the novel, is uncertain. Based on Robey's travels and the description of events in the region the most-likely, and certainly most probable, place is somewhere in the Appalachian range of what is today known as West Virginia. The current State of West Virginia seceded

from Virginia on 20 June 1863, after Virginia had seceded from the United States of America. The West Virginians sided with the Union while the remainder of Virginia sided with the Confederacy. Robey's family thus comes from a borderline political region. Throughout the novel Robey does not engage in political thinking, but clearly his father has—Robey's father was not drafted or conscripted but volunteered. The Greenbrier referred to in Chapter 2 is perhaps Greenbrier County, West Virginia, or thereabouts.

The Thomas Jackson of Hettie's vision is the Confederate General Thomas Jackson who died, historically, on 10 May 1863, hundreds of miles from the Childs' farm—in this respect, Hettie's vision is indeed prophetic. Her urgency for her husband's return prior to July also is prophetic when, near the novel's conclusion, her husband is mortally wounded on 1 July at Gettysburg.

The interaction between Robey and Morphew is interesting—Robey is wary of accepting help (his mother has warned him against it), but also realizes that he must accept help if he is to continue his journey. Robey also realizes he will never be able to 'pay back' Morphew for the assistance. For his own part, Morphew appears to be far more interested in helping a neighbor than in securing his financial interest. The eponymous Coal Black Horse appears as a sort of deus ex machina solution to Robey's transportation problem—here in the backwoods country appears a magnificent cavalry horse capable of taking Robey to Gettysburg and home again, a horse free of owner, and a horse intelligent enough of the ways of war to make the journey safely. Symbolically, the horse's appearance is linked to the Biblical four horsemen of the apocalypse—the third horse being black, it's rider famine. Indeed, Robey will ride the black horse into a region where one of his principle activities will be scouring for food. The black horse also can be seen as a symbolic dark horse, a colloquial term describing an unknown person that emerges to prominence. Abraham Lincoln politically was known as a dark horse candidate. A second major symbol invoked in Chapter 2 is the upside-down boy who walks always on his hands. Presumably a 'natural', in the parlance of the times, he symbolizes the quite literal world-turned-upside-down scenario into which Robey is venturing in search of his father. This state of affairs—secession, war, slavery—is so entrenched in that region and that time as to become the new norm; the boy's pockets have been inverted because his upside-downness is the new norm.

Chapters 3, 4, and 5

Chapters 3, 4, and 5 Summary

Robey rides the black horse south, following his mother's instructions. He will travel south, then take a mountain pass east, and then follow the valley north. Other people offer conflicting strategies; he listens, but disregards them. On the road he encounters his first war dead—a field littered with old corpses and detritus of war. Robey is affected but the horse is not. Robey travels nearly around the clock, sleeping on back of the horse. The horse is wily and usually steps off the road into hiding whenever it detects anything approaching. On one occasion, Robey attempts to keep the horse walking when a stranger rides by—and then tries to shoot Robey and steal the horse. Fortunately the horse knows how to respond and gallops away, saving Robey. Later, Robey sees a large group of black slaves tied into a group and being escorted south by a motley group of ruffian slave-catchers.

In Chapter 4 Robey takes a break to sleep on the ground and recover some of his strength. When he wakes, he walks to the edge of a heavily running river and watches the flooding waters. As he stands there the high water undercuts the bank which collapses into the river, taking Robey with it. He is rescued by a peculiar person dressed as an old woman—but Robey quickly discerns the person is a short and wiry man dressed as a woman. The man claims it is to avoid trouble. Robey also notices that the man is infested—literally crawling with—lice. The man herds some geese and invites Robey to stay awhile. When Robey retrieves the coal black horse the man becomes instantly interested and says he wants to buy the horse. Robey declines and the man thereupon shoots Robey in the head—the grazing shot proves damaging but not fatal—and steals the horse. Robey awakes some hours later, tends his wound, and staggers to a ruined house. In Chapter 5, Robey gradually recovers his senses, takes the goose man's horse, and on one occasion meets an old war veteran who claims to have briefly been a cannibal through necessity—and enjoyed it. Robey later finds a burned out house—the second story is burned away but the ground story is built of stone and fairly intact. He camps inside, building a fire and making food from discovered items. He explores the house and finds some fine things and wonders if people fight wars for wealth.

Chapters 3, 4, and 5 Analysis

These chapters move Robey from the rural, safe, home world into the war world. He has no political education and knows practically nothing about the outside world. To fourteen-year-old Robey, war is a mystery. The first dead men he finds arouses in him peculiar feelings that he finds impossible to understand. They have fought, died, and killed each other, for war—but why? His passage here is marked by a tutelage offered by the coal black horse that is wily and knows how the world at war works. The peculiar goose man, later discovered to be an army deserter, dresses in women's clothes to

avoid detection or trouble. His execrable personal habits leave him crawling with a film of lice—again, nearly sure proof against being bothered by most people. Fortunately for Robey, the stolen black horse is traveling in the same direction he wants to travel. The goose man recurs, very briefly, later in the novel.

The gunshot to Robey's head grazes the top of his head, cutting a deep furrow through the scalp and apparently causing a concussion. But it does not prove fatal. Robey's wounded and bloody appearance keeps him out of trouble for the next several days, at least. His worldly education continues as he encounters other strange individuals, including the old unrepentant cannibal; here indeed is the result of famine. The old burned out house becomes a significant setting at this portion in the novel, even though it—like all other settings—is ephemeral. Robey discovers fine things made of wood and so forth. Instead of looting the house he inspects it, explores it, and leaves things as he found them. He eats voraciously and is glad his mother is not there to witness his poor manners.

Chapters 6, 7, and 8

Chapters 6, 7, and 8 Summary

Robey sleeps in the burned out house and is awakened by the approach of three people. Unable to escape the house, he ascends the burned stairs to the second story and hides. The trio enters the house—they are an older man, an obviously ill older woman, and a young thin girl. The older woman is bloated with a severely distended belly, and is blind. The older man and woman apparently are married; the younger girl, who appears tired and hungry, acts as a sort of servant and is not held in high regard. The young girl is instructed to build a fire and she uses many of the fine objects of the house to keep the fire burning. She makes dinner from a chicken. The older man uses a hot knife to burn a tick out of his thigh, taking no especial effort to remain modest in front of the girl. Robey watches from the shadows upstairs. That night the older man sexually assaults the young girl; she resists, but he beats her and rapes her. Robey knows he could intervene but realizes that his journey to find his father could be interrupted or even prevented. Instead, he mutely witnesses the violence and, when the three appear asleep, he creeps downstairs and departs. As he leaves the house he realizes the young girl, fifteen-years-old, is awake and watching him. They lock eyes and then he sneaks away and leaves.

