Lincoln in the Bardo: A Novel Study Guide

Lincoln in the Bardo: A Novel by George Saunders

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Plot Summary

The following version of this book was used to create this study guide: Saunders, George. Lincoln in the Bardo. Random House, 2017.

Lincoln in the Bardo is a novel based on the true story of the death of William Wallace "Willie" Lincoln, a son of United States President Abraham Lincoln. In 1862, Willie Lincoln died of typhoid fever at the age of 11. The novel opens in the bardo, which is an intermediary state between life and the afterlife. Willie Lincoln materializes in the bardo and is greeted by Hans Vollman—a deceased printer who was killed at the age of 46 by a falling support beam—and Roger Bevins III—a young man who took his life after being rebuffed by a young man named Gilbert with whom Bevins was in love.

Through the use of real and invented historical sources, the novel relates the story of Willie's death. The doctor believed that Willie was merely sick with a cold and would soon recover. Thus, Abraham Lincoln and Mary Todd Lincoln proceeded with the state dinner they had planned. In the White House, they entertained many important diplomats, politicians, and military officers while Willie lay sick in his bed. Willie died not long after this night, as it turned out that he was sick with typhoid fever.

In the bardo, everyone that Willie meets is a person has died and been buried in the same cemetery as Willie, and even though they are in the bardo, they are able to view the cemetery around them. They also believe that they are not dead but merely sick. However, Vollman and Bevins encourage Willie to pass on to the next stage of the afterlife, as they know that the bardo is a dangerous place for young people. They knew a young person in the bardo—a young woman named Elise Traynor—who stayed in the bardo for too long and became trapped there forever. However, before Willie decides to pass on, his father arrives in the cemetery and looks at Willie's body in the mausoleum where it lies. Lincoln hugs the body and speaks to it before leaving. This gives Willie and the other people in the bardo hope that Willie may be able to return to his former state with the help of his father. The people of the bardo tell Willie their stories so that he may help them once he has returned to his life.

However, Willie is soon grabbed by a malevolent tendril, as had happened to Elise Traynor when the bardo began to consume her. Vollman and Bevins follow Lincoln, merge with him, and try to get him to return to Willie's mausoleum so that Willie can either be saved by his father or be convinced to pass on to the next stage of the afterlife. Lincoln returns to the mausoleum because he realizes he forgot to lock it. While Vollman and Bevins are away from the mausoleum, Willie converses with the Reverend Everly Thomas, another occupant of the bardo. It is revealed to the reader that, unlike the other people in the bardo, Reverend Thomas actually knows that he is dead. However, when he died and sat for judgment in the afterlife, he was cast back into the bardo for some inscrutable reason. Reverend Thomas believes that it is because he has committed some unrealized sin that he must account for.

Abraham Lincoln arrives at the mausoleum again to lock it. Vollman and Bevins urge Willie to merge with his father to hear his thoughts, but before Willie can do so, Abraham Lincoln begins to walk away. Then, more tendrils burst from the ground to grab Willie. They are possessed by the spirits of unrepentant sinners. Hearing these voices describe their crimes without remorse, Reverend Thomas becomes more confident in his own sense of morality, and he tricks the tendrils into letting go of Willie for a moment. Thomas then grabs Willie and attempts to run with him to safety. The tendrils knock them down, and Thomas is rewarded for his bravery by being allowed to pass into the next stage of the afterlife. Vollman then picks up Willie and brings him to the cemetery's chapel, where his father sits.

In the chapel, Willie merges with his father and realizes that he is dead. He declares this to the other people of the bardo and then passes on to the next stage of the afterlife. At the same time, Lincoln is able to overcome his grief for his son, and he recommits to his resolutions as President in the midst of the Civil War. Greatly affected by Willie's pronouncements, many more inhabitants of the bardo accept the fact of their deaths and allow themselves to pass into the afterlife. This includes Vollman and Bevins.

Chapters 1 – 25

Summary

Chapter 1: The novel opens in the bardo, an intermediate state between death and the next stages of the afterlife. Hans Vollman, a 46-year-old printer, speaks of his marriage to a very young woman. He says that, due to his ne wife's nervousness, they did not consummate the marriage on their wedding night. He also says that the day they finally planned to have sexual intercourse, he was struck by a falling beam in his office. He says this made him sick and that the doctor placed him in a special "sick-box" (5) for recovery. Vollman speaks this story to his acquaintance in the bardo Roger Bevins and to the young Willie Lincoln, who is slowly materializing in that place.

Chapters 2 – 8: These brief chapters describe a lavish state dinner organized by Abraham and Mary Todd Lincoln in the White House in the year of 1862. The dinner is described with the use of entries from real and invented historical sources. During the dinner, Abraham's 11-year-old son Willie lay in his bed in the White House suffering from a fever. The Lincolns had considered canceling the dinner due to the boy's ill health, but the doctor said it was merely a cold and that Willie would recover. However, the narrative then reveals with the use of historical entries that Willie was killed by his illness.

Chapters 9 – 15: The narrative then returns to the bardo, where a young man named Roger Bevins III tells of how he arrived in that place. He says that he fell in love with a man named Gilbert, but that Gilbert ultimately rebuffed Bevins because Gilbert did not wish to give in to his own homosexuality. In despair, Bevins returned to his home where he slit his wrists in a suicide attempt. However, he quickly regretted his decision, so he ran downstairs in the hopes of being found and revived. Bevins says that he is still there, still waiting to be found and saved. The narrative then pivots to Willie Lincoln's view, who says that Vollman manifests as a naked man with a preposterously large and engorged sexual organ, and that Bevins manifests as a grotesque humanoid figure with many eyes, arms, and hands. Vollman and Bevins tell Willie to allow himself to pass on and leave the bardo, but Willie says he must wait so his father can fetch him. Bevins and Vollman say that the bardo is harmful to children who stay too long, and they show him Elise Traynor, a girl of 14 who has been horribly disfigured and trapped in the bardo because she did not allow herself to pass on.

Chapters 16 – 25: Willie, Vollman, and Bevins are joined by the Reverend Everly Thomas, another occupant of the bardo. They then see Abraham Lincoln as he approaches the cemetery mausoleum by which they all stand. In the mausoleum, Lincoln weeps over his son's body while Willie tries in vain to get his father's attention. The narrative then relates a series of historical entries describing Willie's good nature and his parents' utter despair and grief at Willie's death not long after the state dinner. In the mausoleum, Lincoln holds Willie's body and speaks to it before replacing the coffin and leaving. This unprecedented act of closeness between the father and the boy's

body awes the occupants of the bardo and convinces them that Willie may soon return to his former state with the help of his father.

Analysis

The development of the idea of the bardo in the novel is developed in a gradual and somewhat abstruse manner. Firstly, the word “bardo,” is never used in the novel, only in the title, and secondly, the characters that occupy the bardo remain in firm denial about their deceased states. Thus, the reader is left to glean the true circumstances of these characters through various hints and clues. For example, it slowly becomes apparent that the objects to which Vollman refers to as “sick-boxes” are actually coffins. The similar term “sick-form” becomes apparent as a label for a person’s corpse. Moreover, Willie Lincoln’s “sick-house” implicitly refers to the mausoleum in which Willie is interred, thus revealing that Willie, Bevins, Vollman, and all other deceased characters of the novel are buried in the same cemetery. This indirect exposition helps subtly inform the reader about the characters’ circumstances and their personal perspectives, which stand in direct opposition to the fact that they are truly deceased.

Through this contradiction between the characters’ beliefs and circumstances, the bardo comes to represent an intermediary state in more ways than its literal function. The spirits of the deceased appear to remain in the bardo precisely because they hold unresolved regrets in their lives and thusly have not accepted the fact that they are deceased. Vollman, for example, dearly wishes to consummate his new marriage, but his death stands as a great impediment to goal. Bevins, meanwhile, wishes to resume his life because, after cutting his wrists, he suddenly realized how much he valued every simple pleasure in his existence. The primary source of Willie’s wish to return to his life appears to be his loving relationship with his father. Willie says that his father will retrieve him, and Abraham Lincoln does then come to the mausoleum to grieve over his son’s body. Moreover, the narrative uses its format of historical entries to inform the reader of the great filial love that exists between Willie and his father.

The bardo’s strange characteristic of causing harm to children appears to function as a statement on the nature of grief in parents and children. Bevins and Vollman show Willie the grotesque and eternally trapped form of the young Elise Traynor, and they say Willie will also become trapped greatly deformed if he stays in the bardo too long. This seemingly arbitrary characteristic of the bardo appears to have a connection with the idea of a parent’s grief that arises in response to the passing away of one of their children. Lincoln’s grief for his son constitutes one of the main emotional arcs of the novel, and this grief appears to be a factor in Willie’s desire to return to his father and his life. However, the novel ultimately recognizes the necessity of overcoming grief and proceeding with one’s duties, such as the immense duties that weigh upon Abraham Lincoln. Thus, the danger that the bardo presents to Willie appears to be analogous with the danger of bearing grief in one’s heart for too long. For Willie is only able to leave the bardo once he and his father both accept Willie’s death.

