

Orphan Train Study Guide

Orphan Train by Christina Baker Kline

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Plot Summary

Orphan Train is a young adult / historical fiction novel about the relationship between seventeen year-old Molly Ayer and ninety-one year-old Vivian Daly who, as the result of spending time together and sharing their experiences, form a bond, learn from each other, and change in significant ways.

Molly is a troubled foster child in Maine who is about to “age out” of the system (that is, she's becoming too old for the system to continue accommodating). She was put into the system after her father died in a car accident and her mother turned to drugs. Molly, of Penobscot Indian descent, lives with spiteful Dina and timid Ralph, Dina keeping her around in order to keep receiving the government payments she receives for foster parenting. One day, Molly steals a book. As punishment, she is sentenced to perform fifty hours of community service. Molly's boyfriend Jack comes up with a plan for filling those hours: Jack's mother, Terry, is the housekeeper for elderly Vivian, who lives in a large and lonely house and whose attic needs cleaning. Seeing the situation as an opportunity for relatively light work, Molly agrees to clean out and organize the attic.

As the story of Molly's relationship with Vivian develops in the present day, its events are paralleled with / echoed by the story of Vivian's experiences in Depression-era Minnesota. That story begins with Vivian's Irish family coming to New York through Ellis Island. While struggling to make ends meet, a fire kills everyone else in the family, leaving Vivian an orphan. As a result, Vivian is sent on an “orphan train” in the hope that somewhere, she will find a family to take her in. While on the train with several other orphans in similar circumstances, she meets an older boy, Dutchy. They develop a friendship and promise to find each other in the future. Vivian is eventually placed with the cruel Mrs. Byrne, who runs a clothing shop where Vivian makes her way sewing clothes. This situation comes to an end with the stock market crash of 1929 in which Mrs. Byrne and her husband lose their wealth. Vivian is next placed with the poor, filthy, and despicable Grote family. Mrs. Grote is a shut-in who hardly gets out of bed, and Mr. Grote is a do-nothing. Vivian's time with the Grotes ends when Mr. Grote attempts to rape her. Mrs. Grote blames Vivian for the incident and kicks her out into the cold. Rescued by her teacher, Miss Larsen, Vivian is placed first with the kindly Mrs. Murphy, and finally with Mr. and Mrs. Nielsen, who own a general store and who allow Vivian to introduce several new innovations.

Several years later, Vivian has a chance reunion with Dutchy. Shortly after they fall in love and get married, Dutchy is drafted into World War II where he dies on the Pacific Front. Vivian has Dutchy's baby but is too emotionally devastated to care for it, so she gives it up for adoption, keeping the story and its accompanying shame secret throughout the subsequent decades of her life. Meanwhile, Vivian marries Dutchy's best friend from the army, Jim Daly, and makes a comfortable life for herself.

This narrative unfolds at the same time as the present day story develops, describing how Molly goes through some difficulties of her own, but at the same time develops a connection with Vivian that gives her support, refuge, and comfort. When she is kicked



out of her foster home by the cruel Dina, Molly is taken in by Vivian, who eventually allows Molly to interview her as part of her work on an American history assignment for school. Molly also introduces Vivian to the Internet and encourages her to seek out her long-lost daughter. At the end of the novel, Vivian has an in-person encounter with that daughter, Sarah Dunnell, now sixty-nine and a musician, just like Dutchy. That encounter, the narrative suggests, would never have taken place if Vivian and Molly, initially wary of other people in general and of each other in particular, had not let down their defenses and been vulnerable with themselves and each other.



Pages 1-50

Summary

Orphan Train by Christian Baker Kline is the story of a surprising friendship between two women -- troubled seventeen year-old foster kid Molly Ayer and ninety-one year-old Vivian Daly. Like Molly, Vivian was orphaned as a young child. When Molly comes to Vivian's house to organize Vivian's attic as part of community service to avoid juvenile prison, Vivian helps Molly to understand life and to cope with her difficulties.

In a brief prologue, Vivian explains that she believes in ghosts, and that the spirits of the past are always around her. She explains that she suffered the deaths of many friends and loved ones in her life, and it is better to believe in ghosts than to believe those people are gone forever.

The main body of the narrative begins in Spruce Harbor, Maine in 2011, where Molly lives with foster parents Dina and Ralph. As punishment for attempting to steal a book (a copy of Jane Eyre), Molly has been sentenced to fifty hours of community service. When she overhears Dina complain that she (Molly) is untrustworthy, Molly packs her things to leave, in spite of having only one alternative: juvenile hall. Things change, however, when Molly talks on the phone with her boyfriend Jack. It turns out that Jack's mother, a housekeeper, has a client who needs her attic cleaned out and organized. This, Jack says, could count as Molly's community service. Molly admits she is a neat freak, and that because the job seems relatively easy, the idea appeals to her.

Jack drives Molly to Vivian's stately home. In contrast to her usual Goth-style clothing, Molly is made up nicely and is wearing a nice dress. At the house, Molly meets Jack's mom, Terry, who then introduces Molly to Vivian, who immediately detects that Molly doesn't usually wear dresses. During their initial conversation, Molly explains her past to Vivian, revealing that her father died in a car accident and her despondent, drug-addicted mother ended up in jail a year later. In her turn, Vivian reveals that she also seen tragedy in her life, but doesn't go into detail, instead asking Molly when she'd like to begin work. She also begins telling Molly the story of her life. She begins with her early childhood in Ireland and her family's immigration to America in the 1920s when she was seven, traveling through Ellis Island and arriving in New York City. As they were getting settled, Vivian says, her family experienced racism, but her father got a job as a dishwasher through a family contact, and the family was able to get a small apartment. Her family, Vivian adds, believed in the American dream and was upbeat about the future. Tragedy strikes, however, when a fire breaks out in the family's apartment about two years after they arrive. The fire, Vivian says, was the result of cramped conditions and inadequate safety relating to tenement housing at the time. Vivian's family dies in the fire, leaving Vivian traumatized by its sounds, smells and sights, as well as by the loss of her parents and siblings.



Initially, the orphaned Vivian is sent to live with Mr. and Mrs. Schatzman, who soon send her off to Children's Aid. There, Vivian is told that she must change her Irish name, "Niamh Power", so as not to appear too Irish for prospective foster parents. Meanwhile, she is taken in by stern social worker Mrs. Scatcherd and, along with many other orphaned children, is placed on an "orphan train" bound for the country in search of parents for the children. At the beginning of the journey, Vivian is handed a toddler named Carmine to look after. She comes to like him, as he reminds her of her now-dead sister Maisie.

On the orphan train, a group of boys pulls pranks and causes trouble, one of them wondering aloud whether the children are worse off with the social workers than on the street. As punishment, the boy is sent to sit with Vivian instead of with his friends. The twelve-year-old boy (Dutchy) tells Vivian she will have difficulty being chosen by a family because her red hair is undesirable. Vivian wonders how they will fare in their new home, and the boy states that only God knows.

At a temporary stop in Chicago, the children are instructed to stay on the train platform, but Vivian follows Dutchy into the station itself, which is full of people. The children are grabbed by policemen, with the citizens regarding them as criminals. Mrs. Scatcherd convinces the policemen to let the children go, but later punishes Dutchy. As the journey continues, and on the eve of meeting prospective families for the first time, all the children are nervous and uncertain.

In the present, Molly expresses muted excitement to boyfriend Jack about working for Vivian. Later, Molly has dinner with Dina and Ralph, narration revealing Molly's resentment of what she sees as Dina's hypocrisy - professing to be a compassionate Christian but nevertheless engaging in constant nagging and verbal abuse. Narration also reveals that Molly has been through much in her time as a foster child, including exchanging her virginity for a tattoo at the age of sixteen.

Analysis

The Prologue functions on a number of levels. First, its language and style establish a wistful, melancholy tone while simultaneously introducing one of the novel's major themes, that of the past's powerful influence on the present. Here the theme is represented through the idea of ghosts, insofar that the "ghosts" of the past haunt the present and never truly leave. Later in the narrative, that theme also plays out in terms of action - specifically, the various revelations of how the past experiences of both Molly and Vivian affect their attitudes, actions, and relationships in the present. Finally, the prologue also suggests that Vivian's particular perspective on the past will play a significant role in the development of the story, and serves as foreshadowing of the various difficulties (i.e. deaths and losses) experienced by Vivian and, to a lesser degree, by Molly.

The novel's thematic consideration of the relationship between past and present also manifests in how the story proper is actually told when it begins following the prologue.



The book continually shifts perspectives and time periods between 1929 (Vivian's perspective) and 2011 (which is primarily told through Molly's eyes). In other words, and in terms of both style and substance, the narrative makes clear that history repeats itself, with Vivian having struggled (in the past) through many of the same issues that Molly does (in the present). For example, both women are orphans, both had to deal with death at a very young age, and both, as the narrative eventually reveals, have been moved from foster home to foster home, where both have felt neglected and unloved. The narrative also makes clear that as a result of these experiences, Molly and Vivian both have developed a "shield" of sorts for dealing with people. In Molly's case she is rude, irreverent, and standoffish, her tough upbringing having taught her that if she lets someone in to her life emotionally, they may hurt her. The shield Molly has developed is the obstacle that the character must overcome, the struggle to do so defining "arc" or journey of transformation the character undergoes over the course of the story. All that said, at this point in the book, Vivian and Molly have not yet interacted much in 2011, but the reader senses that the past will "merge" with the present as the two storylines converge and/or interact - in other words, there is the strong sense that in the same way as Vivian's past strongly informs her own present, that past will also affect Molly's present, and perhaps change her. That change is foreshadowed in Molly's change of clothing: even before she and Vivian actually meet, the narrative portrays Molly as being transformed by their relationship.