In Chapter 7 Robey continues his journey and is then apprehended by Union guards. Robey wears a jacket that is reversible—blue on one side and gray on the other side. His mother has made the jacket and instructed him to wear it so that the color matches the color of the region's uniforms. In this way, he presumably will be safer. The Union guards decide the reversible jacket is evidence that Robey is a Southern spy. They arrest him, tie his hands, and take him into a nearby town to be delivered to a Union major. While Robey waits in captivity he sees the trio from the burned out house arrive in town where the older man presents himself as a Christian Reverend and begins to organize a revivalist prayer meeting. In Chapter 8, the Union major finally arrives and eventually gets around to inquiring about Robey. His first order is to have Robey untied; he discounts entirely the Confederate spy theory and accepts Robey's story at face value. The Major is a kindly but intelligent man, and was a schoolteacher prior to entering the military. He confirms one portion of Robey's story—the goose man is an army deserter who has been apprehended again and the coal black horse is in the army stables. The major orders the horse returned to Robey and then writes a lengthy letter stating the facts and giving Robey safe passage. About this time a long-awaited Union supply train pulls into the town depot and much confusion begins. Confederate raiders take this moment to mount a surprise attack. The major rushes outside and Robey is left to his own devices.

Chapters 6, 7, and 8 Analysis

The major event of these chapters involves the rape of the fifteen-year-old girl named Rachel, though Robey will not learn her name for several days. All three of the characters in the strange trio recur through the novel though the old man is more of a symbol than a character. The old woman's illness is not described in detail but she is blind, suffers much pain, and is severely bloated about the stomach. Although not noted at this point in the novel, Rachel has become pregnant from the rape.

Note particularly the Chapter 7 iteration of Robey's ceaseless fatigue and his endless searching for supplies. These twin processes of exhaustion and forage are a recurrent trope throughout the novel. Robey's entire voyage is done on minimal sleep; horses typically require only a few hours of sleep each night—these are the only hours that Robey sleeps on the group; otherwise he is napping on horseback which is not particularly restful. His other main problem continues to be food. Robey is not along—Rachel is exceedingly thin because she is unable to sufficiently forage for herself and that what she does find is appropriated by her malevolent guardian.

The Union major is one of the few sympathetic characters associated with the military presented in the novel. His background as a schoolteacher allows him to read Robey quite quickly. The major "...expressed the sentiment that someday this war would be over and when it was they would all have to live with each other once again" (p. 89)—in this he is quite insightful but expresses an opinion rarely held within the narrative. Even Robey's father will, later, declare that society will be forever changed by the conflict. This wide variety of opinion about what the war means, or should mean, largely is uninteresting to Robey as he forges his own very unsympathetic opinion of war and what it means.

Chapters 9, 10, and 11

Chapters 9, 10, and 11 Summary

The Confederate raiders attack the town in the dark, shooting at the locomotive until the boiler erupts. The attack is a complete surprise and numerous Union soldiers and townspeople are killed. Robey, against the advice of others, goes outside to witness the skirmish. He sees the Union major attempt to rally the Union forces; the major is shot off his horse and lands on an iron fence that pierces his body numerous times. Later, Robey sees a captured Union cavalry officer executed. Robey locates the stables and discovers the coal black horse is missing—but he follows its fresh prints. He travels into a field and finds the horse standing next to the hanging body of the goose man. Robey surmises the goose man had escaped and retrieved the horse in the confusion of the Confederate attack. Riding in the dark at a gallop, the goose man ran into a forked limb that broke his neck and has left him hanging in the tree. The agitated horse calms when Robey appears and allows him to mount. Robey proceeds north once again.

In Chapter 10 Robey comes north through the various fields of the Gettysburg campaign, finding them littered with thousands of dead and tons of wrecked or discarded equipment. Dead horses are common. He scavenges weapons, ammunition, food, and water from the fields and continues for hours through the nearly incomprehensible wreckage. He continues in a line as if guided by a compass and finally, after fifty-one days of travel, he finds his father. Unfortunately, Robey is not quite in time—his father is alive and coherent, but has been shot through the head. The ball has entered his father's cheek and passed out the back of his head doing considerable damage. Robey cleans the wound and bandages it as well as he is able; he gives what comfort he can to his father. Although his father slips in and out of consciousness, when he is awake he appears alert and in full possession of his mental faculties. Robey spends the night sleeping next to his father.

In Chapter 11 Robey spends the next day wandering the field of battle to secure forage for himself and his father. At one point some photographers pay him to move and arrange corpses to make dramatic war photographs. He also is paid to help grieving widows heft their dead into coffins and load the coffins onto conveyances. Elsewhere he helps gravediggers bury some corpses. He goes into a town center and discovers two women sitting on a porch laughing and telling funny stories. They charge him a huge amount of money to fill his canteen from their pump and sell him a tiny loaf of bread at an exorbitant price. He also purchases clean linens for bandages. He then returns to his father, gives him food and water, and then cleans the wound and binds it. The head wound has become infested with maggots and is becoming putrescent. While Robey sits with his father he sees groups of hogs rooting around the battlefield, eating the dead men.

Chapters 9, 10, and 11 Analysis

Robey departs home on May 10 and arrives at Gettysburg presumably on July 1 several hours after the first days' fighting has concluded—fifty-one days of travel with few interruptions. The novel deliberately is quite vague on the exact locale of Robey's father—somewhere on the sprawling battlefield of Gettysburg. Combined casualties for the three days of battle at Gettysburg are estimated at above 46,000 men of whom some eight thousand were killed. Likewise, dates are not given so it is possible that Robey's father was injured on July 2 or 3 (there does not seem to be concerted fighting in the area, perhaps indicating July 3 as more likely). The historic disposition of forces at the battle found the Union army to the south of the Confederate army—thus, Robey approaching from the south, probably finds his father somewhere along cemetery ridge and does not have to pass through the Confederate forces nor the main line of battle. Chapter 11 details the events of the first day after Robey finds his father. It is fairly clear that given the nature of his father's wound that it is mortal—especially as no medical attention or even basic facilities are available. Robey's father appears unsurprised to see his son; Robey is totally nonplussed about leaving home, riding fifty or more days, and discovering that he has ridden directly to his wounded father. Most of the next few chapters of the novel detail the processes of Robey foraging for food and supplies as his father slips away and he enters manhood; in this way, the death of the father in the arms of the son is a symbolic transition of generations.