Discussion Question 1

Discuss the format of the novel. What are the advantages of presenting the novel with the use of historical entries and alternating points of view between characters? Why do these mechanisms appear necessary? What do they add or subtract from the telling of the story?

Discussion Question 2

Discuss the relationship between Hans Vollman and Roger Bevins III. Why do they appear to be such close companions in the bardo? What do they each gain from their mutual association? How do they compare or contrast as characters?

Discussion Question 3

What is striking or significant about the presentation of Abraham Lincoln in the novel? What appear to be the most significant aspects of his relationship with his son?

Vocabulary

mortify, expedient, pervade, defer, efficacious, nascent, congest, manifold, witticism, alabaster, promenade, repast, pagoda, frigate, cherub, edifice, matron, transient, quaint, stolid, roseate, apposite

Chapters 26 - 40

Summary

Chapters 26 – 29: After Abraham Lincoln's visit, many people in the bardo rush towards Willie, wishing to tell him of their lives and problems, because they believe Willie may be able to return to his old life and help them. Jane Ellis, a society woman, tells of her three beloved daughters whom she wishes to aid in their youths. Mrs. Abigail Blass, a rich but stingy woman, tells of her various bank balances and properties. Lieutenant Cecil Stone tells of his many slaves, whom he would abuse physically and sexually. Eddie Baron and Betsy Baron speak of their lives of poverty and frequent partying, and they speak of their kids, who never come to see them. However, the gathering is interrupted by the arrival of a large number of entities of the bardo who apparently visit the bardo every night. They take on various familiar forms based on the people to whom they speak. They attempt to convince the people in the bardo to pass on to the next stage of the afterlife, but the people in the bardo view these envoys with suspicion and hostility. Eventually, the entities retreat.

Chapters 30 – 34: Vollman, Bevins, and Reverend Thomas look about to see who among them disappeared after agreeing to pass on to the next stage of the afterlife. To their surprise, they see that Willie Lincoln was able to resist the envoys. They once again urge Willie to pass on, reminding him that the bardo is hostile to young people. However, Willie says that he will not heed them, because if he had, he would have missed his father's visit. Willie says he is confident that his father will retrieve him from this place. However, a strange and malevolent-seeming tendril suddenly shoots up from the ground and binds the boy in place. Vollman and Bevins recall how this same phenomenon marked the beginning of Elise Traynor's downfall. In his mind, Willie recalls his good times with his father, and he recommits to staying strong so that his father can come retrieve him.

Chapters 35 – 40: Suddenly, three occupants of the bardo who are referred to as "the Bachelors" (121) appear. They say that Willie's father is still in the cemetery, sitting in the chapel that is situated on the grounds. Vollman and Bevins, although aware that the Bachelors sometimes like to lie and play pranks, decide to go look for Willie's father and attempt somehow to get him to return to Willie's mausoleum. Reverend Thomas says that this is a bad and useless idea. He attempts to talk them out of it, but Vollman and Bevins go anyway. On their way to the other side of the cemetery, Vollman and Bevins pass by several other occupants. They pass Trevor Williams, a kindly hunter who wishes to return to his life and hunt more animals of the earth. Then they see Percival "Dash" Collier, an owner of many gardens and houses who wishes to return to his life so he may tend to those properties. Then they pass Jasper Randall and Benjamin Twood, two salesmen whose personality and diction appear to have become highly degraded in the bardo.

Analysis

After Abraham Lincoln's visit, the narrative appears to transition towards a focus on anthologizing the stories of the various occupants of the bardo, thus building thematically relevant subplots underneath the main narrative arc of the novel. The story still continues to advance the main narrative regarding the fate of Willie Lincoln, but as more occupants of the bardo are revealed to the reader, the narrative appears to place an increasing amount of importance on the collective stories of the people in the bardo. One major instance of this narrative mode appears directly after Abraham Lincoln concludes his first visit to Willie's mausoleum. Characters like Jane Ellis, Abigail Blass, Lieutenant Stone, and the Barons are each afforded space in the narrative to tell of their own stories, even though these stories have no direct relation to Willie's story beyond the fact that these characters are all in the bardo with him. The tones of these stories vary from tragic to humorous to repulsive, but each carries a strong undertone of regret and lack of fulfillment. These stories thusly help to advance the tone and themes of Willie's story arc and the novel as a whole. These individual stories share a dynamic of mutual development, each serving to further develop the world and themes of the other.

Another major instance of this dynamic of anthologizing comes when Vollman and Bevins race to find Abraham Lincoln, although the series of stories they encounter on the way serve different narrative functions than the stories mentioned above. The stories of characters like Trevor Williams, Percival Collier, Jasper Randall, and Benjamin Twood are told in much briefer and more comical modes, employing very humorous descriptions of these characters with regards to how they appear in the bardo. Moreover, these characters appear to have much more frivolous concerns and problems keeping them in the bardo than most of the characters mentioned above. This juxtaposition functions as a device for the development of perspective, illustrating how any problems, no matter how grave or trivial they seem to one person, may be inflated or diminished by changes in thinking or perspective.

It is also important to note the narrative function of the mysterious envoys who come to persuade the occupants of the bardo, as these envoys further develop the nature of the conflict between the bardo and its occupants. At first, the envoys appear to be just as malevolent as the people in the bardo fear, as these entities use tricks and deceptions to try to convince the people in the bardo to pass on. However, as the novel progresses, it becomes clear that the ultimate goal of these envoys is a benevolent one. They attempt to convince the people in the bardo of the truth that their lives have ended and that their only choice is to pass on. In response to these entreaties, Hans Vollman replies, "To whom do you speak? Who is hearing you? To whom do you listen?...Here I am. I am here. Am I not?" (99), thus clarifying one of the reasons that so many people in the bardo are convinced that they are still alive. The nature of the bardo is such that its occupants retain their senses. However, this insight also emphasizes of the denial that characters like Vollman hold, for even this perspective should not be able to stand in the face of all the evidence around them that clearly confirms their deaths.

Discussion Question 1

What is the narrative function of the various personal anecdotes told by minor characters? Why does the novel give so much attention to the stories of minor characters? How do these stories interact with novel's themes and main storylines?

Discussion Question 2

Discuss the significance of the unnamed envoys of the bardo that come to speak with the bard's inhabitants. What appears to be their purpose or function in the world of the bardo? What appears to be their narrative or thematic function?

Discussion Question 3

What is the particular danger to Willie in the bardo? Why is it that only children in the bardo seem to be susceptible to this danger? What does this dynamic imply in terms of the narrative or themes of the book?

Vocabulary

loam, predilection, dearth, timidity, imbibe, inquisitive, insensate, obeisance, fulminate, aplomb, amiable, overwrought, querulous, stygian, vivify, bemuse, tacit, boorish, corporeal, redolent

Chapters 41 – 63

Summary

Chapters 41 – 51: Vollman and Bevins witness a man in the bardo named Captain William Prince. Prince is a soldier, and he speaks aloud about his life, addressing his remarks to his wife, who is not present. Prince admits that he was unfaithful in his marriage and deeply repents, and in that moment, he passes on to the next stage of the afterlife, disappearing in what the others call “the matterlightblooming phenomenon” (140). Vollman and Bevins then find Abraham Lincoln sitting in a patch of grass, looking quite sad and defeated. They merge with Lincoln and are flooded with vague memories of Lincoln’s past. They attempt to motivate him to return to Willie. Lincoln recalls precious memories of Willie, and he thinks of how terrible death and grief are. The narrative then presents several historical entries regarding the horrors and violence of the American Civil War. The narrative then returns to the scene, where Lincoln takes solace that Willie is in a better place. Vollman and Bevins then believe that if Willie is made aware of his father’s wish for him to be in a better place, Willie will agree to pass on.

Chapters 52 – 55: Vollman and Bevins argue over whether or not it is truly possible to control a person by merging with them. Vollman cites an instance when they inspired a moment of passion between two lovers, saving the lovers’ marriage, but Bevins claims that it may simply have been a coincidence. Nonetheless, they attempt to persuade Lincoln to return to Willie’s mausoleum. They focus on thoughts of Willie, and then they realize that Lincoln has accidentally taken the mausoleum’s lock with him. Lincoln realizes this at the same time, and he rises to return the lock to the mausoleum. As Lincoln does so, Vollman and Bevins exit Lincoln and are endowed with all of Lincoln’s memories. They realize that much time has passed in the world, although they each remain in denial about their respective deaths.