Other important elements include the references to Dutchy (whose appearance here foreshadows his important appearances later in the narrative), and the sense of historical accuracy in Vivian's story, specifically the sense that the descriptions of Vivian's living conditions depict circumstances as they really were. Here it's also important to note that there was a real orphan train that ferried orphans to prospective new homes, and the stock market crash of 1929 (an important event in the following section) actually happened. In other words, there is the sense that "Orphan Train" is of interest as historical fiction: the author has clearly researched real events and settings and then fictionalized those events into a compelling narrative while still retaining much of the flavor and authenticity of the historical happenings.

Finally, the references in this section to the classic novel "Jane Eyre" can be seen as having several important parallels to the current narrative. Similar parallels can be found in relation to the introduction of a second classic novel "Anne of Green Gables", in the following section. For commentary on both novels, and their relationship to THIS novel, see "Analysis - Section 2, p. 51-104)".

Discussion Question 1

Contrast what Vivian and her family thought America would be like versus what they found living in America was actually like. What accounts for the discrepancy?



Discussion Question 2

Why does Molly wear “Goth” clothing and behave in eccentric or rude ways? How have Molly’s external appearance and behavior helped her cope with her difficult childhood?

Discussion Question 3

Why do you think Dutchy wonders whether the orphans might be better off living on the streets than riding on the orphan train? What is it, do you think, about the latter experience that might make life on the streets more appealing?

Vocabulary

incarnations, conventionality, monogrammed, divining, monolith, meticulous, dowager, interrogated, cacophony, incessant, superlatives, imperative, pinafores, peculiar, milquetoast, chaperones, litany, entreaties, appellation, impeccable



Pages 51-104

Summary

On Molly's first official day of work, housekeeper Terry leads her up to the attic, which is large and full of furniture, clothes, and boxes full of documents and keepsakes. Molly tries to look on the bright side, but her pessimism and outspoken nature cause her to bite her tongue a couple of times. With Vivian looking over her shoulder, Molly opens a box labeled "1929-1930". This leads to another shift in the narrative, as the reader is taken back to 1929 and Vivian's continuation of her life story.

On the orphan train, with the children about to be presented to prospective parents, Mrs. Scatcherd prepares them to look and act their best. Dutchy says he wants to find Vivian again after they've been placed with parents, leading them into a conversation about whether they believe in fate. Vivian says she does. Shortly afterwards, at the train's first stop in Minneapolis, the orphans are paraded in front of several sets of prospective parents. A young couple takes baby Carmine from Vivian's arms, and she has difficulty letting him go. Meanwhile, a pair of farmers adopts Dutchy for work as a hay baler, much as Dutchy expected. No one adopts Vivian and she is scared, but the train will be making another stop down the line. Vivian and Dutchy part, promising they will try to find each other in a few years.

Later, in Albans, Minnesota, Vivian is adopted by Mr. and Mrs. Byrne, who manufacture women's clothing. He is bubbly and energetic; she is taciturn and stern. They take her not because they want to be parents, but because they need a girl who can sew. Vivian is given the name "Dorothy" (without approval or input) and given duties to perform each day. She is then introduced to five women who work in the Byrne home on the clothing business. Vivian is supervised by Mary, who is rude and resentful of Vivian's presence, belittles her sewing skills, and forces Vivian to do the "grunt" work like sweep up and collect stray pins. When Vivian takes exception and talks back to Mary, she causes a commotion and faces discipline from the stern Mrs. Byrne. Mary's one ally is Fanny, an older worker who watches over the other girls.

Back in 2011, Molly continues cleaning out the attic with Vivian watching over her. Vivian doesn't want to throw anything away, so it's become more of an organizing job. Vivian presses Molly about her mom (who is in prison) and whether she'd like to reconnect with her. When Molly says no, Vivian senses an anger in her, the narrative indicating that both Vivian and Molly are stubborn and outspoken. Meanwhile, Vivian guesses correctly that Molly likes to read and gives her an old book (Anne of Green Gables) as a gift, which touches Molly, to her surprise. The next day, while Vivian is still sleeping, Molly (who is already almost half done her fifty mandatory hours) shows up early. Terry reprimands her for showing up unannounced, and advises Molly to be harsher with Vivian when it comes to throwing out old things: Vivian, in Terry's opinion, must learn to let some of the past go. To pass the time, Molly reads Anne of Green



Gables, and starts getting into it. When Vivian shows up, she praises Molly for being an early bird, and announces that she's ready to get back to working in the attic.

Back in 1929, Vivian is managing to survive her time at the Byrnes, but becomes angry and disappointed when Mrs. Byrne announces that she (Vivian) will not be returning to school this year. In the clothing shop, Mary continues to harass and scold Vivian, who is comforted by Fanny's revelation that Mary's animosity stems from fear that Vivian will take her job some day.

Over time, Vivian works hard and continues to improve in her sewing skills. One day, Mrs. Byrne sends her to town for an errand, and because Vivian doesn't know the way, Fanny is allowed to go with her. Fanny gives Vivian the treat of penny candy, which tastes delicious to her. Another day, Mrs. Byrne goes with Vivian to the fabric shop and has Vivian choose a few patterns to make new dresses for herself, also buying her a wool coat and a couple of sweaters. Later, Mrs. Byrne toys with the idea of sending Vivian back to Children's Aid because of Mary's complaints, but Mr. Byrne convinces her to let Vivian stay. When Mrs. Byrne is not around, Mr. Byrne tells the homesick Vivian stories about Ireland (he is Irish-Catholic, and Mrs. Byrne is not). Mr. Byrne also convinces Mrs. Byrne to let Vivian keep her claddagh cross, the one memento of her family life that she has left.

Analysis

The primary element to note in this section is how its action deepens and defines the relationship between Molly and Vivian as they begin the attic cleaning in earnest. It becomes clear that Vivian is interested in the process not necessarily to order and prune her possessions, but to show kindness toward Molly. For her part, Molly (with her lifetime of personal disappointments) is skeptical of Vivian and her motives and just wishes to finish her hours and be rid of the assignment, but over time, that attitude changes.

One of the triggers for the change is Vivian's inquiry about Molly's mother, which makes Molly realize that Vivian is the first person to ever ask about her in a deep and introspective way, and which, to Molly's surprise, makes her feel more positively towards Vivian. An even stronger trigger for Molly's transformation is Vivian gift of "Anne of Green Gables". Narration reveals that Molly while thinks the gift is a worthless old trinket of no consequence, she feels touched and she doesn't know why. There is the sense here that Vivian is beginning to break down Molly's defenses, that while Molly has made a habit of stifling emotions and protecting herself, she is starting to open up. The gift is also significant on another level, the same level as Molly's attempting to steal "Jane Eyre" in Section 1 - specifically, the ways in which the experiences and circumstances of both title characters (Anne and Jane) parallel those of Vivian and Molly.

Both "Anne of Green Gables" and "Jane Eyre" are concerned with the experiences of orphaned girls / young women. Jane, like Vivian and Molly, is moved from difficult



situation to difficult situation, eventually becoming happy as an adult. Anne's situation is somewhat different, in that she only moves into one adoptive home, but the circumstances are difficult for her as well, even though they, like Jane's, Molly's, and Vivian's, also resolve into something more positive. Another parallel is more specific to "Anne ...", specifically the fact that both Anne and Vivian have red hair, and for that reason are viewed as "undesirable". Finally, and perhaps most importantly, both Anne and Jane are portrayed in their respective novels as having the kind of independent spirit and courage that defines both Molly and Vivian in their respective stories. In this context, the author's choices in introducing these parallels can also be seen as exploring the novel's thematic interest in the relationship between past and present - that is, the implied similarities between the present novel and other stories either decades old, in the case of "Anne ..." or centuries old, in the case of "Jane ...". It could be argued, in fact, that the stories of Vivian and Molly can, on another level, be seen as archetypal, or representative of universal situations, experiences, and values, such as loneliness, the struggle to maintain identity, and the power of hope. One last point about the appearance in this section of "Anne ...": it foreshadows the novel's appearance in the next section (i.e. in the past) and the important role it comes to play in Vivian's later life.

Meanwhile, other important elements include the vivid portrait of the cruelty with which the orphans are treated as they are placed in a line at the train station and evaluated like livestock. The narrative here, evocative of the experience of slaves at similar "markets", is a reminder that orphans (and human life in general) were held in quite low regard until only very recently. The fact that the author is drawing upon real history for her fiction only increases the shock in the modern reader at this behavior. Vivian's difficult existence at the Brynes further reinforces this. Then there is the ongoing development of Vivian's identity crisis. Before the fire that killed her family, she had a strong, safe identity as an Irish girl named Niamh with a family who loved her. While the fire robbed her of her loved ones, its consequences and aftermath robbed her of that identity, which is forced into the background as she is first adopted a source of free labor (in this section) and later adopted into other circumstances. This identity crisis perhaps manifests most vividly in the changes to her name, starting with Mrs. Scatcherd's insistence (in Section 1) that she rename herself and the Brynes rechristening of her as "Dorothy" in this section. Here it's important to note while her name is changed, her most precious possession - the claddagh cross - is also threatened, but its presence in her life, its value as a powerful and tangible reminder of her core identity, is preserved. In short, and in these particular situations, the author is once again asserting the book's thematic consideration of the connection between past and present.

Discussion Question 1

Discuss the different reasons why foster parents wished to adopt the orphans of Children's Aid. How are these attitudes different (or the same) as modern attitudes about foster parenthood?



Discussion Question 2

As this point in the story, what is your prediction for how Molly's attitude will change with respect to Vivian and cleaning out the attic? What clues in the story thus far support your prediction?

Discussion Question 3

Compare and contrast the relationship Vivian/Dorothy has with Mrs. Byrne with the one she has with Mr. Byrne. What accounts for any differences?