Chapters 12, 13, and 14

Chapters 12, 13, and 14 Summary

On the second day after finding his father, Robey watches hundreds of women searching the fields for their loved ones. He then sees the girl whom he watched being raped. She approaches him and they recognize each other. She says to him "You could have stopped him" (p. 137) in reference to the assault. Robey is uncertain how to respond—that was not his purpose; he has come to find his father. She says she is fifteen years old; Robey is fourteen years old. She says her name is Rachel and she points to a distant farm and tells Robey that the three of them are staying in the farm. She then departs. Throughout the day Robey sees many scavengers robbing corpses. He also sees numerous sightseers performing a sort of battlefield tourism. Various birds and small rodents begin eating the dead. He sees numerous black slaves burying their dead owners—dead Confederate officers. He talks to some and learns they intend to return to their slavery to carry the news of their masters' deaths. One says he knows he will be sent back to retrieve the corpse for re-burial in the south. Robey and his father discuss slavery as an institution.

In Chapter 13, during the night of the second day, Robey sees two particularly vile scavengers who are using a hatchet to chop open the jaws of the dead and a hammer to knock out any gold teeth. He watches as they murder wounded men to steal gold teeth. He silently follows them as they return to a dugout shelter and watches from a distance as they melt their various dental fixtures, rings, and so forth into small ingots of gold. He listens as they make plans to continue looting the dead, and as they discuss how they murder the wounded. They plan to follow the army on to the next battle. When one of the scavengers emerges from the dugout Robey shoots him at point blank range and kills him. The other scavenger discloses that the dead man was his brother. He then throws out all of their accumulated loot. Robey takes the loot and departs into the night.

In Chapter 14, the third day and night after Robey finds his father transpire. Robey's father somehow knows what Robey has done and cautions him that he must chose his path in life with much caution. Robey's father attempts to explain the high purpose of war and instill in Robey a greater meaning of life. He notes that he soon will die and by doing so his existence will pass into Robey, from father to son. Robey holds his father that night, cradling his head and then body, until and after his father dies.

Chapters 12, 13, and 14 Analysis

When Robey meets Rachel, an unspoken understanding passes between them. She accepts that he did not help her because he was seeking his father, even though he was too late anyway to save him. They both understand that when his father dies, he will meet up with her at the barn and they will leave together. The name Rachel has

Biblical overtones—the second wife of Jacob, Rachel gave birth to Joseph and Benjamin, dying during the birth of her second son; she is thus one of the mothers of the House of Israel. The discussed about slavery between Robey and his father is interesting and atypical in modern literature insofar as it does not condemn the practice of slavery outright. The slave that speaks of burying his master and later returning for him foreshadows Robey's future intentions regarding his father's corpse. Within the novel Robey does not retrieve his father's corpse from Gettysburg but does plan to do so eventually.

In Chapter 13, on pages 153-154, we find the strongest dialogue in the novel as Robey discusses murdering his first man with the dead man's rogue brother. Robey's motives are not particularly clear—at least, he claims he has not done it for the money but when the other man throws out the money Robey does take it and leave. In some sense, at least, Robey is protesting the brutality of the men; not their brutality of robbing the dead so much as their penchant for murdering the mortally wounded in order to be able to rob them more easily. Certainly their methods are brutal and leave the dead disfigured, but in reality their methods are not so different from the regularly constituted military forces' methods. Instead, Robey appears to reject their motive. It is easy to see how Robey would believe the men would murder e.g. his own father in order to extract a gold tooth. The men certainly are not sympathetic and the cropped ears of one indicate their thieving activities are habitual rather than opportunistic. Symbolically they live under the ground like rats. Their discussion of when to clear out and where to go next are particularly repellent. However, Robey has watched scavengers and pilferers for many hours without having such a strong reaction as he does to these nocturnal predators. Note that the surviving brother recurs later in the novel whereas—at least within the narrative framework—Robey does not profit from the stolen loot.

Finally, in Chapter 14, Robey's father's suffering concludes with his death. By this time both Robey and his father are fully reconciled with the man's impending death. They talk primarily about philosophical things in a very intimate and deep way. The father sees himself quite literally passing into his son in a continuous chain of ancestry. Whereas Robey's father was a Union volunteer, Robey has made his own decisions about war and politics—he determines that war is nothing noble at all, that the ravages of war are apparently endless, and that the process of war brings out the worst (and suppresses the best) in all people. The closer one draws to war the worse one suffers. The experiences of the past weeks has convinced Robey that war, whatever it is, is nothing with which he wishes to involve himself. Note the description of the way Robey holds his father and contrast it to the later description of the way Robey holds Rachel during delivery.

Chapters 15, 16, 17, and 18

Chapters 15, 16, 17, and 18 Summary

After his father dies Robey buries the corpse, digging a deep grave away from other graves and memorizing the location—he plans to return to get the corpse for reburial at home at some point. He puts all of his money, a considerable amount, into the grave. He then goes to the distant farm and makes a rendezvous with Rachel. They shear off her hair and dress her as a boy. As they are leaving the old man comes out and begins loudly to preach, telling Rachel she has been wicked and must repent. Robey moves to shoot the man but Rachel intervenes, stabbing the man in the stomach with a pitchfork as he prays for her salvation. They ride south from the farm and eventually come upon the Union army forces at the banks of a river. The army has constructed a pontoon bridge across the river and Robey and Rachel cross. Based on Robey's father's soldiering, he is accepted by the Union forces. While in the area, Robey rearms himself with two Remington revolvers and also a Springfield rifle.

In Chapter 16, Robey and Rachel pass by a house owned by an old woman who calls them inside and comforts them. She fixes a huge meal for them and then puts them into beds and they sleep for many hours. When they awake the old woman has vanished; Robey and Rachel share an intimate physical moment. Later, in the pasture, they come across a dead mare and her dead newborn foal and Rachel weeps. Rachel tells Robey that she is an orphan—her parents had been Christian missionaries that had traveled to Africa on a proselyting mission and while there they had been killed by lions. The old man reverend and his blind wife had been her guardians for years. Rachel is mentally dominated by the old man and whenever he begins to speechify she loses her free will and does whatever he tells her to do. She warns Robey repeatedly that the old man will recover and then come after her. She also warns him to never let the man begin to preach because he will put a spell over anyone who listens.

In Chapter 17 Robey and Rachel travel at night and sleep in the day. The travel this way for weeks and weeks and finally they return to the area of Greenbrier where Robey finds Morphew's store burned to the ground; the rest of the town, also, is burned into nothing. No animals and no humans are to be found and the town appears to have been deserted for a considerable period of time. Robey anxiously presses on and finally returns home, finding his mother in good health and the farm in good condition. He looks around and notices how small the family plot is. Robey's mother is devastated by the news that her husband is dead. A few days later Hettie tells Robey that Rachel is pregnant and asks him if the child is his; Robey indicates that Rachel must decide that. Months go by and Hettie mourns in sadness while Rachel fights off madness and gets larger. On day Robey is in the fields and sees a figure approaching from afar. Using his telescope he recognizes the figure is the scavenger he did not kill. Robey hides by the road and kills the scavenger with a single rifle shot.