Chapters 56 – 61: Historical entries describe the effects that Willie’s death had upon Abraham and Mary Todd Lincoln. The entries note the potential conflict between Lincoln’s grief and his duties as President. They also describe the terrible effects of grief upon Mrs. Lincoln, who confined herself to her room for more than a month after Willie’s death. The narrative then transitions to Reverend Thomas’ point of view. Thomas attempts, sill unsuccessfully, to persuade Willie to pass on from the bardo. Thomas then reveals to the reader that, unlike the others in the bardo, he is fully aware that he is dead. He tells of his arrival in the afterlife, where he came to a house where his life was to be judged by spiritual entities. He witnessed one man before him rise up to heaven, and he witnessed another man being cast down to hell. However, when Reverend Thomas’ judgment arrived, he was simply cast out into the bardo. The entities said that he would one day be recalled to the house of judgment, but Reverend Thomas is unable to figure out what sin of his is responsible for keeping him in the bardo.

Chapters 61 – 62: The narrative conveys a series of historical entries that detail Abraham Lincoln's outward appearance as observed by his peers. The narrative then transitions back to the bardo, where Lincoln arrives to place the lock on the mausoleum. Vollman and Bevins tell Willie of what they observed within his father, and they convince Willie to merge with his father to see for himself.

Analysis

The scene involving Captain William Prince is significant because it shows a character passing on from the bardo through their own volition, adding depth and complexity to the moral and metaphysical aspects of the bardo. Vollman and Bevins observe Prince lamenting the sin of infidelity to his wife, and Prince articulates this lament as a confession. After admitting this wrongdoing and declaring his deep repentance, Prince is apparently allowed to pass on from the bardo. This thusly characterizes the bardo as a place for the expiation of sins in addition to its other wrongdoings. Prince's situation differs from the situations of Vollman and Bevins, who seem only to be held in the bardo due to their inability to accept the fact that they are dead. Thus, the bardo appears to serve multiple thematic functions. As has already been established, the bardo serves as a platform for the thematic processing of grief, but the scene with William Prince gives the bardo the added thematic function of exploring the various moral dimensions of the characters' situations.

This theme of morality extends to the character arc of Reverend Thomas, whose narrative is given a very surprising new dimension in this section. Previously, Reverend Thomas has been presented as a nagging and someone inscrutable old man, but his past actions are given much more clarity with the revelation that Thomas is actually aware that he is dead. This realization would be enough to free other characters for the bardo, but this is not the case for Reverend Thomas. Because Thomas' entrapment in the bardo is established after a preliminary judgment of his life, Thomas is led to believe that the presence of some unresolved sin is keeping him in the bardo, just like William Prince's sin kept him there until he was able to expiate it. Thus, Reverend Thomas' role in the bardo is not only to safeguard the safety and morality of his fellow occupants, it is also to search within himself to see where his morality could possibly have gone awry.

This section also gives considerable focus to Abraham Lincoln, examining the philosophical and ethical complications that arise between his personal experience and his public duties. As President, Lincoln finds himself at the helm of the Union during the Civil War, fighting for the unity of the country. However, the death of his son appears to complicate Lincoln's view of the war as he becomes faced with the terrible realities of death and grief from a personal perspective. The narrative portrays this realization and moral struggle through Lincoln's thoughts as viewed by Vollman and Bevins. When merging with Lincoln, Vollman and Bevins are able to eavesdrop on the President's thoughts. Lincoln thinks to himself, "Hence is murder anathema. God forbid I should ever commit such a grievous—" (150), upon which Lincoln realizes that he is arguably responsible for the many thousands of deaths in the Civil War. This struggle in Lincoln—between his grief for Willie, his belief in the necessity for the country's unity, and his

aversion to the horrors and supposed immorality of death—continues to develop throughout the novel and comprises the whole of Abraham Lincoln's character arc in the novel.

Discussion Question 1

Discuss the various effects that arise when Vollman and Bevins simultaneously merge with Lincoln. How do Vollman and Bevins' experiences from doing so inform the narrative and their own situations?

Discussion Question 2

Discuss the secret story of Reverend Thomas. Why does Thomas appear to be in the bardo despite realizing and accepting his own state of death? How does Reverend Thomas' story inform his role in the bardo and his pas actions in the novel?

Discussion Question 3

What is the function or significance of the historical entries that pertain to Lincoln's outward appearance? How does this develop the tone and focus of the novel, and how does it develop Lincoln as a character?

Vocabulary

inscribe, wanton, disarray, grandiloquent, clandestine, parch, succumb, glower, tarry, wraith, avaricious, discordant, vacuity, profligate, torpor, prodigious, forfend, winsome, cogitate, resplendent, confluence

Chapters 64 – 82

Summary

Chapters 64 – 66: In response to Abraham Lincoln's second visit, more inhabitants of the bardo gather around Willie's mausoleum, and they all begin to shout their stories, confessions, plans, and regrets. Eddie and Betsy Baron appear once again, followed this time by several African-Americans who inhabit the same pauper's grave as the Barons. Elson Farwell, an educated black man who was a slave to a wealthy Washington family, begins to tell his story. In highly baroque language, he tells the story of his life and death, and he rails against slavery and the systems of oppression used against black people in America. He is followed by a slave named Thomas Havens, who responds by saying that he rather enjoyed his life. He says he trained himself to ignore his own desires and treasure what little freedom he was granted, although it becomes apparent from his words that Havens harbors lingering regret about his state of enslavement an the freedom it took from him. Havens is then followed by slaves Litzie Wright and Mrs. Francis Hodge. Mrs. Hodge explains that Litzie has become mute due to the repeated acts of sexual violence that were perpetrated against Litzie throughout her life.

Chapters 67 – 76: Mr. Manders, the cemetery guard, arrives and speaks with Abraham Lincoln. Lincoln tells Manders that he will be out of the cemetery shortly, and Manders leaves. Vollman merges with Lincoln and attempts to persuade him to stay longer. The narrative then conveys a series of historical entries that illustrate the harsh criticisms to which Lincoln was subjected as President. This is then followed by another series of entries that discuss Lincoln's love as a parent, his indulgence of his children, and his ambition as a man. These are followed by a third series of entries regarding the Lincolns and the state dinner that took place shortly before Willie's death. The doctor had said that Willie would recover, and on this assumption, the Lincolns decided to proceed with the dinner. In the cemetery, Vollman listens to Lincoln's thoughts as Lincoln comes to terms with Willie's death. Lincoln forces himself to acknowledge the fact that the body before him is not Willie and that Willie is gone forever. Lincoln finally leaves the mausoleum, and in the bardo, the malevolent tendrils continue their slow progress of trapping Willie.

Chapters 77 – 82: In a desperate effort to persuade Lincoln to stay, Vollman, Bevins, Reverend Thomas, and many other inhabitants of the bardo merge with Lincoln. When merged together, the inhabitants of the bardo experience a sudden euphoria, and they find that their grotesque bardo manifestations suddenly fade. Instead, they manifest simply as themselves. Unfortunately, Lincoln does not seem affected by any of this, and he continues to walk away. They all exit Lincoln and return to their grotesque forms. Back at the mausoleum, Vollman, Bevins, and Reverend Thomas find Willie even further entangled by the tendrils. The tendrils suddenly begin to speak with the voices of various deceased people. These people all admit to having committed various heinous sins in their lives, but none of them express any real guilt or repentance. In the face of

these beings, Reverend Thomas suddenly becomes convinced of his own righteousness and good intentions, and he successfully tricks the tendrils into releasing Willie for a moment. In that moment, Reverend Thomas picks up Willie and attempts to run away. The tendrils catch up and knock them to the ground, and Reverend Thomas disappears in the matterlightblooming phenomenon. Vollman then picks up Willie and runs with him towards Abraham Lincoln.

Analysis

The narrative significance of the novel's African-American characters, though foreshadowed earlier, begins to culminate in this section with the introduction of Elson Farwell, Thomas Havens, Litzie Wright, and Francis Hodge. The descriptions of these characters' lives help to address issues of race relevant to both America's history and its present. Elson Farwell's fiery and articulate rhetoric, for example, sets the tone of the scene with a heartfelt diatribe against the indignities of slavery and racial oppression. Farwell, despite being well educated, was treated poorly by the family that owned him, and their neglect ultimately resulted in his death, thus turning Farwell into a fierce opponent of slavery and oppression. Thomas Havens provides something of a counterpoint to Farwell, declaring his own contentment in the position of slave. However, Havens cannot help but acknowledge the underlying natural impulse towards freedom, and this ultimately only serves to strengthen Farwell's arguments. The story of Litzie Wright, as relayed with the help of Mrs. Francis Hodge, then further illustrates the horrors of slavery by presenting Litzie's history of sexual abuse. This abuse is presented as a result of peoples unwillingness to recognize Litzie's humanity due to her race, and this lack of agency in her life is reflected in her inability to speak or express herself in death.