Vocabulary

tendrils, furrowed, slovenly, majestic, beseech, destitution, disembark, circumspect, surrogate, mannequin, bodice, lavatory, contemplate, ravenous, austere, effervescent, nonchalantly, non sequitur, enrichment, pilfer



Pages 105-152

Summary

Mrs. Byrne tells all the seamstresses about a crash in the stock market that has made it difficult for her and her husband to feed her own family, let alone pay the workers. Over the following weeks, Mrs. Byrne falls apart emotionally and physically, and Vivian loses a lot of weight from not eating. The seamstresses are dismissed one at a time until only Fanny and Vivian are left. At that point, the Byrnes are visited by Mr. Sorenson, a man from the Children's Aid Society. Mrs. Byrne accuses Vivian of eating too much and being a bad child, but it's clear she has to give Vivian up because she can't afford her. Vivian has an emotional goodbye with Fanny, then Mr. Sorenson takes her to a country farm where another family, the Grotes, has expressed the need for a young girl to take care of a new baby. Mr. and Mrs. Grote agree to take Vivian on and send her to school in exchange for Vivian helping out with the new baby, Nettie.

The Grote house is barely more than a shack, unkempt and filthy. Mrs. Grote is similarly filthy, apparently quite depressed and sleeping all the time, while Mr. Grote is convinced he doesn't need to work and can simply live off the land, making food from skinning squirrels and other methods that make Vivian squirm. She is greatly relieved to go to her first day of school, a one-room schoolhouse where she meets her teacher, Miss Larsen, who assesses Vivian's reading level and gives her the book "Anne of Green Gables" to read. As the weeks pass, Vivian comes to love school, particularly when Miss Larsen remembers Vivian's birthday and has the class sing "Happy Birthday." Vivian cries at the thought that someone actually remembered her birthday.

In 2011, Molly confesses to her social worker (Lori) that her time with Vivian isn't all that bad, commenting that Vivian is a "cool lady." Lori says that Molly's SAT scores and GPA are good, and that Molly should apply to college, but Molly hasn't thought much about it. Lori also notices that Molly has taken out her nose ring. Meanwhile, Molly's foster mother (Dina) discovers that Terry is Vivian's housekeeper, reveals that she and Terry used to go to high school together, and makes racist comments that tie Terry's job to her Hispanic heritage. Molly becomes angry, but manages to keep her cool.

A short time afterwards, Molly's American History class starts a unit on Native Americans. Her assignment is to interview someone who has taken a "portage," a word borrowed from the Wabanaki Indians which means a literal or metaphorical journey. In class, Molly learns some truths about Native Americans that contradict stories she'd previously been told, stories riddled with stereotypes and invented histories. These truths include the facts that Native Americans were not "primitive savages" but were in fact highly evolved / civilized, and that many Indians died from disease and extermination, as opposed to what traditional history says were colonial counter-attacks in response to unprovoked Native attacks and pillaging. These discoveries enrage Molly, who is descended from Native Americans. Molly also remembers her eighth birthday, when her father came late and gave her three jewelry cards for a gift. They



bear Indian symbols, her father explaining that each one is meant to protect her. Two weeks later, narration reveals, her father died in a car accident. Molly now keeps these three charms on a necklace. One of them, which portrays the image of a turtle, is particularly important to her.

In 1930, Mr. Grote has inappropriate sexual conversations with Vivian. At around the same time, the family comes down with head lice, and Mrs. Grote angrily accuses Vivian of bringing the parasites into the house. The whole family cuts their hair off, including Vivian. Vivian feels miserable and wants desperately to escape her home life. This leads to a deterioration in her schoolwork, and Miss Larsen gently asks if anything is wrong at home. Vivian says everything's fine. One night, Mr. Grote sexually molests Vivian in spite of her screams and struggles to escape. Mrs. Grote catches the two of them together, and she puts the blame for the event on Vivian, throwing Vivian's suitcase at her and ordering her to leave the house. In the dead of winter, Vivian leaves the house forever, abandoning most of her possessions.

Analysis

The first point to note about this section is its emphasis on / extensive incorporation of the “historical” part of historical fiction. The author weaves real-world events such as the stock market crash of 1929 and the Great Depression into Vivian's narrative, while in the 2011 narrative, an American history assignment provides the author the opportunity to share real-world knowledge about several tribes of Native Americans. In more specific terms, the Vivian narrative shows just how badly poor families had it during the depression as her foster parent, the despicable Mr. Grote, has to scrounge off the land in order to just barely feed his family. At the same time, the Molly narrative vividly portrays not only the reality of the American Indian experience, but also how that reality was (and continues to be) corrupted by white interpretations of history.

Also in this section, the parallels between 2011 and the early 1930s, between the experiences of Vivian as a young girl and Molly as a young woman, become even more apparent. They both come from similarly poor backgrounds, they both were orphaned at a young age, they both experienced significant birthdays, and they both were bounced around between different foster families which did not really want them. These parallels suggest that Vivian's value to Molly is to demonstrate that Molly is not alone in her struggle for acceptance and identity, even though at times it may feel that way: like the turtle symbol on the card left to her by her father, Molly has walled herself off from the world, but through Vivian, she has begun to open up and let someone in.

Meanwhile, the harrowing ordeal Vivian has with Mr. and Mrs. Grote causes her to grow up and “become a woman” too rapidly, and she is the worse for it. She is forced to deal with hunger, with child-rearing, with dire poverty, and both Mr. and Mrs. Grote provide an extremely distasteful introduction to sexuality at a time when Vivian is poised to blossom into puberty. The intensity of this experience is vividly revealed through Vivian's recollections, which are specific and detailed. Here it's important to note that an explicit molestation scene such as the one here is a bold and potentially controversial choice for



a book which is ostensibly for teenage girls. On the other hand, the unflinching portrayal of this incident is an example of how "Orphan Train" also functions as a "social issues" book, tackling tough issues the young reader might be experiencing like foster care, extreme poverty, racism, and sexual abuse. It could be argued that in exploring/describing such situations, the book is doing what Vivian does for Molly, showing a young reader (as Vivian shows Molly) that she is not alone, and that there is light at the end of the proverbial tunnel. For further consideration of this aspect of the book, see "Themes - Tackling the Tough Stuff".

It's also important to note the reappearance here of "Anne of Green Gables". Miss Larsen's selection of the book, which she probably knows is the story of an orphaned, red-headed girl, suggests that she is particularly sensitive to Vivian's situation (i.e. also being an orphaned, red-headed girl). This suggestion reinforced by the fact that Miss Larsen also remembers Vivian's birthday. The book's appearance here foreshadows its later appearances in the narrative, and at this point, the reader might reasonably deduce that the copy of the book here is, in fact, the copy that Vivian gave to Molly in Section 2.

Finally, it becomes clear at this point in the book that Molly's assignment – to interview someone about their life's journey – is the pretext for Vivian sharing her story in the first-person narrative sections of the book. This helps to explain the author's choice of first-person perspective for these sections, the idea being to communicate to the reader that the sections set in the past are, in fact, Vivian is telling her story directly to Molly for the purposes of the school assignment.

Discussion Question 1

In what ways has Molly changed by this point in the book in comparison to the person she was at the beginning of the book? Cite specific examples.

Discussion Question 2

What seem to be the parallels between Molly's present day experiences and what she learns were the experience of American Indians in the past?

Discussion Question 3

What exactly is wrong with Mrs. Grote is never fully specified. What are some theories to explain why she behaves the way she does? Why does she refuse to get out of bed or take care of herself? And why does she blame Vivian – and not Mr. Grote – for both the head lice and for Vivian's sexual molestation?

Vocabulary

haggard, stricken, hearsay, upholstered, yonder, mutton, hotchpotch, qualms, ornate, incentive, confederacy, contemporaneous, gleaned, foraging, wigwam, emanating, tarnished, impervious, remnant, vagrant



Pages 153-212

Summary

After being thrown out of the Grotes' home, Vivian walks four miles in the cold and snow to the schoolhouse. In conversation with Miss Larsen, Vivian reveals her squalid living conditions and Mr. Grote's sexual molestation, asking she can live with the teacher. Miss Larsen reluctantly refuses as she lives in a boardinghouse which does not allow children. Nevertheless, she promises to help Vivian find a new home. Later, Mr. Sorenson, the Children's Aid worker, arrives and listens to Vivian's tale, but is unconvinced and believes Vivian might be exaggerating and overdramatizing. When Miss Larsen supports Vivian, Mr. Sorenson says he will make inquiries on a new home for her. In the meantime, Miss Larsen takes Vivian to a temporary home, Mrs. Murphy's boardinghouse, where she (Miss Larsen) lives. Mrs. Murphy, an energetic Irishwoman, takes an instant liking to Vivian and introduces her to the residents as Niamh, which is her real Irish name. The boardinghouse has plenty of food, a bathtub, and is warm – the opposite of what Vivian is used too. She loves it, but soon comes down with pneumonia. Mrs. Murphy personally nurses Vivian back to health, and after a week her fever breaks. During her recovery, Vivian's greatest fear is that soon she will taken away from all of this.

In 2011, Molly is enjoying spending time with Vivian and listening to all of her stories as part of the “portage” assignment. In turn, Vivian is having a catharsis (emotional release) as a result of telling the stories, the narrative revealing she had never really told anyone of her difficult childhood before. Molly begins to understand her own reticence to talk to people and open up. Soon afterwards in history class, the class discusses whether the Native Americans were victims or whether there are simply winners and losers in history. Molly defends the Native American side, revealing she is a Penobscot Indian. Back at home, Molly gets into an argument with boyfriend Jack about how much time she spends at Vivian's and how little progress they're making in cleaning out the attic. Later, inspired by Vivian's story, Molly goes to the library and looks up records for Molly's family. After hours of searching, she learns that Maisie – Vivian's younger sister who was assumed lost in the fire – actually survived and went on to have several children and grandchildren. Molly then discovers Maisie's obituary – she died at age eighty-three, just five months before. Molly doesn't know how she will tell Vivian the news.