In Chapter 18, Rachel and Robey await the appearance of the old man. Months pass by but finally he arrives. Robey meets him alone on the road and the man tells him the woman is dead and then begins to preach for a moment before Robey shoots him through the chest, killing him. Robey returns to the house and tells Rachel the news which sends her into contractions. Robey holds her like he once held his father and she is delivered of twin boys. The next morning Robey awakens early to discover Rachel and the twin babies are missing. He runs outside and then finds her at the river—she has cast her infants into the water. Robey jumps into the river and rescues the infants, taking them and Rachel back to the house.

Chapters 15, 16, 17, and 18 Analysis

The old man takes two pitchfork stabs to the abdomen but survives them. This method of revenge by Rachel of course symbolically inverts the man's violent penetration of Rachel—just as he survives but is grievously wounded, she too survives but carries the wound with her. Note Rachel's attitude of displaying her naked body to Robey—she challenges him to objectify her but he does not. The river that Robey and Rachel then cross is not named but almost certainly it is the Potomac River. Historically, at this point in time the Union army was crossing the Potomac River in pursuit of the retreating Confederate army.

In Chapter 16, the dead mare and foal symbolize the potential future fate that Rachel is considering for herself and her unborn child—at this point, Robey does not yet realize she is pregnant. The old woman probably is a wanderer who simply claims to own the house—but Robey is never quite sure about that. In any event, she is a wanderer like Robey. Rachel's story is as unalike Robey's story as it could well be—they have virtually nothing in common. However, he begins to fall in love with her and she seemingly reciprocates though she is much more wary of physical intimacy for obvious reasons. It is possible, even probable, that Robey and Rachel have sex in the house (refer to page 182); however, they may have simply engaged in petting. The remainder of the novel does not clarify this. Note, too, that at this point of the novel Robey arms himself with a rifle. To this point he has been armed only with revolvers—pistols being primarily a personal defensive weapon. The Springfield rifle he obtains is a definitively offensive weapon of war; Robey is never without his rifle again.

In Chapter 17, the shadow imagery presented on page 177 is the first definitive narrative statement that Rachel is pregnant. Hettie, naturally, realizes it before Robey. In the ensuing months Hettie battles sadness while Rachel battles madness. The advent of twins is hinted at by the description of Rachel's enormous size. Once again, the dialogue between Robey and the scavenger is rich and excellently written. Later, the dialogue (about the shooting) between Robey and his mother is insightful and precise. The various homesteaders that Robey sees symbolize his life coming into society from the backwoods of seclusion. He indeed has transitioned from a sheltered boy to a wise man of action. Although he scorns war he is not afraid to kill to defend what is his and he does not hesitate to seize the advantage when it is presented.

In Chapter 18 the novel concludes with a sort-of happy ending. Robey saves the twins, Rachel has, symbolically, baptized them and herself and has gone to the extreme. Robey in effect rescues her as well. She appears to accept his acceptance of her, and she seems to realize they have become a family. For Robey, this has been obvious for a long time—also symbolized by his holding of Rachel in labor just as he held his father during the last moments of his life.

Characters

Robey Childs

Robey Childs, the principle protagonist of "Coal Black Horse", is a fourteen-year-old young man, born 1849. His mother is named Hettie and his father is not named; the three of them form a traditional family. Robey grows up in an unnamed area of what is probably today known as West Virginia; possibly in Greenbrier County. Robey's family farm is located on the top of an isolated hill or mountain, and consists of several crop fields and various typical farm animals. Robey is a hard-working young man who speaks very little and has little to no formal education. He is respected in the area, however. When his father joins the Union army and goes away to war Robey remains to maintain and run the farm with his mother. When Hettie has a type of precognitive vision she sends Robey across the country to find his father and bring him home. Early in his voyage, Robey obtains a fine stallion, a coal black horse that takes him to the battlefield of Gettysburg over the course of about fifty days of travel. Along the way Robey experiences various things that change him from essentially a provincial boy to an experienced man. He sees the results of war, first by finding decaying corpses and then gradually passing into more and more recent battlefields. His wartime experiences include interaction with murderers, thieves, rapists, and various other vile individuals. He also meets some good men who help him along the way. Robey determines that war is a vast evil and that the closer one approaches it the worse one is affected by it—we wants nothing to do with it. He passes through an actual battle unharmed and after nearly two months on the road he finally locates his father by riding directly to him. Robey's father has been shot through the head and is dying. Robey comforts him as well as he is able until his father dies after three days. During this time Robey kills a brutal battlefield scavenger. After his father dies and is buried, Robey retrieves Rachel from her wicked guardian and the two return home together. Later, Robey kills another scavenger and then kills Rachel's pursuing guardian. Rachel, pregnant from rape, delivers twins. Robey saves them from the river after a despondent Rachel casts them in.

Hettie Childs

Hettie Childs is a middle-aged woman who is noted as being thin and wiry. She is married to Mr. Childs, whose first name is not given in the novel, and she is the mother of one son—Robey Childs. Hettie appears in the first chapter of the novel and the last two chapters of the novel. In the first chapter of the novel, Hettie has a precognitive vision in which she sees that Thomas Jackson is dead and she also apparently sees the subsequent death of her own husband. Thomas Jackson, historically a significant Confederate general, in fact did die on the very day that Hettie claims him to have died—some hundreds of miles away. This is either an amazing coincidence or Hettie is in fact visionary. She sends her son, Robey childs, to find her husband and bring him home from the war. She stresses that he must bring away his father prior to July. The

exact connection, if any, between Thomas Jackson and Hettie's husband is not explored in the novel. Hettie also instructs Robey to side with whatever men he finds himself among—she gives him a reversible jacket, with one side blue and one side grey. She tells him to refuse help from anyone and to trust no one; Robey soon discovers he cannot follow this advice exactly. While Robey is gone, probably about three months, Hettie appears to manage the farm quite well alone. When Robey returns with the news that his father is dead, Hettie does not appear surprised though she is of course stricken with grief. Over the next several months Hettie deals with her own grief in silence. Simultaneously she cares for Rachel and instructs her in the processes of becoming a mother. Hettie helps deliver Rachel's twins. Hettie's characterization is particularly strong and she struggles with the loss of her husband and the complex process of her son's transition to adulthood with grace and self-control.