The scene in which the inhabitants of the bardo all merge with Lincoln presents the reader not only with the true forms of these people, but also with a subtle thematic comment on the nature of communion between people and communities. Every inhabitant of the bardo is affected by some supernatural affliction commensurate with the events and regrets of each person's life, but these afflictions disappear when the people of the bardo all merge with Lincoln and with each other. It is important to note that this transformation has nothing to do with Lincoln, but simply with the enjoinment of the inhabitants of the bardo. This phenomenon seems to suggest that one of the keys to salvation from the bardo is intimacy with those around oneself. This message appears rooted in simple ideas of human community and betterment, meaning that the same methods that allow one to thrive in a community in life apply also in death. Moreover, this idea gives a significant insight into the function of the bardo itself. It appears that the bardo is meant as an arena for the communion of various deceased souls so that they may come to terms with their lives and declare their sins in order to pass on to the next stage of the afterlife with something like a clean slate.

In this same vein, the episode involving Reverend Thomas and the tendrils binding Willie provides valuable insight into the moral function of the bardo and Reverend Thomas' role within it. When faced with the unrepentant souls that control the tendrils

binding Willie, Reverend Thomas is struck with a sudden resolve. He declares to himself that the key to true morality is only good intentions and the ability to admit wrongdoing when on has perpetrated it. This thought motivates Thomas to try to save Willie, and he is rewarded by his heroic attempt by finally being allowed to pass on to the next realm. This concludes Thomas' character arc, thus revealing that Thomas' true purpose in the bardo was to find confidence in his own morality and help to distribute the benefits of that morality to his fellow inhabitants. This helps develop the function of the bardo as an arena for moral discovery. When faced with the unrepentant arguments of the tendrils, Thomas chose to reject their ideas and instead embrace his faith in his own noble ideas of morality.

Discussion Question 1

Discuss the stories of the African-American inhabitants of the bardo. Why are their stories relayed to the reader in an uninterrupted series? How do these stories inform each other, and how do they compare and contrast with the stories of other people in the bardo?

Discussion Question 2

What is the significance of the changes that the bardo inhabitants experience when they all merge together within Lincoln? What implications do these effects have on the metaphysical principles of the bardo and the themes or morals of the novel?

Discussion Question 3

Discuss Reverend Thomas' final resolutions and actions before finally passing on from the bardo. What moral implications do these resolutions and actions carry? Why do they seem to allow him to pass on from the bardo? How does this contextualize Thomas' role in the bardo?

Vocabulary

anathema, impel, respite, feckless, charnel, pejorative, perforce, febrile, assuage, conciliate, modicum, convivial, impinge, puerile, presage, bedlam, filial, hagiography, commensurate, deleterious, jocular

Chapters 83 – 108

Summary

Chapters 83 – 93: Vollman, Bevins, and Willie follow Abraham Lincoln to the chapel that is situated on the cemetery grounds. There, Willie merges with his father. Willie listens to his father's thoughts, trying to discern some advice regarding Willie's situation. The novel then gives three short series of historical entries. The first details Willie's death, the second details his embalming, and the third details his funeral. The narrative then refocuses on the cemetery, where Willie separates from his father's form. Willie declares that he realizes what he and the others in the bardo truly are. He says that they are all dead; he says he learned this from his father's thoughts. Several occupants of the bardo who hear this immediately disappear in the matterlightblooming phenomenon, and then Willie himself passes on. Willie experiences an extreme serenity, and then he feels like he is rejoining some greater spiritual whole. Abraham Lincoln appears to feel Willie's passage, and as if set free by it, he rises once again to leave the cemetery.

Chapters 93 – 100: Vollman and Bevins enter Lincoln as Lincoln exits the chapel. Lincoln appears to have overcome his grief for his son, and he now focuses his thoughts on the Civil War. He decides that it is necessary to proceed with the war and win it as quickly and efficiently as possible, rationalizing that winning the war is the only way to end brutality, unify the nation, and free the slaves in America. Outside the chapel, Thomas Havens merges with Lincoln, and Havens is greatly impressed by the exciting life of freedom he sees in Lincoln's memories. Meanwhile, more inhabitants of the bardo pass on in the matterlightblooming phenomenon, including Francis Hodge and Litzie Wright.

Chapters 101 – 103: Betsy Baron speaks to Eddie Baron, declaring that they were terrible parents to their children. Betsy tells Eddie that she loves him, and then she passes on in the matterlightblooming phenomenon. Eddie, not wishing to be left alone, passes on as well. Memories start flooding back to Vollman and Bevins. Bevins remembers being in the bakery where he worked and seeing Gilbert enter with a handsome young man. Gilbert and the man appeared to laugh at some joke at Bevins' expense, and Bevins then rushed home, where he killed himself. Bevins then recalls Vollman's young wife visiting Vollman's grave and saying that she had remarried. As Vollman and Bevins begin to accept their deaths, they see their lives pass before them as their lives would have occurred had Bevins and Vollman not committed suicide or been hit by a falling beam. Seeing these visions, Bevins and Vollman are content. However, before they pass on, they go to see Elise Traynor one last time. They apologize for not helping her pass on from the bardo when they had the chance. Vollman enters her form and passes on in the matterlightblooming phenomenon, thus destroying Elise and ending her misery. Then Bevins passes on to the next state of the afterlife as well.

Chapters 104 – 108: As the sun begins to rise, the remaining inhabitants of the bardo merge with their bodies in the cemetery, saying that they will be out and about again the next night. Lincoln leaves the cemetery on his horse, and he is followed by the excited Thomas Havens, who merges with Lincoln and then with Lincoln's horse, and then with Lincoln again, happily riding along in the light of the early morning.

Analysis

The climax of the novel appears to center around Willie's merging with his father, the result of which helps to resolve many different story arcs and themes of the novel. Willie's realization of his own death causes an uproar in the bardo, as Willie then declares this fact aloud, apparently causing many of the novel's characters to pass on in the matterlightblooming phenomenon. This fact implies that many of the people in the bardo simply needed to be convinced of their situation, and apparently they had placed enough importance on Willie and Abraham Lincoln's relationship to believe all information yielded from it. Willie's own passing on symbolizes not only Willie's acceptance of his death, but also his father's acceptance of it, as Willie's passage appears to have a direct metaphysical affect on his father. Once Willie passes on, Lincoln is able to manage his grief and refocus on his duties as President. Lincoln's acceptance appears to have its own metaphysical repercussions, as even Vollman and Bevins finally come to terms with their deaths and pass on. Through this series of metaphysical occurrences, the novel emphasizes the power and importance of accepting what cannot be changed, as Willie's acceptance ignites a series of chain reactions that aids his father and many people of the bardo to pass on from their respective states of limbo and paralysis.

Willie's first-hand experience of passing on through the matterlightblooming phenomenon provides vital insights into the book's presentation of spirituality and the afterlife. Up until this point in the book, the reader hos only had Reverend Thomas' experience of the judgment house on which to base expectations of where the matterlightblooming phenomenon sends a person's spirit. However, Willie appears to experience a very different spiritual phenomenon. Willie experiences a feeling of rejoining a larger spiritual whole, thus carrying major implications for the novel's illustration of a spiritual world as it relates to the physical world. The physical world appears to be a separate entity from the novel's spiritual world, although still infused with aspects of grace and spirituality. The kindness and goodness that characters experience in the physical world appear to be products of the unseen sources of the spiritual or supernatural world. The bardo acts as an intermediary between these two states, and Willie's experience of the spiritual world appears to be one of unity. Willie appears to shed his own identity and experience a state of unity with the spiritual energy of that realm, thus mirroring the state of graceful unity experienced by the members of the bardo when merging together within Abraham Lincoln.

After Abraham Lincoln overcomes his grief for his son, he is able to form firm resolution with regards to his Presidential duties, and these resolutions present further ethical and moral questions to the reader. Lincoln resolves that he must continue on with the war,

believing that swift victory is the only way to minimize overall cruelty and suffering in the country. However, the harshness of the language that Lincoln uses in order to express these thoughts makes the resolution slightly more ambiguous. In his thoughts, he does not shy away from the brutality that his decision will require, despite the intense grief he just experienced regarding the death of his son. However, the narrative appears to largely agree with the rightness of Lincoln's resolution, as it appears to be the only way to reunify the country and end slavery. The narrative emphasizes the importance of unity and the evils of slavery through the events in the bardo, which so often illustrate the positive power of unification and the terrible effects of slavery and oppression.

Discussion Question 1

Why are Vollman and Bevins presented with the unlived portions of their lives before passing on from the bardo? What effects do these visions seem to have on them? How do these lives develop the characters in the eyes of the reader? What do these visions imply about the nature of life as presented by the novel?

Discussion Question 2

Discuss the nature of Lincoln's resolutions in the wake of his grief. Do his rationalizations sound convincing, or does his moral quandary appear to still be open for debate or interpretation?