Back in 1930, Vivian enjoys living at the boardinghouse, but inevitably Mr. Sorenson arrives to deliver the bad news: no one he knows is looking for a child, so it's probably back to New York on the orphan train with her. But Mrs. Murphy has a back-up plan. She has spoken with Mr. and Mrs. Nielsen, who own the general store. Their daughter died, she says, and they are looking for help. Some time later, Mr. and Mrs. Nielsen arrive to meet Vivian, who is dressed up prettily and has rehearsed what to say and how to act. The Niensens agree to take her and have her work in the store after school for an hourly wage. Vivian doesn't wish to leave the boardinghouse and feels no connection to



the Niensens, but realizes she has to do what she must in order to survive. Before she leaves for the Niensens, Miss Larsen gives Vivian the school copy of *Anne of Green Gables* to keep.

Life at the upper-class Niensens' home is comfortable and orderly. Vivian even enjoys the Lutheran services they attend, even though she was brought up Catholic. One day, the Niensens express their interest in formally adopting her, and they ask her to change her name from Niamh to Vivian, the name of their dead daughter who died from diphtheria. She agrees to take on the name, though she feels no familial love for them. It is more like a contract to her. Meanwhile, in a chance meeting in the general store, Vivian meets Mr. Byrne, who reveals that Mrs. Byrne committed suicide by walking out into a snowstorm. The financial depression was too humiliating for her to handle.

The narrative then jumps several years to when Vivian is fifteen. She is caught with cigarettes, kisses a boy named Ronnie King, and does what might be described as typical teen things. She also turns out to be an asset to the general store, convincing the Niensens to make several improvements – stocking more women's items, negotiating better prices from manufacturers, putting coupons in the paper, and developing a layaway program. By the time Vivian graduates high school, the store has nine employees and she is managing most of its operations.

Back in 2011, Molly has enough of Dina's constant jabs and insults, and she talks back. Dina proclaims that Molly is no longer welcome in the house, while spineless Ralph can only meekly try to strike a truce. Molly packs her things, although she has no idea where to go. She considers returning to her mother, but on the Internet she discovers that her mother was just arrested for trying to steal prescription drugs and is clearly still a hopeless addict. Molly's only option is to ask Vivian for help and a place to stay.

Analysis

The parallels between young Vivian and Molly become even clearer in this section, particularly in relation to their similar struggles to claim / hold onto the identities they were born with (i.e. Molly's Indian ancestry, Vivian's Irish ancestry) and their both being ejected from their adoptive / foster homes. This, along with Molly's request that Vivian help her (which can be seen as paralleling the same request that the younger Vivian made of Miss Larsen), can be seen as again developing the novel's thematic interest in the relationship between past and present. Another manifestation of this theme can be seen in Molly's defense of / connection with Vivian, indicative of the relatively peaceful relationship the two women have which parallels the relatively peaceful relationship that Vivian has with the Niensens. In relation to this point, it's important to note how the author has chosen to telescope, or narratively shorten, the amount of time the story spends on Vivian's early teen years, a more technical indication of the relatively safe, comfortable situation (nothing of importance happened, so there's nothing to include in the story). Finally, the depth of connection the two women find themselves sharing in the present has a clear and vivid manifestation in Molly's attitude towards the work in the attic. For one, she is no longer concerned about limiting her time with Vivian to the



fifty hours prescribed by her community service orders. Also, she is not insisting on throwing out any of Vivian's attic possessions, having realized the emotional meaning these items have for Vivian.

Other noteworthy elements include a key structural point. Mr. Grote's sexual molestation of Vivian and Mrs. Grote's blaming and expulsion of Vivian serves as the lowest and most desperate point of the story. This takes place about halfway through the book, at what is traditionally referred to as the "midpoint". It is common practice in storytelling to have either a very high or very low point halfway through the story, and then for the protagonist's fortunes to either dip (following a high midpoint) or improve (following a low midpoint) as the story proceeds to the denouement, or resolution. In this case, Vivian's fortunes predictably improve from the horrible episode with the Grotes, as she is taken in the by solid middle upper-class family, the Nielsens. Eventually, she finds her career calling, which is to inject innovation into the retail business run by the Nielsens.

Another important point is the reappearance of "Anne of Green Gables" as a significant presence in Vivian's life, particularly noteworthy here as Vivian is about to enter a similar phase of life with the Nielsens to one Anne eventually entered - a period of contentment, relative acceptance, and relative peace.

Finally, in this section the reader receives confirmation that Vivian is in fact telling these stories of her childhood to Molly as part of the "portage" assignment, and also that both women are transforming as a result of the exchange. In Vivian's case, she enjoys a catharsis as she is able to release feelings and secrets she kept for so long. In Molly's case, she is able to realize that she is not alone in hardship: in and through Vivian, Molly is discovering a kinship that she never really had with another person. The turtle, to develop the metaphor/parallel indicated by the particularly important card in the small collection left to Molly by her father, is coming out of its shell.

Discussion Question 1

Why would Vivian's improvements to the Nielsens' store help their business? And how was Vivian able to arrive at these innovations?

Discussion Question 2

Describe the ambivalence Vivian feels toward the Nielsens when they ask her to take on the name of their deceased daughter. Why might she be reluctant to accept the name? Relate her reluctance to her long-standing struggles to hold onto her identity. What is the relationship between her taking on the new identity and the physical circumstances of her life?



Discussion Question 3

In what ways does Dina drive a wedge between herself and Molly? Is Molly at all to blame for the deterioration of their relationship?

Vocabulary

lacerate, sediment, throes, squalling, vestibule, appalling, placard, nimbus, marionette, chemise, cardigan, corralled, empathy, imbecile, limerick, consensus, protruding, intonations, hymn, mahogany



Pages 213-278

Summary

After being thrown out of Dina and Ralph's, Molly trudges with two heavy duffel bags to Vivian's home, remembering to not arrive unexpectedly and calling first. When she arrives, she bursts into tears and Vivian orders her to come in. As Vivian makes tea, Molly tells her the entire story – about her mom and dad, about Dina and Ralph, and about her other foster homes. Molly also confesses that she came to Vivian under false pretenses, revealing that she first came to serve her community service. Vivian dismisses Molly's feelings of guilt, saying everything is okay. Molly further confesses what she found out about Maisie, Vivian's long-lost sister, including how she had not died in the fire. When Molly shows a picture of elderly Maisie on her computer to her, Vivian is greatly touched.

In 1939, Vivian goes with two city girls from night college, Lillian and Emily, to Minneapolis to see "The Wizard of Oz". Vivian is amazed at the amazing Technicolor world of Oz compared to Dorothy's drab home life in Kansas. Next, Lillian and Emily and a boy, Richard, take Vivian to the Grand Hotel for drinks and clubbing. Conservative Vivian is ill at ease with these "city slickers" and their easy, immoral ways. She excuses herself while they get drunk in a bar, simply sitting on a couch and people-watching. A young blond man recognizes her as Niamh, leading the astonished Vivian to recognize him as Dutchy, the boy from the orphan train. As the two embrace, their mutual affection is clear. Dutchy is now a piano player and as he plays at the hotel bar, Vivian watches and sees that he's quite good. Afterward, Vivian takes him back to her hotel room, bribing the desk clerk because no boys are allowed. They lie together in bed, and the closeness and connection are immediate. Dutchy describes how he was sent to a farm, where he was beaten and neglected, and how he ran away multiple times, once in a snowstorm he was lucky to survive. He also describes how he moved in with another farmer, Karl Maynard, at whose home he learned to play piano. Vivian instantly falls in love with him, feeling their chance meeting in the hotel was the only truly fated event in her life. Ten months later, the two are married.

For a couple of years, Vivian and Dutchy have a great life, Dutchy becoming a music teacher and Vivian continuing to run the general store. Then, when Pearl Harbor is attacked in December 1941 and the United States is plummeted into World War II, Dutchy is drafted into the Air Force. He and Vivian exchange dozens of letters, Dutchy explaining his life at sea and Vivian telling him of life at home. When she reveals she is pregnant, Dutchy is overjoyed. But when Dutchy reveals he is to fight in the Central Pacific near Burma, Vivian is worried, eventually receiving the devastating news that Dutchy was killed by a crashing plane on his aircraft carrier. The extreme loss Vivian feels at Dutchy's death leaves her deeply wounded. Vowing never to let herself be hurt like that again, she erects a shield around herself, names her new baby Maisie (after her apparently-dead little sister), and then gives the baby up for adoption. Eventually, narration reveals that Vivian wound up marrying Jim Daly, Dutchy's best friend in the



service, but that her love for Jim never matched up to her love for Dutchy, despite the decades passing pleasantly enough and Jim having the business smarts to grow and modernize the store business.

In 2011, Vivian expresses sorrow and regret for her decision to give up her baby and calls herself a coward. Molly wonders if Maisie could be found again, as she would only be in her late 60s. Vivian says it's too late. Meanwhile, Vivian allows Molly to use a spare room for a while. Later, Molly comes to an agreement with Ralph to pretend she still lives with him and Dina so as not to raise any alarms with Child Protective Services.