Father Childs

Mr. Childs' first name is not given in the novel; he is a middle-aged man who is married to Hettie and has one son, Robey. For reasons that are not described in the novel, Childs leaves his family and farm sometime prior to 1863 (probably c. 1861) and enlists in the Union army to fight against secession and, perhaps, slavery. Childs has a developed sense of history and politics and volunteers. He probably hails from what today is known as West Virginia, that portion of then-Virginia being largely pro-Union and seceding from Virginia as Virginia seceded from the United States of America. Childs' military service gains the honest respect of the men and officers he serves with and he apparently is brave and valiant in combat. Childs fights at Gettysburg and is shot through the head on the first day of battle, taking the ball in his cheek whereupon it travels around the skull and exits in the rear, creating a channel of shattered bone around one side of his head. He is nearly entirely incapacitated by the mortal wound but retains his mental faculties and ability to speak and reason. He lives for three days after his wound, cared for by Robey, and died on the field of battle close by where he was shot. He is buried by Robey nearby though Robey intends at some point to recover the body for re-burial at home. Childs' principle interest during his few remaining days is to inculcate in his young son the values and essence of the father. In this, Childs demonstrates the link of ancestry that is so important to traditional families. Childs does not judge his son's actions but cautions him that he must live with, and accept, the results of what actions he does choose to take. The rather vague presentation of Childs allows the reader to construct in him an arch-type of a universal father figure.

Morphew

Morphew runs a small Mercantile, or general store, in a tiny town named Greenbrier or situated in a region called Greenbrier (the novel is not particularly clear on this point). Morphew appears to be fairly well off and is certainly established in the town. He owns a fine stallion, a coal black horse that he gives to Robey in the early portion of the novel. Morphew also feeds Robey and then supplies him with weapons and food stores for Robey's lengthy voyage. Morphew represents the solid and dependable frontier

neighbor who is far more interested in helping his neighbors than in making money off their difficulties. Morphew also cares for a strange child who always walks on his hands. Morphew, essentially a minor character, appears only in Chapter 2. When Robey returns to Greenbrier in three months' time he discovers Morphew's Mercantile burned to the ground—and no sign of Morphew.

The Upside-Down Boy

The Upside-Down Boy is a minor but significant character in the novel, appearing only briefly in Chapter 2. He is a ward (or possibly a child) of Morphew. The young boy appears always to walk on his hands, upside down. In fact, he spends so much time upside down that his coveralls have been modified by having the pockets sewn on upside-down, so they are right-side up when he is upside-down. He uses the pockets to carry candy. Presented as a 'natural', in the terminology of the period, the Upside-Down Boy is a potent symbol that foreshadows the world-turned-upside-down that Robey is about to enter. After meeting the Upside-Down Boy, Robey leaves behind his normal world of family, farm, and neighbors, and enters the upside-down world of warfare, thievery, rape, and murder.

The Goose Man

One of the first nefarious characters that Robey meets is a short man who has deserted from the Union army and avoids capture by dressing as an old woman—a device that the man describes as a "stick for beating off the dogs" (p. 43). When Robey first encounters the man, he is tending a flock of geese. The man's other very distasteful practice is to be deliberately infested with lice—so many that his skin seems to writhe with them. When the man approaches Robey he appears to be friendly and honest, if bizarre. However, within minutes Robey lets down his guard and the man shoots Robey in the head and steals all of his belongings, including the coal black horse. Fortunately for Robey, the goose man is not a particularly good shot and the grazing bullet knocks Robey out but does not kill him. For inexplicable reasons, the man then runs north toward Gettysburg. He is arrested by Union forces and held in the stockade in the same town where Robey finds himself after also being arrested. During a Confederate raid the goose man escapes the stockade, obtains the coal black horse, and gallops through the woods in the dark. The goose man meets a hideous fate when the horse runs him into a forked branch on a tree, snapping the man's neck and hanging his corpse from the branch. Robey finds him minutes later and leaves him hanging like strange fruit, recovering his coal black horse and continuing his journey. The goose man first appears in Chapter 4, is mentioned again in Chapter 8, and dies in Chapter 9.

The Union Major

When Robey is arrested, he is brought before a Union Major. The Major is a kindly older gentleman, formerly a schoolteacher in civilian life. The Major's world view is that the

war is transient and the combatants will have to learn to live with each other in peace once again in the relatively near future. The Major judges Robey to be innocent of being a spy and sets him free, ordering that the coal black horse be returned to him. The Major also writes a letter of safe passage for Robey and the horse and intends to set him on his way. The Major's honorable intentions are foiled, however, by a surprise Confederate raid. The Major attempts to rally his troops but is shot from his horse and dies when he is impaled on an iron fence. The Union Major appears only in Chapters 8 and 9 and is a minor character but is significant in being one of the few military men that Robey meets who is honorable and moral.

Rachel

Rachel is a fifteen-year-old orphaned young woman, born 1848. She is a principle protagonist in the narrative and her characterization is second only to Robey Childs' characterization. Rachel has been raised as a devoted Christian girl. Her parents, Christian missionaries, traveled to Africa on a proselytizing mission but were there killed by lions. Her parents had left her under the care of a reverend and his wife. At some point, Rachel's guardian began to maltreat her—probably about the time of the beginnings of the Civil War. The old woman guardian becomes seriously ill and blind; her body cavity becomes grossly distended and she is in constant pain. The old man guardian, himself a reverend and powerful Christian orator, begins to mentally and physically abuse her. During their wartime travels the trio appears to be fairly shiftless and Rachel develops into an undernourished woman who routinely is described as thin and wasting. Her appearance otherwise appears unremarkable—she has light hair and dresses in tattered and soiled clothing. Rachel first appears in Chapter 6 where Robey hides and watches as the old man abuses her and then rapes her. Robey could intervene but does not, choosing instead to pursue his own duty of finding his father. Rachel appears briefly in Chapter 7 and then vanishes from the narrative until Chapter 12 where she meets Robey on the battlefield of Gettysburg. At that time Rachel realizes that Robey has found his father who is dying; she tells Robey where she is staying and by this assures that he will retrieve her when he is able. In Chapter 15 Robey meets Rachel and they set off together; in the process the old man confronts her and she exacts her revenge, somewhat, by stabbing him in the abdomen with a pitchfork—certainly a symbolic penetration. Rachel then travels with Robey for the remainder of the novel as they return to the Childs family farm. Rachel teeters on madness as she is pregnant with the old man's twin children. She goes through a lengthy period of complex emotions and, when the old man finally comes looking for her and is killed by Robey, she goes into labor. Rachel is delivered of twin boys by Hettie. A few hours late she sneaks out of the cabin while everyone else is asleep and throws her newborn infants into a river and then starts to drown herself. Robey appears, prevents her suicide, and then saves the infants. At this point Rachel appears to accept her new life as a family member. A complex character and a difficult heroine, Rachel is a powerful figure in the novel.