Discussion Question 3

Why does the narrative end from Thomas Havens' point of view? What are the significances of his various choices in the final chapters of the novel?

Vocabulary

acquiesce, licentious, arraign, proclivity, cohort, locomotion, disconsolate, abate, anterior, crestfallen, daguerreotype, distraught, prow, dialect, frock, louver, latent, placid, morbid, succumb

Characters

Willie Lincoln

William Wallace “Willie” Lincoln was one of the sons of U.S. President Abraham Lincoln. Willie died of typhoid fever in 1862 at the age of 11. Willie is also one of the main characters of the novel. The novel describes Willie’s death and his subsequent occupancy of the bardo, which is the metaphysical space between death and the next life. Like his father, Willie is strong-willed, intelligent, courageous, and highly principled. This strong will keeps Willie from passing on to his next life, but when Willie finally realizes that he is dead, he choose of his own volition to pass on.

Hans Vollman

At the time of his death, Hans Vollman was a middle-aged American man who worked as a printer. During the novel, he is dead and occupies the bardo. In the mid-1840s, he was killed by a falling ceiling beam in his printing shop. Recently before his death, he had been married to his second wife, a relatively young and shy woman named Anna. In the bardo, Hans manifests as a naked version of himself with a preposterously swollen sexual organ, representing the fact that he had never consummate his second marriage, much to his frustration. In the bardo, he believes himself merely to be recovering from an illness, but he eventually realizes he is dead.

Roger Bevins III

At the time of his death, Roger Bevins III was a clerk in a bakery. In the early 1840s, he fell into deep despair over his love interest, a man named Gilbert who had expressed romantic feelings for Bevins but who ultimately rebuffed him, saying that a homosexual relationship would be immoral. In response, Bevins cut his wrists but then regretted his decision as he was dying. In the bardo, Bevins believes he is not yet dead and has a chance of returning to life, but he ultimately realizes that this is dead. He manifests in the bardo as a version of himself with many eyes and pairs of arms.

Reverend Everly Thomas

Reverend Everly Thomas is another occupant of the bardo. The circumstances of his death are vague, but he keeps close companionship with Hans, Roger, and Willie in the bardo. Reverend Thomas acts as a moral compass for the group and has a tendency to preach to his fellow occupants of the bardo. Unlike Vollman and Bevins, Thomas does suspect that they are all dead. On this suspicion, Thomas goes off to explore the bardo on his own, face the truths of his life, and ultimately pass on to the next life.

Abraham Lincoln

Abraham Lincoln was the 16th President of the United States of America, and he is one of the characters in the novel. During the novel, Lincoln must manage the responsibilities of his office, including the direction of the Union Army during the American Civil War. He also must deal with the emotional loss of his son, Willie Lincoln, to typhoid fever. Lincoln is ultimately able to overcome the hardship of losing his son in favor of his duties as a leader in America's time of crisis.

Elise Traynor

Elise Traynor is a young woman who died and became stuck in the bardo. In life, she was a young society woman who wanted only to become married and have children. However, she was sexually abused by several of her suitors, and the trauma caused by this abuse seems to keep her stuck in the bardo, where she is immobile and manifests as a grotesque form that only looks vaguely human. Bevins and Vollman bring Willie to Elise Traynor so Willie can see the ill effects that the bardo has on young people who stay there for too long.

Eddie Baron and Betsy Baron

Eddie Baron and Betsy Baron are a married couple from a background of poverty. When they were alive, they lived in the slums of Washington, D.D., and after they died, they were buried in a pauper's grave with many other bodies. They are rowdy and use profane language, and they remain in the bardo because they see it as an opportunity to have fun and to be free from the suffering of life. However, they eventually come to terms with the hardships of their lives and their immense failings as parents to their children, and they willingly pass on to the next life.

Mrs. Abigail Blass

In life, Mrs. Abigail Blass was a wealthy woman with many valuable possessions. In the novel, she is deceased and is an occupant of the bardo, where she manifests as a small rodent-like being. She spends her time in the bardo gathering and hoarding twigs and rocks and other useless items. She is eventually born off to the next life by a parade of shape-shifting that function to convince people in the bardo that they must move on from their past lives.

Lieutenant Cecil Stone

In life, Lieutenant Cecil Stone was a military lieutenant who owned many slaves and who died in the early 19th century. During the novel, Lieutenant Stone is dead and occupies the bardo. He is overtly racist and spends his time savagely accosting the

African-American occupants of the bardo. By the end of the novel, Stone is subdued by these African-American occupants.

Elson Farwell

Elson Farwell is an occupant of the bardo. He is an African-American man who speaks eloquently and passionately about his opposition to slavery and all forms of oppression against African-Americans in the United States. During his life, he was the slave of a wealthy family, and he resented his enslavement. He appears to share several similarities with American civil rights activist W.E.B Du Bois, both in terms of his ideology and his highly educated manner of oration.

Thomas Havens

Thomas Havens is an occupant of the bardo. Like Elson Farwell, he is African-American, but his views of racial relations contrast greatly with Farwell's views. Havens appears to have been quite content with his position as a slave to a white family. However, by the end of the novel, he comes to agree with Farwell's views, admitting that he does wish he had experienced a life of freedom.

Symbols and Symbolism

The Bardo

The bardo symbolizes the intersection between life and death. As an intermediate space between life and reincarnation, the bardo stands as a strong symbol for the ways in which death affects those still living. Abraham Lincoln, for example, struggles throughout the novel to balance his grief for his son with the duties of his office. Furthermore, because the novel plays with metaphysics in such a way that makes the deceased characters the focus of the story, the bardo also serves as a frame for examining the ways in which one reflects upon one's own life, either with regret or with acceptance.

The Sick-Box

Coffins, or "sick-boxes," symbolize vain hope and misunderstanding. The deceased characters of the novel remain in the bardo until they accept that they are dead and must pass on to their next lives. Thus, characters like Vollman and Bevins, who have not come to terms with their deaths, seek to delude themselves with the idea that they are merely sick and will recover. Therefore, they take to referring to things like coffins with less fatal sounding names, such as "sick-boxes."

The Matterlightblooming Phenomenon

The matterlightblooming phenomenon, as it is referred to by the people in the bardo, symbolizes acceptance and the ability to move on. When any of the occupants vanish in a flash of light, it is because they have finally accepted their death and are willing to pass on to their next life. The characters who have not accepted their deaths view this phenomenon as malevolent and destructive. The phenomenon shares a parallel with the acceptance that Abraham Lincoln ultimately experiences with regards to the grief he has for his deceased son, Willie.

The Envoys

The envoys of the bardo symbolize the urgent necessity of accepting loss. These unnamed beings occasionally arrive in the bardo to coax its occupants towards reincarnation. They take different forms based on whom they are speaking to, morphing into shapes that resemble those familiar to each occupant of the bardo. Although the envoys serve a benevolent purpose, they are seen as malevolent by the people in the bardo who remain in denial about their deaths.

The Pit

The pit symbolizes social and economic oppression. The pit is a large pauper's grave, and it is occupied mostly by African-Americans who have been interred in the cemetery. It is also occupied by Eddie and Betsy Baron, who lived and died in poverty. The racial segregation that the pit represents helps to highlight the themes of race that are present throughout the novel. Moreover, the presence of Eddie and Betsy Baron in the pit help to highlight their economic destitution and the state of ignominy they held in life and continue to hold in death.

The Carapace

The carapace that attacks Willie Lincoln symbolizes the danger and harmful effects of prolonged grief. As a child, Willie Lincoln is highly susceptible to ill effects in the bardo, with the risk of being held their forever. Malevolent forms of evil spirits attempt to form a solid carapace over Willie to trap him in the bardo. Willie appears stuck in the bardo due to his own strong will and the mutual grief of Willie and his father. When Willie finally escapes the bardo and enters the next stage of the afterlife, it is presented as a result of a mutual acceptance between Willie and his father. This acquittal of grief thus saves Willie from being doomed to an eternity in the bardo.

Metaphysical Merging

The ability of deceased characters to merge with each other and with the living represents the sense of communion that is vital to human civilization. When a deceased character enters into the body of a living character, the deceased character gains all the knowledge and feelings of the living character. Moreover, when more than one deceased character enters the same living character, the deceased characters experience a temporary release from the ill effects of the bardo, thus symbolizing the positive nature of constructive human communion.

Physical Manifestations

The ways in which the characters physically manifest in the bardo symbolizes the characters' lingering regrets. For example, Vollman manifests as a naked version of himself with an enlarged sexual organ, thus representing his regret that he was never able to consummate his second marriage. Bevins manifests with many eyes and arms, symbolizing his regret at having to live a double life, constantly hiding his true romantic desires due to stigmas against homosexuality. The wish to go back and remedy these regrets is what keeps these characters temporarily trapped in the bardo.