The days at Vivian's place pass pleasantly. Vivian gets a computer and Molly teaches her how to use it, leading to Vivian finding a number of resources and communities about the people on the orphan trains. She also finds out that Carmine, the boy she had taken care of for a short time on the train, had a good life. Eventually, Vivian gets up the courage to discover the whereabouts of the daughter she gave up for adoption. Molly discovers that her name is Sarah Dunnell, and she's a musician living in North Dakota. Vivian reaches out, and the two parties arrange a personal meeting at Vivian's house. Terry, Molly and Jack help Vivian prepare the house for the big meeting. Molly feels like she has come into her own, and she feels free and peaceful, wondering whether fate or chance brought her to Vivian. When the meeting between Vivian and Sarah happens, Molly is struck with the love and longing she sees in Sarah's face once she sees Vivian for the first time. The story ends with Vivian getting ready to share her life story with Sarah and Sarah's family.

Analysis

In some ways, Vivian meeting Dutchy by chance at the hotel ten years later feels like something of a plot contrivance/convenience, but it is explained by Vivian as the first true moment of fate in a life that has been marred by random chance and misfortune. Their meeting relates to one of the book's more significant themes - specifically, its exploration of the relationship between destiny, randomness, and personal will. There is the sense that to this point in their lives, both Vivian and Molly have been subjected to random misfortune (as orphans bounced around between different families), while each having very little say (i.e. personal will) about what happens to her. By contrast, by choosing to pursue an instant courtship with Dutchy, Vivian importantly makes a strong, independent decision for the first time in her life. Ironically, however, her initial meeting with Dutchy happened by pure chance (she happened to be at that hotel at that time out of all the hotels in Minneapolis). In the same way, Molly chooses to spend more time with Vivian, even though THEIR first encounter, and the initial stages of their relationship, also came about by pure chance. In both cases, the women choose to see these apparently random encounters as fate, or destiny. Whether they are or they aren't, in both cases there remains an interesting interplay between fate, randomness, and free will.

The balancing act between fate, randomness, and destiny also develops the exploration of spirituality which is glimpsed throughout the book. When Dutchy meets Vivian, he



believes that it is God's doing. This is in contrast to Dutchy as a boy, who told Vivian that he didn't believe that God looked out for orphans. This is similar to events in 2011, as Molly delves deeper into her Penobscot ancestors' spirituality and begins to ascribe great meaning to the spiritual totem animals inscribed on her necklace charms. While this secondary theme is not developed in particular depth or detail, there is the sense that in the novel, spirituality has, or at least can potentially have, a great deal to do with whether one views circumstances as fated or simply random.

In any case, whichever side of the argument the reader comes down on in terms of why things happen to the characters (fate, randomness, or some combination/interaction of the two), the fact remains that as a result of their encounter, both Vivian and Molly have opened up themselves and their lives as a direct result of getting to know each other. Vivian's life has perhaps changed more drastically, in that she has finally connected with her long-lost daughter (a connection with family that she, Vivian, has sought for years), but the point must be made that as the result of Vivian's climactic revelation of her deepest pain, triggered by Molly's pre-climactic revelations of HER pain, both women release themselves from some difficult, damaging circumstances, and both are better off for knowing each other and having opened themselves up to each other. This is, arguably, the book's primary thematic contention - that having the courage to be open and vulnerable leads to important, valuable personal transformation.

In short, Vivian and Molly have each stepped off their psychological / emotional "orphan trains" (which have up to now transported them to, and left them in, places of abandonment and loss), and found the true lives, connections, and fulfillment they have always longed for.

Discussion Question 1

Compare and contrast Molly's character in the beginning of the book with her character at the end of the book. What accounts for her changes, and what important traits have stayed the same?

Discussion Question 2

Describe Vivian's feelings about why she gave up her daughter for adoption and how she feels about the daughter in 2011. What will Vivian meeting her daughter in 2011 mean for both women?

Discussion Question 3

What part did fate play in Molly's meeting with Vivian and the subsequent change it caused in her? How much of Molly's change is fate and how much is personal will or random chance?



Vocabulary

sycophantic, obituary, raucous, uncanny, scrutinize, decadent, acquiescence, liveried, monocle, concierge, chambray, banquettes, coiffed, disemboweled, sinew, idiom, condolence, reincarnation, smattering, pristine



Characters

Molly Ayer

Molly is the novel's central character / protagonist. Seventeen years old at the time the novel is set, narration reveals that her father died in a car accident when she was young, which in turn caused her grieving mother to resort to drugs and become an addict, leaving Molly a virtual orphan. As a result of these circumstances, Molly has become angry and bitter, guarded and tough, outspoken, sarcastic, and forthright to the point of rudeness. All this has led her to being moved from foster home to foster home, leaving her also feeling unwanted.

At the beginning of the novel, Molly has become particularly difficult as the result of the abusive attacks she faces from her current foster parents, Dina and Ralph. Her anger and frustration are vividly revealed in her reaction to being given the assignment of cleaning out Vivian's attic as part of sentence to community service: at first Molly scoffs at helping out an "old lady", and she wishes to get the job over with as quickly as possible. But gradually, as Vivian shares her difficult life story, Molly comes to respect and care about her. As a direct result of her relationship with Vivian (who functions as an antagonist, or motivator / trigger for change), and as the result of its events and circumstances, protagonist Molly gradually loses the toughness and attitude that contributed to her difficult life, and also develops a willingness to let people in. These inner changes also manifest in her outward appearance, which becomes less Goth-like and more relaxed, more neutral. As her social worker notices, she also takes out her nose ring.

One of the key manifestations of Molly's transformation is her defense of her ethnic / cultural background. Molly is a Penobscot Indian and takes pride in her heritage, but before her relationship with Vivian changes her, she would have kept both that heritage and that pride a secret. After becoming friends with Vivian, and after realizing how tightly Vivian clung to her Irish identity through all the challenges that came her way, when the topic of Native Americans comes up in history class Molly passionately argues that Native Americans were and are the target of injustices. In other words she, like Vivian, has become proud of her identity, and fights to defend it.

Overall, the most important manifestation of Molly's transformation is the help she offers Vivian to find her lost adopted daughter. The key point to note here is this: at the beginning of the novel, the help Molly offers to Vivian (to clean out the attic) is grudging and unfriendly, while at the end of the novel, her help is willing and compassionate. Bookending the novel with similar actions undertaken in very different contexts clearly portrays and defines Molly's transformation.



Niamh Power / Dorothy / Vivian Daly

Vivian Daly is the novel's second main character, and functions as its antagonist, or the character who triggers and/or defines the transformations of the protagonist. Ninety-one years old at the time the novel is set, Vivian is portrayed as having gone through what might be described as several lives. At the very least, she has gone through several names.

Vivian was born Niamh Power in Ireland, and like many Irish immigrants, she and her family took a boat over to America in hopes of a new and better life. Shortly after arriving settling in New York City, a tenement fire kills Vivian's parents and siblings, leaving her an orphan. This circumstance leads her to being placed on the "orphan train", which tours parent-less children throughout the country, showing them to prospective adopters. Vivian spends the next years trying to survive a series of unwelcoming homes where she is neglected, starved, sexually abused, and renamed by foster parents or social workers. Eventually, Vivian emerges from this dark, Depression-era period to come into the foster care of Mr. and Mrs. Nielsen, who own a general store and who rename her after their dead daughter – again, defining and shaping Vivian's crisis of identity. Nevertheless, Vivian thrives with the Niensens, coming up with several innovations which expand the store and its clientele.

Late in her stay with the Niensens, Vivian has a chance meeting with Dutchy, a boy she met on the orphan train. They fall in love, but tragedy again strikes Vivian's life when Dutchy is killed in World War II. Devastated, Vivian gives up her and Dutchy's new daughter for adoption, feeling she cannot love any other human being. This aspect of her journey carries her through a second marriage to a man (Dutchy's best friend) with whom she is comfortable, but whom she cannot/will not love.

Vivian reveals her history to Molly as their friendship develops in the novel's present day setting. By doing so, Vivian releases the negative feelings and secrets she had kept pent up for decades, triggering a similar release in the much younger Molly. And like Molly, Vivian's emotional health improves by the end of the book, to the point that she is ready to face the long-lost daughter she had abandoned. In short, even while acting as antagonist (i.e. trigger of transformation) in protagonist Molly, Vivian undergoes a transformation (a healing) herself.

Dina and Ralph

Dina and Ralph are Molly's most recent foster parents. Dina is petty and vindictive, a conservative Christian who is taking care of Molly just for the paycheck from the state. She is portrayed as insulting and demeaning, particularly through her mockery of several important aspects of Molly's character, including her veganism and her American Indian Heritage. Ralph, by contrast, is weak-willed and submissive, giving in to whatever Dina wants. He does, at times, show flashes of compassion towards Molly and her situation, but these are few and far between and have to be concealed from



Dina. There is a clear and vivid parallel between Dina and Ralph and Mr. and Mrs. Byrne, one set of Vivian's foster parents (see below).

Jack and Terry

Jack is Molly's boyfriend whom she met at a previous school. It's through Jack's mother Terry (Vivian's housekeeper) that Molly gets the job cleaning out Vivian's attic. Over the course of the narrative, Jack's doubts that Molly could have any sort of relationship with Vivian cause him and Molly to have several arguments, while the protective Terry is suspicious of Molly, calling her a "troubled foster kid". Both Jack and Terry eventually come to accept and encourage the relationship between Molly and Vivian, eventually helping Vivian and Molly with her arrangements for Vivian to meet her long lost daughter. Jack and Terry might be viewed and/or defined as "catalytic" characters, individuals whose actions influence the plot but don't necessarily drive it the way those of a protagonist (Molly) or antagonist (Vivian) might do.

Mr. and Mrs. Schatzman

The Schatzmans are Vivian's first foster parents in New York City. They resent the child and behave in a racist way towards her and Irish people in general. They are the first in a long line of foster parents whose homes are essentially unwelcoming and unhappy ones for young Vivian.