The Preacher and His Wife

The Preacher is an old man married to his wife who is blind and seriously ill. The couple is the guardian couple of Rachel whom they treat poorly—Rachel is, to them, essentially a slave. The old woman is fairly kindly but being blind and disabled has little to offer Rachel and is incapable of protecting her. The preacher eventually rapes Rachel and abuses her mentally and physically. He is a powerful preacher and whenever he prays and preaches the Christian Rachel is unable to escape his domination of her. He also is able to captivate others through his powerful oratory. The couple initially appear in Chapters 6 and 7, and then reappear in Chapter 15; the old man alone recurs in Chapter 18. When Robey and Rachel finally leave together the preacher intervenes to retain Rachel, falling on his knees to pray to tell Rachel to absolve herself of her many sins. Rachel responds by stabbing him in the abdomen with a pitchfork, clearly a symbolic retribution for his rape of her. He is wounded but survives. Sometime later, the old woman dies—apparently of her malady. The reverend man then tracks down Rachel, apparently intending to recover her as his property, but is shot and killed by Robey. The preacher, the dominant antagonist in the novel, is a wicked and vile man who espouses a twisted Christianity in order to hold sway over others. He is a despicable minor character who has significant impact on the narrative.

The Scavenger Brothers

The two scavenger brothers are unnamed; the older brother is somewhat domineering over the younger brother. One of the brothers has cropped ears, indicating a habitual life of criminality. The two brothers appear in Chapters 12 and 13, wandering the battlefield of Gettysburg at night, looting corpses and uses hatchets and hammers to chop open mouths and knock out teeth with gold fittings. That some wounded men are alive does not trouble them as they go about their grisly corpse-dismembering practices—the kill the men only after they have chopped off their jaws and smashed out their teeth. The men then retreat to a dugout and melt the dental fixtures, rings, and other items into small gold ingots. They plan to continue their scavenging for another day or so and then to pursue the Union army to the south where they are sure they will find other battlefields to loot and wounded men to torture and kill. Robey follows the men during the night and at one opportunity he murders one of the men by shooting him through the head. The other brother, trapped in the dugout, throws out all the loot and Robey takes it and leaves. The remaining scavenger pursues Robey and, in Chapter 17, eventually tracks him down to the family farm, riding up at dusk—only to be shot through the chest by Robey. As he dies, the scavenger admits Robey has bested him but also criticizes Robey as a hard man. The dialogue between the surviving scavenger and Robey, in Chapter 17, but particularly in Chapter 13 (pp. 153-154) is the strongest in the novel.

Objects/Places

The Childs Family Farm

The Childs Family Farm is a hilltop farm in a very isolated and sparsely populated region of the Appalachian Mountains. The most likely location for the farm is in present-day West Virginia, though the novel does not specify this. The farm appears to have several fields for crops and a variety of typical farm animals. By the end of the novel several neighboring hilltops have been homesteaded. The novel opens and closes at the Childs Family Farm.

The Coal Black Horse

The Coal Black Horse, that lends itself to the title of the novel, is a fine stallion that is fully trained for military operations. Robey obtains the horse rather accidentally but the horse and Robey form a close pair and the horse always is dependable. The horse is clearly symbolic of Robey's voyage into the heart of darkness and his return, and has some parallels to the Biblical black horse of famine of the apocalypse. The novel's frontispiece aligns the horse with a passage in the book of Job.

Morphew's Mercantile

The small town near Robey's home, probably named Greenbrier, has two businesses—a blacksmith shop and a general store, or Mercantile, operated by a man named Morphew. Robey stops at Morphew's Mercantile after leaving home where he is fed, rests, and then outfitted for his journey with weapons, food, and a fine coal black horse. When Robey returns to the area some months later Morphew's Mercantile (indeed, the entire town) has been burned to the ground.

Small Arms

Robey carries various small arms during his voyage, starting with .44 caliber Colt's Army Revolvers, briefly transitioning to a Colt's Navy Revolver, and then settling on a pair of Remington Revolvers. All of these pistols are, essentially, personal defensive weapons that Robey uses—at least in theory—to defend himself. After experiencing the battlefield of Gettysburg, Robey adds to his armory a Springfield rifle—a decidedly offensive military weapon. Robey never leaves his Springfield rifle behind, and uses it to kill two men who are pursuing him with the intent to do him harm.

The Burned Roof House

At one point a seriously wounded Robey spends the night in a two story house that is partially burned, leaving the upper story a burnt-out shell but the lower story nearly intact. Robey is awakened when a trio of people approaches the house. Unable to escape he hides in the second story and watches as the trio settles and then watches while an older man rapes a young woman. The burned roof house is a minor setting with major significance in the narrative development.

The Union Train Station

At one point Robey is captured and detained as a potential Confederate spy. He is taken to a small town where he is held until freed by a Union Major. The town is a railhead and apparently a major Union Army resupply depot. When the train arrives, Confederate raiders attack causing much destruction. This is the locale of Robey's first experience of a major military skirmish. The train station appears to be only a few days away from Gettysburg though its exact location is not noted in the novel.

Gettysburg

Gettysburg is a small Pennsylvania town principally significant as the site of the major battle of Gettysburg during the United States Civil War. Historically, the battle of Gettysburg transpired July 1st through 3rd and was one of the major engagements of the Civil War, often considered to be the turning point in the war. The battle had the largest number of casualties of any Civil War engagement.

The Field of Battle

The battle of Gettysburg was fought in the environs of Gettysburg, Pennsylvania. The engaged forces numbered about 94,000 men for the Union Army and about 72,000 men for the Confederate Army. The major battle lasted for three days with days of skirmishing surrounding the principle battle. Because of the extent of the battle, the field of battle spanned several miles from north to south and was perhaps two to three miles in width. This huge, vast area included to the town of Gettysburg and numerous geographical features around the town, principally to the south. Robey's various wanderings and locations on the field of battle are not specified in the novel.

The Scavengers' Dugout

Two scavenger brothers live for a few days in a dugout on the field of battle of Gettysburg. As they are active at night, the dugout provides safety during the day and also privacy at night while they melt down their looted items into gold ingots. The dugout has only one entrance and thus Robey is able easily to trap one of the scavengers in

the dugout. Symbolically, the dugout is the only habitation in the novel that is fully below ground—indicating the men who live there are subterranean and symbolically (as well as literally) evil.