Abraham Lincoln’s Horse

Abraham Lincoln’s horse represents nobility and duty. As Abraham Lincoln rides to and away from the cemetery on his horse, much observation is made of the animal by other characters. The cemetery guard observes that the animal appears quite regal and proud to serve as Lincoln’s steed, and when Havens merges with the animal, he remarks upon its simple and wholesome demeanor. The horse’s devotion to Lincoln appears to parallel Lincoln’s devotion to his country, for both Lincoln and the horse are willing to forego their personal comfort and needs for the service of some greater good.

The State Dinner

The state dinner that Abraham and Mary Todd Lincoln host at the White House symbolizes regret and uncertainty. At first, the Lincolns wished to cancel their entertainment due to Willie’s illness, but they ultimately decided to proceed because the doctor had assured them that Willie would recover. However, Willie dies during the ball, and thus the ball comes to represent the Lincolns’ shame and regret, as well as the uncertainty of life and death. Although Willie’s death might possibly have been unavoidable, the Lincolns still regret not being with him at the time.

Settings

The Bardo

The bardo is a concept derived from Tibetan beliefs and culture. The word “bardo” translates to “intermediate state” or “in-between state.” Although this word is used in the title of the novel and not in the actual text, it is implied that the deceased characters of the novel inhabit a metaphysical state between death and reincarnation, similar to the idea of the bardo. In the novel, deceased characters inhabit the bardo until they are able to come to terms with their death and are willing to pass on into their next life. Children generally appear in the bardo for only a short time before passing on, but Willie Lincoln’s strong will holds him in the bardo for an abnormally long period of time. This is dangerous because the bardo tends to have ill effects on young people who stay there for too long.

Washington, D.C.

Virtually all of the novel’s action takes place in the American capital of Washington, D.C., although much of the story takes place on an alternate metaphysical plane within that geographical location. Washington, D.C. is central to the narrative because the plot revolves around the relationship between Abraham Lincoln and his recently deceased son, Willie Lincoln. Because the novel takes place during Lincoln’s administration as President, Lincoln and his family live in Washington in the White House at the time of Willie’s death. The occupants of the bardo with whom Willie Lincoln interacts are from the Washington area, as they are all buried in the same Washington graveyard.

Oak Hill Cemetery

Oak Hill Cemetery is a cemetery located in the Georgetown neighborhood of Washington, D.C. After Willie Lincoln’s death in 1862, he was buried at Oak Hill Cemetery. Much of the novel’s action takes place at this cemetery both on the regular plane of existence and in the bardo. The other occupants of the bardo with whom Willie Lincoln interacts are people who have also been buried at Oak Hill. During each night, the deceased are able to walk about the bardo near the location of their burial, interacting with other deceased people and viewing people who are still alive. Thus, Willie interacts with other people whoa are buried at Oak Hill, and he is able to view his father, Abraham Lincoln, when Lincoln comes to visit the grave.

The White House

The White House is the residence in Washington, D.C. that is occupied by the President of the United States. During the novel, Abraham Lincoln is President and lives in the White House with his family. The White House is also where Willie Lincoln suffers from,

and is eventually killed by, typhoid fever. Willie dies one night in his bedroom while his parents are holding a ball on the White House's ground floor, as they had been assured by a physician that Willie was well on his way to recovery.

The Mausoleum

After Willie Lincoln dies, he is interred in a white stone mausoleum in the Oak Hill Cemetery. The mausoleum serves as the setting for several important moments in the narrative, including Abraham Lincoln's visits to Willie's grave, and the binding of Willie by malevolent forces in the bardo that attempt to trap him there and deform his soul as it manifests in the bardo.

The Pit

In the novel, a large pauper's grave in the Oak Hill Cemetery serves as the place of interment for the deceased who could not afford a grave of their own. The pit is occupied by Eddie Baron, Betsy, Baron, and most of the cemetery's African-American occupants. In the bardo, this grave manifests as a large pit whose occupants are packed closely together, mirroring the way that the bodies are packed closely together in the large grave without any type of coffin or casket.

Themes and Motifs

Death

One thing that most of the novel's characters have in common is that they have passed away, and through this collection of deceased characters, the novel seeks to explore the significance and implications of death. The occupants of the bardo, whether they are able to admit it or not, have all passed away, and because they are still conscious entities, the novel is able to explore the concept of death from the perspective of both the dead and the living. One of the most prominent effects of death that the novel explores is the permanent separation between the dead and the living. For many of the people in the bardo, the thing that keeps them from passing on to the afterlife is a need to return to their loved ones to give guidance or make amends or simply enjoy one another's company longer. Willie and his father, for example, are drawn to one another because it seems unnatural for the son to pass before the father However, they eventually come to terms with the irrevocability of Willie's death, and they become content to keep their love for one another only in their hearts and minds.

The novel also explores the inevitability of death and attempts to use this fact to give perspective on the trials and tribulations of life. For example, Percival Collier is an inhabitant of the bardo who remains there due to concern for his properties. In life, he spent all of his time and energy tending his various properties and gardens, and in the bardo, he spends all of his time helplessly worrying about the state of these properties. His worry is presented as comical and unnecessary, and in this way, the novel attempts to use Collier's situation as a means of pointing out the triviality of so many of life's worries. While the novel does not necessarily call the loss of a loved one trivial, it does use the frame of the bardo as a way of recontextualizing such a loss and making it more manageable. Like Collier's properties, the life of Willie Lincoln is something that cannot return to its owner. However, the love and memories created by Willie's existence still remain with Willie's loved ones, and so the tragedy is made more palatable by things that are realistic and deeply valuable.

The novel carries a distinct flavor of spirituality when portraying death, and whether or not this spirituality is meant to be taken literally, it serves as a functional platform for the exploration and mediation of the concept of death. The final stage of the afterlife is only hinted at in the novel, but it appears to be a nebulous state of spiritual fulfillment where one's soul is shed of its specific identity and incarnation, and that soul rejoins with a larger spiritual energy. Through this concept, the novel attempts to state that, while individual identities are necessary to the experience of life, peace and unity are the true paths to fulfillment and happiness. Through the platform of the bardo, where characters come to terms with their deaths and expiate their sins, the novel demonstrates how such exercises are necessary for all who live, because death is inevitable. Facing ones mortality and being realistic about one's faults help to enrich one's life, regardless of whether or not there is an afterlife.

Grief

Because the novel focuses so deeply on death as a subject, it also chooses to focus deeply on grief and the various functions and challenges grief presents in a person's life following tragedy. One of the most important through-lines in the narrative is that of Abraham Lincoln and his grief for his son, Willie. Lincoln's grief for his son is amplified by several factors, including Willie's young age, the unnaturalness of a child dying before their parents, and the unexpected nature of the death. Abraham and Mary Todd Lincoln had been under the impression that Willie's illness was only minor, and so they organized a state dinner while Willie was ill. When the illness turned out to be typhoid fever and Willie died of it, the Lincolns were left to wonder how grave of a mistake that state dinner was. Through the depth of Lincoln's grief, the novel sets the stage for an exploration of one of the deepest types of grief imaginable. The examination of Lincoln's grief therefore serves to stand in as an examination of most other types of grief as well.

One major quality of grief that the novel explores through Lincoln is the deeply personal nature of grief, which serves to alienate a person during their mourning. It is difficult to find comfort from those who cannot fully grasp the quality of one's grief. Lincoln's grief is shaped by his relationship with Willie, which may only be fully understood by Lincoln and Willie themselves. Thus, Lincoln is portrayed as going through his grieving process alone in the Oak Hill Cemetery. Meanwhile, the deeply personal nature of Lincoln's grief clashes with the highly public nature of his responsibilities. As the President of the United States, Lincoln's grief becomes a point of potential crisis for the country, and he must overcome it as soon as possible in order to return his attention to matters like the Civil War. Ultimately, whether or not these urgent demands factor in to Lincoln's grieving process, the personal nature of his grief helps him out of his grief as much as it appears to have shaped it. Lincoln's fond memories of Willie compel him to honor Willie and move on from the tragedy while still cherishing the good memories of that father-son relationship.

In the end, the novel appears to take an optimistic stance on the nature of grief, as Lincoln is able to overcome his grief, and his grieving process even appears to have made him a stronger and healthier person. Lincoln is able to realize that too much prolonged mourning is unproductive and unhealthy, and so he resolves to not let his sadness overwhelm him indefinitely. This is not shown as callousness or betrayal towards Willie, but simply as the conclusion of a healthy period of mourning. Lincoln takes his time in the Oak Hill Cemetery to reflect upon his relationship with his son and to honor Willie, and one that is completed, he overcomes the paralytic nature fo his grief and moves on with his life and responsibilities.