Mrs. Scatcherd

These two characters appear in the section of the novel in which Vivian rides the orphan train. The stern Mrs. Scatcherd is a by-the-book Christian who helps match up the orphans with possible adoptive parents. Meanwhile, Carmine is a baby whom Vivian is forced to care for on the orphan train, but who is taken from her by Mrs. Scatcherd and given to a foster couple, much to Vivian's dismay. Later in life, Vivian (with Molly's help) learns on the Internet that Carmine grew up and had a good life.

Dutchy

Vivian first meets troublemaker Dutchy on the orphan train when they are both children. They have an immediate connection, and as they're about to be separated from each other by different adoptions, they agree to meet in the future. Ten years later, Dutchy and Vivian meet by chance at the Grand Hotel, where Dutchy is now a piano player. Their connection is still there, and they marry ten months later. They are set to have a happy life; however, World War II intrudes and Dutchy is killed on the Pacific Front. Vivian grieves his loss so intensely that she gives their baby daughter up for adoption and resolves never to let anyone love her again.



Mr. and Mrs. Byrne

The Byrnes are Vivian's second set of foster parents. They force Vivian into virtual slave labor in their clothing shop, and while Mr. Byrne is genial but distant, at times helping Vivian remember her Irish heritage, Mrs. Byrne is a cruel disciplinarian. When the stock market crash of 1929 occurs, the Byrnes' fortunes are wiped out and they are forced to give up Vivian and close their shop. Mrs. Byrne later commits suicide, unable to stand her poverty and humiliation.

Mary and Fanny

Mary and Fanny are two of Vivian's co-workers in the Byrne clothing shop. Mary is Vivian's immediate supervisor, and because of her belief that Vivian will one day replace her, she is resentful and cruel. Fanny, by contrast, is friendly and generous, giving Vivian gifts of clothing and candy.

Mr. Sorenson

Mr. Sorenson is a Children's Aid social worker. He appears several times during Vivian's various foster home stays, often refusing to accept / believe her claims of mistreatment. He is particularly resistant to Vivian's account of being sexually assaulted by Mr. Grote (see below). Eventually, however, he is convinced, and doesn't force Vivian to return to the Grotes'.

Mr. and Mrs. Grote

The Grotes are the third family that young Vivian is sent to live with. Their home and farm are poorly run, unkempt and filthy, and an unhappy place for Vivian. Mrs. Grote seems chronically depressed and mentally ill, spending most of her days in bed and neglecting her children. The recently-fired Mr. Grote vows to live off the land instead of getting a job, casting both his family and Vivian into dire poverty. At one point, he sexually molests Vivian, but is caught in the act by Mrs. Grote, who expels Vivian from from the Grote home. Vivian's departure from the Grotes is the trigger / catalyst for her eventually being taken in by the much more friendly and respectful Nielsen family.

Miss Larsen

Miss Larsen is Vivian's kind and intelligent schoolteacher who arranges for a safer foster home after Vivian is expelled from the Grotes. Her understanding of, and insight into, Vivian's character and situation lead her to be a strong support for her, particularly in the face of negative attitudes and judgment from the Grotes and Mr. Sorenson.



Mrs. Murphy

Mrs. Murphy is the owner of a boardinghouse which Vivian is sent to after her time with the Grotes. Mrs. Murphy comes to care for Vivian, saving her from a bout of pneumonia and then arranging for her to live with the Nielsens. Mrs. Murphy shares an Irish heritage with Vivian, which reawakens the latter's interest in, and connection with, her history.

Mr. and Mrs. Nielsen

These upper middle-class shopkeepers take Vivian in and have her work at their shop. They turn out to be kind and good parents, though Vivian never feels she can truly love them. She chooses to accept the new name they give her, that of their own dead daughter, in spite of feeling strongly like she wants to retain her own identity.

Jim Daly

After Dutchy's death, Vivian marries his best friend from the service, Jim Daly. Jim has a nose for organization and numbers, and he helps Vivian to manage and grow first the store that she inherited from the Nielsens, and later her other retail stores. Vivian has a pleasant time with him but can never love him like she did Dutchy.

Lori

Lori is the social worker assigned to monitor Molly. They have a good and jokey relationship, often trading barbs and witticisms. Lori is, in many ways, the closest thing that Molly has to a best friend before she meets Vivian.

Sarah

These two characters appear first in Vivian's past, and make appearances as adults in her present. Sarah is the sixty-nine year-old long-lost daughter of Vivian who was given up for adoption. At the end of the book, and with Molly's help and encouragement, Vivian seeks out and meets Sarah in order to resolve her shame at giving her up. Maisie is Vivian's younger sister, believed to have been lost in the fire that killed Vivian's family. Later in the narrative, however, Molly discovers, and reveals to Vivian, that Maisie not only survived, but had a long and happy life. Both characters, and the stories of what happened to them, can be seen as a symbol / foreshadowing of the possibility of a hopeful future emerging from a traumatic past, an experience shared by both Molly and Vivian.



Symbols and Symbolism

Claddagh Cross

This is a piece of jewelry given to Vivian in Ireland. It's the only thing she's left with after her home and family burn in a fire. Thus, it is extremely dear to her and represents the family she's lost. It's also an important representation of her original identity, the version of herself she desperately tries to hold on to as she moves through the various foster homes that, in so many ways, come close to destroying that identity.

Turtle Tattoo

Molly got a turtle tattoo (illegally) when she was sixteen, in exchange for her virginity. As Molly explains, the turtle is a symbol for her people (the Penobscot Indians) of strength and perseverance. On another level, related more to the novel's themes, a turtle is an animal who carries its home with it, and this is also the case for Molly, who constantly moves from place to place. Finally, a turtle has a hard protective shell, similar to the shell (admittedly more emotional and/or psychological) that both Molly and Vivian put up to protect themselves.

Jane Eyre

This is the book which Molly steals from the library, an act that forces Molly into cleaning Vivian's attic as part of her punishment (i.e. community service). The book symbolizes Molly's artistic temperament and sensitivity as well as her inquisitiveness, things which have been oppressed in her foster home environments. It's also important to note that, as noted in the Analysis, the title character of "Jane Eyre" is an orphan, moved around from one unhappy foster home to another, like Vivian and Molly, but eventually achieving happiness, also like Vivian and Molly.

Possessions in the Attic

In her home's attic, Vivian has kept furniture, clothing, and dozens of boxes of possessions dating from as early as the late 1920s. As Terry explains, these possessions symbolize for Vivian her entire life. They are important keepsakes, and in many ways Vivian continues to define her identity and herself by their existence. At the same time, they also represent the ways in which she's bound, held back, or confined by her past, restrictions that she must move on from, which Molly helps her to do - literally, by helping clean out the attic, and emotionally, by helping her both reveal herself and explore possibilities for a new future.



Anne of Green Gables

This classic children's book is given to Vivian by her teacher, Miss Larsen. Many decades later, Vivian gives the book to Molly. It is an important symbol / object for a number of reasons. One, it represents the value and importance of the older generation passing on its knowledge to the younger. Two, it is a (thematically relevant) symbol of how the past influences the present. Three, and like "Jane Eyre" (see above), the book is the story of an orphan in an unhappy foster situation. The parallel between the book and Vivian's story is even more closely wound than that between Molly and Jane, in that both Vivian and Anne have/had red hair. Finally, because the book was originally given to Vivian by a compassionate teacher who understood her and empathized with her, the passing on of the book to Molly suggests (foreshadows?) the same feelings and/or intentions in Vivian towards Molly.

Currant Bread

Miss Larsen and her class celebrate Vivian's birthday by giving her currant bread. This touches Vivian deeply, insofar that someone remembered her birthday at all. At home, Mr. Grote dismisses birthdays as ridiculous, but nevertheless eats the bread. This is a stark reminder of how very different Vivian's home life and school life are at this point in her life. Meanwhile, the bread's being given on Vivian's birthday can be seen as a reinforcement of the value not just of her existence, but of her birth into an Irish identity, the identity she strives so hard to hold on to.

Three Jewelry Cards

Molly's dad gets three jewelry cards for Molly for her eighth birthday. He explains that each one has Indian symbols which are supposed to protect the user. These cards (one of which depicts a turtle - see above) are also symbolic of the father himself, because two weeks after her birthday, Molly's dad died in a car accident.

Nose Ring

Molly's nose ring is initially an important part of her self-identity. For her, it represents her punk attitude and free spirit. However, she decides to take off the ring as she gets to know Vivian more. She becomes defined more by herself and the content of her character than by an external fashion accessory. The removal of the nose ring is an important symbolic representation of Molly's transformation from an angry, rebellious young woman to one who is compassionate, sensitive, and respectful.

Computer

When Molly moves in, Vivian buys a computer and begins exploring the Internet. The computer symbolizes Vivian's "opening up" in terms of sharing her story and her feelings with others who were on the orphan trains or who had family on the trains. It also represents and/or manifests her desire to open herself up to the future, in that she uses the computer to help her connect with her long-lost daughter and later begin the journey of reconnecting and moving forward with her.

Piano

For Dutchy, the piano (and his ability to play it) become an important sign of his independence, and of his maturation into adulthood, developing it as a useful skill that would earn him a living. Both his attitude and his skills are effectively echoed in the fact that Sarah Dunnell (Dutchy's daughter) also became a musician, a skill apparently was passed through the generations.



Settings

Spruce Harbor, Maine, 2011

This is the novel's primary setting, the physical context in which its action plays out. The larger environment is frequently described as beautiful and peaceful, while Vivian's large mansion is depicted as stately and well-maintained. Both aspects of setting serve as vivid contrasts to the rundown home Molly shares with her foster parents, Dina and Ralph. It could be argued, in fact, that the beauty and expanse of Vivian's home is representative of the more expansive, open life Molly moves into over the course of the narrative.