The Pastoral House

After Robey's father has died and he has retrieved Rachel from her abusive guardians, the couple stumbles upon a home in a pastoral setting. They are welcomed inside by an old woman who makes them comfortable and then cooks and serves to them a gigantic meal of good food. Like some type of guardian angel, the woman then vanishes and is not seen again. Robey and Rachel spend the night together, engaging in some physical intimacy that possibly includes sexual intercourse. The pastoral house is a minor bug significant setting as it marks a notable narrative transition.

Themes

War

By any standard, the novel's principle theme is war. The narrative opens during the United States Civil War and the major narrative events of the novel revolve around the battle of Gettysburg and tangential circumstances surrounding that conflict. "Coal Black Horse" opens with Hettie Childs' precognitive vision of her husband's death at the battle of Gettysburg—she does not name the locale but she gives a precise date. Robey Childs then proceeds across the country for about seven weeks of travel, passing from old battlefields with decaying corpses to ever-newer battlefields and greater destruction. He comes across thieves, murderers, deserters, and rapists as he proceeds ever closer to war. He witnesses slavers, adventurers, and other distasteful characters going about their own personal greedy business, profiteering from the destruction and chaos found on the edges of warfare. The closer he approaches to the actual battlefields the more intense the plundering and inhumanity becomes until finally he arrives at the scene of combat itself. Robey witnesses a Confederate raid on a Union train station and then visits the battlefield of Gettysburg where he spends three painful days tending his mortally wounded father. While there, he sees much of the worst that humanity has to offer and engages in his first deliberate acts of violence, killing—perhaps murdering, depending upon one's viewpoint—a scavenger who is pillaging the dead and nearly dead. While Robey's father attempts, in Chapter 14, to explain the high purposes of war Robey finds in it nothing redeeming and nothing of worth.

Transition

The novel can be viewed as a traditional bildungsroman where Robey Childs transitions from childhood to adulthood. He enters the narrative as a fourteen-year-old boy of huge stature and considerable strength but with little or no formal education. Robey has spent his entire life on the isolated family farm and knows very little about the greater world. Robey exits the narrative as a fifteen-year-old young man who has a companion and children, who runs a house and farm, who is armed and demonstrates a predilection for shooting first and asking questions later. Throughout the novel, Robey transitions from the safe home farm to the battlefield of Gettysburg; he transitions from innocent to experienced, and he transitions from naïve to a decisive actor determined to preserve his own safety and interests. The novel bolsters this theme with the death of Robey's father, who transitions from adulthood to death, simultaneously inculcating in Robey a sense of ancestry and a sense of the greater significance of the family line—father to son/father to son. The novel also prevents a parallel transition of Rachel, moving from her difficult and negative childhood through a violent rape into a damaged womanhood. Rachel has a difficult road to travel but at the narrative conclusion appears to have accepted her final destination. Against these character transitions the novel's dominant setting of Civil War finds the nation itself in transition. The homesteaders around Robey's old home signify that things will never remain constant for very long.

Families

At the core of the narrative structure is the Childs family—Mr. Childs, his wife Hettie, and their son Robey. The Childs family lives on an isolated hilltop farm and appears to keep to themselves. They are well respected in the area and their few neighbors are supportive and credible. The principle narrative action involves Robey attempting—unsuccessfully—to rescue his father from the battle of Gettysburg. To this end Robey travels some seven weeks or more through difficult and dangerous circumstances, picking up a serious physical wound on the way. When faced with an opportunity to intervene on Rachel's behalf, Robey remains focused on finding his father in an attempt to save the natal family. When Robey does find his mortally wounded father his only concern is to render what assistance he can and Robey remains on the battlefield for three days until his father dies. This event marks a major narrative shift because Robey no longer is a child in a family but is now an adult; much of Chapter 14 deals with Robey's father's attempt to instill in Robey the values that he will need as an adult. After this occurs, Robey then retrieves Rachel and takes her home; they clearly are identified as a couple at this point though they are not formally wed. Robey accepts Rachel's twin boys as his own and then waits for Rachel to accept them as her own, also. At the novel's conclusion, Rachel appears to have arrived at a decision and the narrative ends with a sort of hopeful note.

Style

Point of View

The novel is related from the third-person, omniscient point of view by an entirely effaced but reliable narrator. Robey, the principle protagonist, is the central character and is present in every significant scene of the narrative. The narrator frequently reveals interior thoughts and motivations of Robey, but only infrequently reveals interior thoughts of other characters. This construction closely aligns Robey with the narrator and in some ways conflates the character of Robey with the narrative act. The point of view selected allows Robey to be presented in a quite sympathetic light; thus, his murder of the scavenger brothers and his robbery of them appear to be justified and not premeditated or motivated by greed. Robey is presented as acting somewhat impulsively and his motivation appears to be based more on a sense of moral courage rather than on a sense of greed. Also, his decision to allow Rachel to be raped is presented as his single-minded determination to locate his father as quickly as possible rather than as an act of cowardice on his part. The point of view selected is appropriate and in many respects typical of the sort of narrative structure utilized in the novel.

Setting

The novel does feature several settings that are fairly well developed. The novel opens and closes at the Childs Family Farm. The small town nearby is described, as are a few houses—the burnt-out house early in the novel and the pastoral house in the latter portion of the novel. The rail depot where Robey briefly is incarcerated is described. Finally, the battlefield of Gettysburg is fairly completely developed as a local, if transient, setting. All these locales can be viewed as a sort of picture of the eastern United States. However, the geographical setting in the novel is not quite as important as the textural setting, or the social milieu in which the novel is set. The United States Civil War is ongoing during the period of time considered by the novel. This conflict rages back and forth across the region discussed and in many ways the conflict looses the bands of normal civilization; the social contract is disrupted and disregarded. Thus, the war conflict itself, terrible enough in isolation, ripples outward throughout the broader region filling it with slavers, thieves, murderers, rapists, and other unsavory characters. Everyone becomes a victim of war, either through direct participation in the military action or through some degree of reflected violence that percolates throughout the region in response to, or perhaps caused by, war. This social condition forms the backbone of the real setting of the novel.