Relationships

Throughout its exploration of life and death, the novel presents interpersonal relationships as the medium of all real fulfillment and truly important experiences in life. For most inhabitants of the bardo, interpersonal relationships form the figurative tether

that holds them in place and occupies their thoughts and concerns. Hans Vollman wishes to return to his former state so that he may consummate his marriage and continue to enjoy the company of his new wife. Roger Bevins wishes to return so that he may live life to his fullest and form romantic relationships with other men without fearing persecution. Willie Lincoln wishes to return to life to be with his father and his family once again. And then there are many other people in the bardo who have similar family or romantic relationship whose absence troubles them. By juxtaposing all of these various relationships and the fulfillment they provided, the novel seeks to emphasize just how valuable such relationships are, and just how urgently one should cherish them while still alive. The inhabitants of the bardo must be content with their lives that have already concluded, but the reader is still able to make the most of their interpersonal relationships.

Even on a more abstract level, the novel seeks to emphasize the importance of communion and unity among people as a whole. The novel accomplishes this through various conceptual events concerning the metaphysics of the bardo. One example arises when many inhabits of the bardo merge with each other and inhabit Lincoln's form at the same time. When merged together, the people of the bardo temporarily shed their grotesque manifestations and instead manifest simply as themselves. This appears to symbolize the restorative effects of unity and community I times of tragedy or crisis. This idea reappears when Willie passes on to the final stage of the afterlife, where he describes a feeling like shedding his individual identity and becoming part of a larger whole. These metaphysical mechanisms appear to be methods by which the novel highlights the power of unity and interpersonal relationships in life, for they help to give one both peace and fulfillment.

While many of the relationships in the novel vary in type and quality, the potential of these relationships to provide fulfillment is presented as the same. For example, Willie Lincoln and his father had a very loving and fulfilling relationship, while Betsy Baron and Eddie Baron had a very dysfunctional relationship with their own children. However, despite the fact that one of these relationships was far more fulfilling than the others, the Barons' relationship with their kids is still portrayed as having been a possible opportunity for fulfillment. Before the Barons pass on to the final stage of the afterlife, they lament how negligent they were with their own children, and they realize that they missed out on much joy because they wished to focus on their own enjoyment rather than taking good care of their children. Therefore, while the fate of the Barons is a sad one, it still provides valuable lessons.

Morality

The bardo serves as a place for the novel's deceased characters to com to terms with their own deaths, but it also serves as a setting for these characters to explore and expiate the sins and wrongdoings of their lives. The novel uses this metaphysical dynamic to explore the nature of morality, and one character that provides a good example of this phenomenon is the Reverend Everly Thomas. Reverend Thomas is the only character in the bardo who seems aware that he is dead and yet still remains

tethered to the bardo. Thomas takes this to mean there is some sin or wrongdoing for which he has not repented, and thus he must remain in the bardo until he atones for it. Ultimately, when faced with the malevolent and unrepentant souls tasked with trapping Willie in the bardo, Thomas experiences a moment of revelation and recommitment to his ideas of ethics and morality. Reverend Thomas decides that true good intentions are the key to positivity morality. Reverend Thomas appears to be rewarded for this revelation and his subsequent protection of Willie by being allowed to pass on from the bardo.

The narrative also explores fundamental moral quandaries in Lincoln's storyline, as he must not only grapple with his grief for his son, but also make decisions regarding strategy and morality for the war within the United States. Lincoln declared war on the secessionist states of the country in an attempt to preserve the unity of the nation. Then, in 1862, his son died, and the novel uses the grief of this incident to explore the morality of Lincoln's political decisions. When grappling with the grief of the loss of his son, he must attempt to reconcile the pain of this loss with all the pain caused by the casualties of war. Ultimately, Lincoln decides that the war is necessary, because the unity of the country and the abolition of slavery are the only ways to end deep-seated sources of evil and suffering within the country. The novel appears to support this conclusion through its exploration of the trauma experienced by the people in the bardo who were slaves in life. The people of the bardo also find great peace through unity, and this appears to be a comment on the necessity of the country's overall unity.

While the novel may not provide a single moral code by which to live, it does advocate for the necessity of moral resolve as a means of operating in the world. Throughout the novel, characters are rewarded for discovering realistic paths forward and equipping themselves with moral resolutions that are characterized by positive intentions. In the bardo, when characters embrace the facts of their deaths and the substance of their lives, they are allowed to pass on. In addition, characters facing moral quandaries are not necessarily rewarded for figuring out every facet of the problem and coming up with singular solutions, but they are instead rewarded for coming up with positive resolutions under the circumstances and approaching these resolutions with confidence and righteousness. Thus, the novel appears to present morality not as the adherence to a specific moral code, but simply the achievement of one's own well-intentioned conception of morality.

Regret

Through the irrevocability of death, the novel explores the nature of regret, which pertains to all things in life that cannot be changed or readdressed. Every character in the bardo must come to terms with the fact that there are things in their lives that cannot be changed now that those lives have ceased. Whether those regrets pertain to experiences that can never be had, tumultuous relationships that can never be reconciled, or company that can no longer be enjoyed, the characters are forced to come to terms with these losses and accept the fulfillment that their lives did provide them. The novel uses this framework to address the idea that all people deal with

regret, even while they are still alive, and it is necessary to address this regret in healthy and realistic ways. Moreover, it is also important to recognize problems when there are still opportunities to remedy those problems, which the deceased occupants of the bardo are unable to do.

In light of the inevitability of regret in life, the novel advocates for direct approaches when dealing with regrets, such as wholehearted repentance. One significant example of this manifests in the story of Captain William Prince, who Vollman and Bevins witness passing on from the bardo. Captain Prince vocally confesses his transgression against his wife, to whom he was unfaithful. In his confession, Prince demonstrates a profound and heartfelt regret for being unfaithful to his wife, and this repentant spirit helps to elevate the confession and help Captain Prince pass on from the bardo. A good example of a foil to this dynamic would be the spirits that inhabit the malevolent tendrils that attempt to trap Willie. These spirits are from people who transgressed severely in life but regret only that they are being punished. These people have committed terrible atrocities and should experience regret more than anyone else in the bardo, but they are unrepentant, and for that they are punished.

Ultimately, the novel portrays regrets simply as secondary side effects to the more positive aspects of life. The things that the characters regret in their lives could not have become concerns if they had not pursued the things in their lives that truly mattered to them. For example, Vollman could not have regretted the brevity of his marriage if he had not become married and fallen in love in the first place. Bevins could not have regretted being rebuffed by Gilbert if Bevins had not followed his true romantic passions. Willie and Lincoln could not have regretted their separation by death if they had not had such a loving relationship in the first place. In this way, the novel demonstrates how regrets are inevitable if one pursues happiness, but that this happiness outweighs regrets in most or all cases.

Styles

Point of View

The novels main storyline, which concerns the events in bardo and the cemetery, are told from rapidly alternating points of view. Characters from the bardo—such as Hans Vollman, Roger Bevins, Willie Lincoln, and Reverend Thomas—appear to take turns recounting the novel's central narrative in the past tense, as if they are looking back on it from the final stage of the afterlife. The novel marks the various points of view by labeling each discrete section with the name of the character who is recounting it. These chapters resemble a script, although the names are placed at the end of each discrete section rather than at the beginning. This rapidly alternating narrative serves to provide a fuller and more distinct sense of the events in the bardo, giving the reader a look into the bardo as a whole community rather than through one person's experience of it. The occupants of the bardo contrast very strongly with one another in terms of personality and experiences, and their respective background stories are highly important for developing the themes and tone of the novel. Thus, providing many different points of view helps to provide the novel with a deeper sense of both the shared and divergent experiences of the bardo's occupants.

In addition, the novel provides another large set of perspectives in the chapters that are comprised of various historical entries. While some of these entries take the form of secondary sources, meaning the perspective of someone who is looking back on a historical time without having lived through it, other entries are in the form of primary sources, meaning records of people who lived through various historical events. Thus, some of these entries provide distinct individual impressions of events, while other entries take on the more omniscient perspective of history in general. The experiences of people contemporary to Abraham Lincoln explore the immediate emotions and differing opinions that colored the time in which the novel is set. The more historically-focused entries are dedicated to providing more impartial exposition, giving specific and confirmed facts about Lincoln and the state of the country.

Language and Meaning

The tone of the novel frequently shifts between absurdity and poignancy, and while it often focuses on absurd details and uses rather humorous language, the main substance of the novel lies in the exploration of deep and sorrowful themes. In terms of plot and narrative, the novel features many absurd ideas, characters, and linguistic devices. For example, the bardo itself is a fantastical realm inhabited by grotesque beings, but all of these elements are in service of highly earnest themes such as grief and coexistence. The individual stories of the inhabitants of the bardo are often entertaining and sorrowful at the same time, for the language of the novel is often offbeat and humorous, while the actual content of the stories usually includes regret, heartbreak, loss, and death. The novel seems to use an unconventional and humorous

style as a way of intriguing and entertaining the reader, drawing them in to the much heavier and more important themes of the narrative.