New York City, late 1920s

This is the first of several important settings in which the narrative of Vivian's past unfolds. Her family lands in New York City in the "Roaring 20's" just prior to the stock market crash which caused a period of great financial distress. The city holds a great deal of both promise and danger, as evidenced by the fact that a tenement fire (of the sort that historically claimed countless lives) takes the lives of Vivian's family.

The Orphan Train

The orphan train (which actually historically existed) ferried children without parents from New York City to points west, where social workers hoped to place them with needful families. Vivian journeys on one of the trains, and it is a despairing and lonely experience: she and the other orphans are essentially on a journey into a frighteningly unknown future. Here it's important to note the parallel with Molly and her experiences - specifically, the idea that she too is on a kind of orphan train, a journey into a similarly frightening, similarly unknown future that promises more unhappy foster homes, more anger, more resentment, and ultimately more loneliness.

Chicago Union Station

This is the setting for an important scene in the past in which young Vivian and Dutchy get in trouble with the authorities, but are rescued by Mrs. Scatcherd.

Albans, Minnesota, 1929

This small mid-western community is where Vivian is sent to live with Mr. and Mrs. Byrne, the clothiers. There, she ekes out a pitiful existence making women's clothing in a "slave labor" type environment.



The Grote Home

This is another of Vivian's foster homes, described as being particularly messy and dirty, ramshackle and filthy. This is the setting for some of Vivian's darkest and most sorrowful moments.

Miss Larsen's Schoolhouse

Vivian's first schoolhouse is run by the kind and intelligent Miss Larsen. Vivian comes to really enjoy her time at school and dread her time at the Grotes. The building and the environment become something of a refuge for her.

Mrs. Murphy's Boardinghouse

After escaping the Grotes, Vivian is cared for by the kindly Mrs. Murphy at her large boardinghouse before being adopted by the Nielsens.

The Nielsens' General Store

For many years, Vivian lives above, and manages, the Nielsens' general store. She introduces several innovations which increase the Nielsens' profits and which allow the store to grow and expand. The store and its operations become the foundation for Vivian's future / eventual success in business.

Minneapolis Grand Hotel

In the big city, Vivian has a chance meeting with Dutchy which changes her life. Dragged reluctantly to a hotel bar by her friends, Vivian reunites with Dutchy, falls in love, and eventually marries him.

Vivian's Attic

This is where Vivian keeps her past - boxes of mementos, papers, documents, souvenirs, and possessions that define both who she was and who she became. Molly's work clearing out the attic is representative of Vivian's attempts, throughout the narrative, to organize and understand her past, and also Molly's simultaneous attempts to work through the difficulties associated with her own history.



Themes and Motifs

The Past Haunts the Present

In the brief Prologue, narrator Vivian introduces the concept of ghosts, stating her belief that ghosts haunt the living. While the text is unclear on whether she literally believes that, what's more apparent is that Vivian believes in ghosts in a more figurative sense – that the past “haunts” the present by having a profound and lasting influence on it. She seems to believe that the people in our lives who may have died, gone elsewhere or abandoned us, can still have an effect on our health, our attitude, and our thinking, all despite their absence. This in turn introduces one of the novel's central thematic contentions, that not just important people in the past but also important events, circumstances, and choices affect, and indeed define, the present.

This manifests with particular vividness as Vivian shares with Molly both her life story and the relics from that life story found in her attic. While telling her stories to Molly, Vivian reveals how each episode in her life, good or bad, has helped to shape her into the woman she has become. She has clung to these past memories and feelings much as she has clung to the physical items. There is the sense throughout the narrative, however, that while hoarding these memories and feelings can be good and lend a feeling of security, it can also be destructive. For example, the narrative indicates that Vivian has harbored feelings of guilt and cowardice over giving her daughter up for adoption. Molly helps Vivian to deal with those feelings by confronting them head-on and eventually inviting her grown-up daughter for a meeting. Similarly, the act of going through and organizing her attic possessions cause Vivian to deal with unpleasant memories. By reliving them, by allowing them to “haunt” her, and then by letting them go, Vivian becomes freer and less encumbered by those memories. In short, the narrative suggests that the healthiest relationship with the past might be to acknowledge it and/or own it, but at the same time not let it have control over the present. The past can inspire, but should not dominate.

Social Issues

In addition to being a work of historical fiction and a coming of age tale (that is, a story in which a young character makes choices and/or has experiences that begin, or continue, the process of maturation into adulthood), “Orphan Train” functions as a social issues novel. Such a novel introduces difficult situations that may be afflicting the intended young adult reader, exploring important issues that are woven into the narrative and subsequently dealt with in a sensitive, frank, or even explicit way. Generally, the hope with such a work is that the reader can or will see his / her own struggles reflected in the protagonist's struggles, take comfort from the sense that she / he is not alone, and possibly even learn a life lesson from how the issue is handled by the protagonist.



There are many such social issues explored in “Orphan Train”, one of which is the issue of poverty (which both Molly and Vivian experience, but Vivian more so). Problems with the foster care / adoption system is another: as the result of their similar negative experiences in systems that exist decades apart but share many common failings, both Molly and Vivian felt unloved, like they didn't belong, and like their respective identities and histories were worthless. The narrative's outcome, by contrast, offers assurances that foster children can indeed find love, identity, acceptance, and a place where they belong. Meanwhile, the issue of drug abuse is addressed through the character of Molly's mother, who becomes unfit to care for Molly after addiction takes over her life. Then there is the issue of racism, with both Molly (with her American Indian ancestry) and young Vivian (with her Irish heritage) facing negative, emotionally violent reactions to their identity. Here it's important to note that once Vivian and Molly both come to terms with their pasts / identities, they both receive affirmations, from outside sources, that preserving one's historical identity has value. A teen at school tells Molly that she is “cool” after Molly reveals her Penobscot Indian heritage, leading Molly to embrace rather than shy away from the trappings of her Penobscot ancestry, while in the past, Vivian receives support and recognition from teacher Miss Larsen.

Perhaps the most notable “social issue” tackled by the book has to do with issues of sexual molestation. Mr. Grote's attack on Vivian is written with explicit details and in a very frank manner. While some readers might find the portrayal of this circumstance a little hard and/or edgy, it's important to note that such strong portrayals can be very effective in raising awareness and encouraging students to take action on similar issues in their own lives.

Love and Loss

Molly and Vivian are quite alike in that they have both erected shields to protect themselves from the extreme negative feelings produced by their tragic childhoods. Specifically: Molly loved her father dearly, and he died in a car accident shortly after her eighth birthday. That, combined with her mother's descent into drug use and the negative experiences she (Molly) has in various foster homes, cause her to put up a protective shell. Meanwhile, Vivian loved her family, but they died in a fire, while later in life, Vivian allowed herself to love Dutchy, but fate responded by killing him in World War II. After Dutchy's death Vivian, like Molly, has put up a shell around herself: both women have concluded that the hurt is simply not worth opening their hearts to love. It is better, and safer, to close oneself off emotionally from the world, to not dare to love. For Molly, this manifests in her tough, “I don't care” attitude and her in-your-face rudeness and sarcasm. For Vivian, she spent several decades coasting along in life, loving her second husband Jim but never daring to love him truly and deeply like she did Dutchy.

A related point is that there is the strong sense, throughout the book, that each woman has offered a “front” to the world that is not genuine. Molly is in fact not as flippant and uncaring as she seems: on the contrary, once she opens up to Vivian she is revealed as caring deeply about the plight of Native Americans (for example), and that she harbors a deep-seated anger which must be addressed before it explodes in unpleasant and

unpredictable ways. By the same token, Vivian's cool and collected demeanor is not genuine either: secretly, she is ashamed and guilty about her daughter's adoption.

As the women spend time together and bond, their emotional shields gradually come down. Part of the reason is that they are so alike and come from such similar backgrounds. For each of them, this makes opening up easier and more natural – they are, in many ways and as they discover, kindred spirits in spite of their considerable age difference. By sharing their stories and their feelings, personal development each woman is allowed to resume, and this process is shown to be overwhelmingly positive, if momentarily painful. By allowing themselves to feel, the women become more able to deal with their real issues instead of burying them. In short, and as a result of the events portrayed in the narrative, there is the clear sense that thematically, the book strongly advocates letting one's guard down, even if it may hurt. The joy of love is worth the heartbreak of loss.

Styles

Point of View

The narrative is written from two distinct points of view, which emerge according to which time period the author intends to put in focus. In the prologue, as well as in the sections dealing with the period between the late 1920s and early 1940s, the narrative uses Vivian's first-person perspective. This is appropriate given that the “conceit”, or narrative premise, of these sections is that Vivian is sharing her life story with Molly as part of Molly's fulfillment of her assignment from American history. Meanwhile, in the more contemporary storyline (i.e. the story of Molly and Vivian's relationship), the narrative switches to a limited third-person point-of view. At different times, the narrator is “in the head” of both Molly and Vivian, the two primary characters – in other words, the narrative perspective shifts between the experiences and perspectives of the two women. The point of view of Molly's limited narration is particularly well handled – her voice is strong and distinct, evocative of Molly's own state of mind ... irreverent, caustic and “mad at the world”. At times, narration even includes a joke that's in Molly's head but which she didn't dare to share.

It's important to note that whether the narrative is focusing on Vivian's past or on Vivian and Molly's present, it uses the present tense, which is both a more modern choice (versus the convention of using past tense) and a choice which lends a sense of immediacy to both time periods, a stronger sense of connection with the characters. This is particularly significant for the Depression-era narrative, as the present tense narration allows history to “come alive,” a feeling which ties into one of the themes of the book (see “Themes – The Past Haunts the Present”). In other words, and in terms of the book's shifting points of view, style and substance reinforce each other.