Language and Meaning

The novel is related in standard English and should be easily accessible to any reader with a basic command of that language. The novel does describe several violent

scenes, including one rape, and does include some strong profanity (e.g., 181). The novel uses a variety of literary techniques to deliver content, including several lengthy dialogues between Robey and Morphew, Robey and his father, Robey and Rachel, and Robey and the surviving scavenger brother. These dialogues are particularly strong and well-written components of the larger narrative. The narrative also uses descriptive passages, introspective passages focused on Robey, and other explanatory techniques. Within the novel meaning is derived from a variety of techniques, principally by examining Robey's reaction to events. The novel is definitively aligned with Christian ideology, made clear by a frontispiece quotation of the Bible and, later, Rachel's reference to the Biblical origins of her own name. Readers familiar with Christianity doubtless will encounter other familiar imagery throughout. The novel presents very few geographical or biographical details; these are deliberately left vague to imply a larger meaning to the narrative—here is not just one young man and his father, but all young men and their fathers. In this sense, narrative meaning is more complex and derived.

Structure

The 218-page novel is divided into eighteen enumerated chapters of fairly consistent length. The chapters are related in strictly chronological order. The novel's principle timeline covers about one year in time—Robey spends about fifty days traveling from his home to Gettysburg and, presumably, about the same time returning. The first fifty days are treated in some detail, consuming Chapters 1 through 10. Chapters 11 through 14 cover a period of three days, and receive the greatest attention of any time period in the novel. Chapters 15 through 17 see Robey and Rachel home from Gettysburg to the Childs Family Farm, though this travel considers only minimal attention. Chapters 17 and 18 then cover many months of time quickly, so Rachel proceeds from early pregnancy to full-term by the close of the novel, perhaps six months in all. This structure of the novel focuses the narrative attention on Robey's journey and his transition from a child to an adult. The novel's structure is easily accessible and traditional and poses no special barrier to interpretation.

Quotes

The evening of Sunday May 10 in the year 1863, Hettie Childs called her son, Robey, to the house from the old fields where he walked the high meadow along the fence lines where the cattle grazed, licking shoots of new spring grass that grew in the mowing on the edge of the pasture. (p. 1)

He shook out the sweat-stained saddle blanket and lay down in front of the horse on a bed of green ferns and where arched fiddleheads unfolded and a lead tied loosely to his wrist. (p. 32)

"What do you have to say?" he asked the porcelain-faced doll, and when there was no reply he whispered the word "nothing". (p. 64)

"Please," the major said. "Untie the young man. We'll just have to take our chances." Then, to the young officer with the leather book, he expressed the sentiment that someday this war would be over and when it was they would all have to live with each other once again. (p. 89)

"Sit down," the major said, pocketing his watch. "Let's have a chat."
"It is the truth," Robey whispered without moving.
"You wouldn't be pulling my leg?"
"No sir."
"Tell me what happened."
"A tiny little fellow back down the road. He was swum with skin fleas and dressed in women's clothes he stol'd off a woman he killed. He shot me here in the head," he gestured," and stol'd my horse. It was a very fine horse black as coal." (p. 95)

"Put him through," one of them said, his voice half lit with whiskey, unable to stop what had been started.
"He ain't hurtin' nobody."
"It's a ugly bull that never hurts anybody," the first one said, and drew his pistol and shot the officer in the forehead. (p. 107)

"You are not from around here," she said.
"No ma'am."
"Why are you here?"
"My mother sent me to fetch home my pap."
"Did you find him?"
"He is over thar. I was to get water, but I drank it all myself. Then I paid for a bandage and I did not have any more money to buy water for this canteen."
"You can help if you want to," she said. "I will give to you water to take, or I'll just give you water and you can go."

"I have never had money before."
"Then it will give me pleasure to pay you in water." (p. 127)

He stood and gathered himself and not knowing what else to do, he began walking away from her, but she followed him to the tree and then her voice was asking to his back, "Who are you?" And then her voice was rising and she was cursing him and saying, "You could have stopped him."
"I could not help," he said, turning to her sad and stricken face. "I had to find my father." (p. 137)

They were a teaching father and a learning son, timeless in their existence, the father born into the son as is the grandfather and the father before him and all the way back to the first. The father's life is foreclosed and the son's life is continuing and as always, only the unknown privileging one state of being over the other. (pp. 144-145)

The other one took the hatchet to the mouth of the officer for the sake of the gold plate it contained and to which a set of false teeth was attached. He raised it over his head and then it flashed down through the yellow light. With a single chop, he sliced through the side walls of the officer's mouth, separating the mandible from the maxilla and leaving the officer's mouth a gaping and bloody maw.
"He's a rascal, that one."
"I'd like to see him bite someone now," the one said.
"He will not bite again," the other said. (p. 148)

"We're going," Robey told him.
"I will come for her," he said. "You should know that."
"It's a big country."
"It ain't that big."
"No, I 'spect it ain't." (p. 169)

"Two, three more days," he said.
"Nights, you mean."
"Nights," he agreed. (pp. 181-182)

"I was going to run off," she said, "but I guess I just run off too late for my own good."
"A person can get used to just about anything if it happens slow enough," he said.
"Not that," she spat, and then she turned her back and went silent on him and they did not speak again before sleep. (p. 189)

He thought of guilt and invited it inside himself, but it would not enter his mind or heart

and it remained a cold and dormant place inside him. Did he kill himself when he first killed and so was already dead? (p. 211)

Topics for Discussion

How does Robey find his father? How likely is it that Robey simply rode out and then happened upon his father many hundreds of miles away? How does the novel explain Robey's ability to find his father?

Robey meets an upside-down boy, that always walks on his hands. This behavior apparently is continuous. What does the boy symbolize within the narrative structure? Why is it significant that Robey meets the boy just as he departs home?

In Chapter 3 Robey sees a group of slaves being taken south. The slavers are particularly noted as being an odd assortment of strange men. Why do you think the narrative presents the slavers as a curious rabble instead of an organized military unit?

In Chapter 5, Robey meets a grizzled veteran who admits to being a sometimes cannibal; he also admits to developing a real fondness, almost a yearning, for eating human flesh. What does this cannibal signify within the narrative?

In Chapter 6, Robey watches while Rachel is raped and he does not interfere. Why does he not interfere? Do you think that his justification is valid? Why or why not?

In Chapter 11, Robey purchases water and bread from two women who sit on their porch telling stories and joking around, laughing. All around them is destruction and death. They are laughing and making a lot of money by selling water. Why do you think they are laughing? Do you find their presence as baffling as Robey finds it?

When Rachel meets Robey in Chapter 12 she pointedly tells him where she is staying. What is her purpose in doing this? Does she hope, or perhaps know, that Robey will eventually come to her rescue?

Why does Robey kill the scavenger in Chapter 13?

According to Robey's father, what is the high purpose of the Civil War? (Refer to Chapter 14)

In Chapter 16 Robey awakens once to discover the structure he's sleeping in is on fire. He gets out and then saves Rachel. Who do you think set the fire? Was Rachel attempting suicide?