Often, the narrative will shun humor entirely so as to give a highly direct and personal account of the novel's more tragic and traumatic aspects. Two examples of this would be the stories of Elise Traynor and Litzie Wright, two young women who suffered terribly in their lives before dying and coming to the bardo. Elise Traynor's description of the debauched and untethered life into which she sank is a poetic but frequently profane description, providing a very shocking narrative effect that draws the reader's attention to the various traumas Elise Traynor experienced. Meanwhile, Litzie Wright, who cannot even speak due to the trauma she suffered at the hands of countless sexual abusers in her life, must have her story told by Francis Hodge. Mrs. Hodge tells Litzie's story in a highly plain and direct manner that carries deep undertones of outrage and fury towards those who harmed Litzie in such a way. The novel also takes on tones of deep and direct melancholy at various times in the novel. This often arises in the thoughts of Abraham Lincoln, whose character arc deals only with Lincoln's grief over his son and the grave duties Lincoln must attend to as President.

Structure

Although the novel is interspersed with chapters of historical entries and background information, the main storyline of the novel follows a linear structure and covers the course of one night. Said main narrative concerns Willie Lincoln's first (and only) night in the bardo. This narrative's only setting is the Oak Hill Cemetery, although the deceased characters inhabit the cemetery on the plane of existence that is the bardo, while the living characters inhabit it in the normal plane of existence. The narrative spans from Willie Lincoln's arrival in the bardo to shortly after he passes on the to final stage of the afterlife. Although the narrative switches perspective frequently, it does not skip ahead in time. Instead, it relates events strictly in the sequence in which they occur, following whichever characters are the focus of the action at each given time. The fact that this narrative is interspersed with so many chapters of historical entries often makes the narrative seem larger in scope than it is, but it really only covers the period of Abraham Lincoln's single nighttime visit to the Oak Hill Cemetery. The only nonlinear aspect of this narrative comes in the form of personal anecdotes told by the various inhabitants of the bardo. This includes anecdotes that the people of the bardo tell about their lives, as well as the flashback Reverend Thomas experiences regarding his arrival to the bardo.

In addition to the main narrative, the novel regularly features chapters told through the use of historical entries, both real and invented. These chapters develop background information and events that occurred prior to Willie's death. These chapters provide information about the circumstances of Willie's death, the events leading up to it, Willie's relationship with his father, the political state of the country, people's impressions of Abraham Lincoln, the horrors of the Civil War, and other various pieces of pertinent historical information. Although the historical sources are excerpted in rapid succession, with only brief passages from each source at any particular time, they are ordered in such a way as to develop a specific subject at any given point. They even help to

simulate scenes at times, such as when they describe the state dinner organized by the Lincolns. They give details about the dinner in such a way as to simulate a scene description, placing the reader directly in the midst of that event.

Quotes

What a frustration! When, now, would I know the full pleasures of the marriage-bed?
-- Hans Vollman (chapter 1)

Importance: In this passage, Hans Vollman laments the fact that his new marriage has not yet been consummated. Because of this regret, he has forced himself into a state of denial, believing he is merely sick and not dead. This state of regret and denial is what keeps Vollman stuck in the bardo, and this particular case helps to establish the dynamic affecting all occupants of the bardo.

I am waiting to be discovered…so that I may be revived, and rise…and begin to live!...Having come so close to losing everything, I am freed now of all fear, hesitation, and timidity.
-- Roger Bevins (chapter 9)

Importance: This quotation functions similarly to the above quotation, although this quotation concerns Roger Bevins. Bevins regrets his decision to kill himself, and he is thus in a state of denial about his death. This quotation has an added dimension of sadness and irony in Bevins' resolution to truly begin living his life to its fullest extent, only to eventually realize the impossibility of this.

I have thought long and hard on what might have caused me to merit that terrible punishment. I do not know.
-- Reverend Everly Thomas (chapter 61)

Importance: This quotation concerns the peculiar case of Reverend Everly Thomas, who remains stuck in the bardo despite realizing and accepting that he has died. He fears that he is stuck in the bardo due to some unrealized sin, as articulated in this quotation, and this dynamic helps to shape and define the entirety of Thomas' character arc. Thomas seems to be a thoroughly moral and just man, but he remains in the bardo for a reason that is at first a mystery.

To whom do you speak? Who is hearing you? To whom do you listen?...Here I am. I am here. Am I not?
-- Hans Vollman (chapter 29)

Importance: Variations of this quotation are repeated multiple times throughout the novel by various characters. These ideas represent a distinct facet of the denial of the characters who remain in the bardo. Because they are still able to sense things and move about, they do not believe themselves to be truly dead. This idea helps to inform the reader's understanding of the mental and metaphysical nature of these characters' circumstances.

Hence is murder anathema. God forbid I should ever commit such a grievous—
-- Abraham Lincoln (chapter 46)

Importance: This thought by Lincoln helps to develop and illustrate one of his central quandaries in the novel. Lincoln grieves deeply for the death of his son, Willie, and yet he is in the midst of civil war with an extremely high, ever-rising death toll. This creates a rich thematic complication between Lincoln's personal experience of the world and his sense of his larger and more abstract duties.

Two passing temporarinesses developed feelings for one another. Two puffs of smoke became mutually fond.
-- Abraham Lincoln (chapter 74)

Importance: This quotation helps to develop the idea of grief as it is presented and explored in the book. The novel emphasizes the transience of life and individual lives, and it confronts the idea that deep emotional attachments form between and remain valuable in spite of this fact. In this passage, Lincoln simultaneously laments this fact and attempts to come to terms with it.

To be grouped with these, accepting one's sins so passively, even proudly, with no trace of repentance?...Perhaps, I thought, this is faith: to believe our God ever receptive to the smallest good intention.
-- Reverend Everly Thomas (chapter 81)

Importance: This quotation represents a pivotal moment for Reverend Thomas. Faced with the malevolent entities of unrepentant sinners, he is suddenly struck with a clear notion of what it means to be virtuous. He thus decides that the true key to morality is simply to pursuing good intentions and repentance for the harm one caused. This revelation and Thomas' subsequent actions to protect Willie appear to result in Thomas' final release from the bardo.

Everyone! Why stay? There's nothing to it. We're done. Don't you see?
-- Willie Lincoln (chapter 91)

Importance: Willie's realization that he and the other occupants of the bardo are dead represents a major turning point in the narrative. Willie's proclamation that they are all dead helps many people in the bardo accept their deaths and move to next stage of the afterlife. It even eventually breaks through the strong denial of Hans Vollman and Roger Bevins. This quotation represents the thoroughness of Willie's realization and new resolution.

I will go on. I will. With God's help. Though it seems killing must go hard against the will of God. Where might God stand on this. He has shown us. He could stop it. But has not.
-- Abraham Lincoln (chapter 95)

Importance: This quotation signifies Lincoln's resolution to proceed with the war despite the horrors of death and violence. Lincoln comes to this conclusion after dealing with his grief for his son and reaffirming his belief in the necessity of such violence to serve higher ideals and prevent further violence. The harsh ways in which Lincoln words these

convictions, such as above, seems to leaves the morality of his decision open to further interpretation, but his argument is aided by the book's attention to the idea of slavery and the moral necessity of ending slavery in America.

What a thrill it was! To be doing what I wished. Without having been ordered to do so, without having sought anyone's permission.
-- Thomas Havens (chapter 96)

Importance: Thomas Havens earlier expresses his contentment to serve as a slave, and he claims to have practiced silencing his own desires. However, he admits that he still carries the desire for freedom inherent to all people. Once Havens embraces the idea of personal freedom in the afterlife, he experiences a tremendous amount of fulfillment, such as he articulates in this quotation. This change provides the climactic turning point in his character arc.

No. They was our kids. We f—ed it up.
-- Betsy Baron, ch 101, pg 324 (chapter 101)

Importance: Betsy and Eddie Baron's containment in the bardo mostly revolves around their inability to repent for their failings as parents to their children. Eventually, towards the end of the novel, Betsy is able to come to terms with these failings, leaving Eddie no choice but to do the same, following his wife into the next stage of the afterlife to avoid being alone. The blunt nature of this repentance, typical to the Barons, is reflected in the above quotation.

We are sorry, I shouted in. Sorry that we did not do more to convince you to go, back when you still had the chance.
-- Hans Vollman (chapter 103)

Importance: This quotation signifies both Vollman and Blevins' final reckoning with their failure to aid the young Elise Traynor in the bardo. Vollman and Blevins' caring relationship with Willie largely functions as a form of repentance for their failure to help remove Elise from the bardo in time to save her. Vollman and Blevins' final apology to Elise, which includes statements like the above quotation, helps to develop and solidify this parallel.