Language and Meaning

There are several points to note when considering the use of language in “Orphan Train”. First, and in general, the language of the narrative employs a relatively sophisticated vocabulary, one that would, in all likelihood, appropriately and effectively challenge most of the young adults reading the book. Second, and as fits a historical fiction, there are several era-specific terms and jargon which serve to educate the reader. For example, when Vivian is working at the Byrne clothing shop and learning sewing, the reader is treated to a “crash course” in different types of fabric and needlework techniques. And in the present, when Molly is learning about Native Americans in history class, the text shares several Native American words from different tribes and their meanings. For example, Molly is asked to interview a person about their “portage”, and this leads her to connect with Vivian and learn her interesting life story. The term “portage” (pronounced “por-TAHGE” comes from the Wabanaki tribe, and it means an actual or metaphorical journey one takes in which one is forced to leave some possessions behind. A related meaning refers to “portage” as a journey over



difficult terrain over which supplies and equipment must be carried – canoes, for example, are “portaged” over land when waterways become impassible. Both definitions can be seen as referring to and/or evoking lives of the main characters themselves: both Molly and Vivian have taken plenty of portages in their lives, bouncing from one family to another, and both characters have carried significant (emotional) loads with them as they’ve traveled.

Meanwhile, it’s interesting to note that the author has refrained from including heavy accents (like Irish brogue), era-specific slang, and/or foreign languages, instead opting to deliver a readable text that, in spite of its significantly advanced vocabulary, would be accessible to modern young adult audiences.

Structure

The book’s distinctive structure features two primary narratives – a contemporary one set in Maine 2011, defined by the experiences of protagonist Molly; and a historical one, the story of antagonist Vivian’s early life, primarily the late 1920s to the end of World War II in the mid-1940s. The book freely switches between these narratives, and both narratives are told in a linear fashion, while at the same time clearly (but not heavily-handedly) developing and portraying similarities between the experiences of the two central characters. At first, Vivian’s story is presented without reason or commentary. However, as the 2011 story continues, it’s clear that Vivian’s first-person narrative has arisen as a response to Molly interviewing Vivian about her life as part of her portage assignment. In addition to this assignment, Vivian is gradually sharing more details about her life as the two women find relics in the attic. Thus, the two narratives begin to merge, two narrative strands wound together into a single thread of story.

This structural practice has thematic implications. Specifically, the Prologue establishes an important theme of ghosts – the idea (as relayed by Vivian) that figures in the past are alive and well, and that they continue to mentally haunt the living in the present. By interweaving the 1930s story with the 2011 story, the author is literalizing and/or manifesting this “ghost” idea. The past is woven together with the present and cannot be fully separated. In other words, the past and present must be considered as a single unit, considering the profound influence the former has on the latter.

One final structural note: chapters frequently end on a “cliffhanger”, in which a major plot thread, in either narrative line, is left unresolved, or a major question is introduced, leaving the reader motivated to read further to find out more.



Quotes

I believe in ghosts. They're the ones who haunt us, the ones who have left us behind. Many times I have felt them around me, observing, witnessing, when no-one in the living world knew or cared what happened.

-- Vivian (Prologue paragraph 1)

Importance: These are the first words of the novel, and are spoken by Vivian in narration. In a lyrical way, Vivian explains that the past has a very powerful influence on her, and that her own sensitivity to the past is more finely-tuned than most due to her age and to witnessing so much death in her life.

I try to forget the horror of what happened. Or – perhaps forget is the wrong word. How can I forget? And yet how can I move forward even a step without tamping down the despair I feel?

-- Vivian (New York City, 1929 paragraph 9)

Importance: Here, Vivian explains her conflicted feelings and trauma with respect to her family burning in a fire. She tries to reconcile the need to move on with the inability to shake off the intense memories which have been seared into her being.

Though we dearly hope all of you will find the right homes at the first stop, it doesn't always work that way. So in addition to being respectful and polite, you must also keep your faith in God to guide you forward if the way is not clear. Whether your journey is long or short, He will help you as long as you place your trust in Him.

-- Mrs. Scatcherd (Union Station, Chicago, 1929 paragraph 44)

Importance: In this quotation, Children's Aid social worker Mrs. Scatcherd tries to assure the uncertain orphans by asking them to put their faith in God. Her perspective is a clear and vivid contrast to that of Dutchy, who doesn't believe that God is watching out for him or anyone. This quote is a vivid exploration of the novel's exploration of the value of faith.

She's supposed to stay until six today, and then come for two hours four days a week, and four hours every weekend until – well, until she finishes her time or until Vivian drops dead, whichever comes first. According to her calculations, it should take a month. To finish the hours, not to kill Vivian.

-- Narrator (Spruce Harbor, Maine, 2011 paragraph 9)

Importance: The omniscient narrator is borrowing some of Molly's acerbic wit to frame her time at Vivian's in macabre yet humorous terms. This demonstrates Molly's dark humor and her grudging willingness to clear Vivian's attic.

Vivian is torn between her heart and her head. Letting go of her stuff is like saying goodbye to her life. And that's tough for anybody to do. So your job is to make her.

-- Terry (Spruce Harbor, Maine, 2011 paragraph 30)



Importance: Terry (Vivian's housekeeper) advises Molly about her job cleaning out Vivian's attic. This is one way an author helps the reader understand a character – by what another character says about him/her. Specifically, in this quote, Terry indicates that Vivian's attic possessions are much more than mere things; they are reminders of her life, a very important aspect of her (Vivian's) character.

It's hard to tell exactly what's going on, but as the weeks pass we begin to catch glimmers. Mr. Byrne apparently invested quite a bit in the stock market, and the money is gone. The demand for new garments has slowed, and people have taken to mending their own clothes – it's one place they can easily cut corners.

-- Vivian (Albans, Minnesota 1929-1930 paragraph 9)

Importance: Spoken by Vivian as the narrator, this passage shows that Vivian came to understand what was happening about the Great Crash of 1929 only gradually. Here it's also important to note that the author is using a real event (the 1929 stock market crash) and weaving it into her narrative. In other words, she is giving an actual historical context to fictional events, thus giving the latter a more realistic, relateable context.

Molly is tempted to say, 'Damn, you mean I have to shut down my meth lab? And I gotta delete those naked pictures I posted on Facebook?' But instead she smiles steadily at Lori and says, 'I'm clear.'

-- Narrator (Spruce Harbor, Maine, 2011 paragraph 16)

Importance: The omniscient narrator goes into Molly's head for her reaction to social worker Lori warning Molly about taking drugs or drinking. In addition to showcasing the sarcastic humor that is part of Molly's character / identity, Molly/the narrator is making an angry comment on how some foster children are treated with too much suspicion.

Sitting in the empty classroom after school one day, Molly stares at that face for a long time, looking for answers to questions she doesn't know how to ask.

-- Narrator (Spruce Harbor, Maine, 2011 paragraph 15)

Importance: Molly is staring at a portrait of Molly Molasses, a famous Penobscot Indian she is named after. At this point in the story, Molly is learning of the heritage of her Native American ancestors and how poorly they were treated by the European colonists. The thought of these injustices enrages her, particularly because some of these injustices seem to parallel her own rough childhood. At the same time, she cannot properly articulate the source of this anger - not yet.

Once I'm out of the woods and on the main road, a full moon bathes the fields around me in a shimmering, pearly light. Gravel crunches loudly under my boots; I can feel its pebbly roughness through my thin soles. I stroke the soft wool inside my gloves, so warm that not even my fingertips are cold.

-- Vivian (Hemingford County, Minnesota, 1930 paragraph 2)

Importance: This quotation is a good example of the descriptive and lyrical quality of



the author's writing. This occurs at a point when Dorothy/Vivian has been thrown out of the Grotes' home after being sexually molested by Mr. Grote. The attention to detail on the first-person narrator's part highlights the importance of the moment: in such an anxious emotional state, Dorothy/Vivian remembers every detail.

What I feel for the Nielsens – gratitude, respect, appreciation – isn't the same as a child's love for her parents, not quite; though what that love is, I'm not sure I can say. [...] They are not my people, and never will be.
-- Vivian (Hemingford, Minnesota, 1930-1931 paragraph 49)

Importance: In this passage, which takes place just after the Nielsens have her to change her name to Vivian, the name of their own dead daughter, narrator Vivian reveals her ambivalence and uncertainty. This passage reveals Vivian's awareness that although the Nielsens are kindly and well-intentioned, and she's grateful for the relative happiness she's experiencing with them, she can never feel the bond she felt with her own biological mother and father.

Dutchy drops the attache case as I stand up, and sweeps me into a hug. I feel the ropy hardness of his arms, the warmth of his slightly concave chest, as he holds me tight, tighter than anyone has ever held me. A long embrace in the middle of this fancy lobby is probably inappropriate; people are staring. But for once in my life I don't care.
-- Vivian (Minneapolis, Minnesota, 1939 paragraph 1)

Importance: Vivian describes her reunion with Dutchy after ten years apart. It was clear that they had feelings for one another when they were children, and now all of that pent-up emotion floods out. With Dutchy, Vivian feels a freedom and joy she hasn't experienced in many years. In contrast to her orderly and conservative life with the Nielsens, Vivian here is experiencing and communicating real passion and excitement.

I learned long ago that loss is not only probable but inevitable. I know what it means to lose everything, to let go of one life and find another. And now I feel, with a strange, deep certainty, that it must be my lot in life to be taught that lesson over and over again.
-- Vivian (Hemingford, Minnesota, 1943 paragraph 10)

Importance: Vivian is reacting to both her baby being born and the grief she's suffering from the death of Dutchy, her husband and the baby's father. Vivian is at an extremely low point, and she feels fated to a life of deep loss. In the same way she was bounced from one life to another as an orphan child, she feels bounced from one emotional experience (joy) to another (deep, deep grief).