

Underground Airlines Study Guide

Underground Airlines by Ben H. Winters

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Plot Summary

The following version of this book was used to create this study guide: Winters, Ben. *Underground Airlines*. Mulholland Books, 2016. First edition.

The novel takes place in an alternative contemporary United States where Abraham Lincoln was assassinated shortly before taking office as president of the United States. In this reality the Civil War did not occur, slavery was never abolished and is still legal in four southern states, and America is considered to be a pariah to the rest of the western world due to its continued legalization of slavery.

As the novel opens, the narrator, identified as "Jim Dirkson," attempts to convince a Catholic priest named Father Barton who he knows to be a high-ranking member of the Underground Airways group that helps escaped slaves flee the United States to help his wife escape from slavery. Father Barton refuses. Dirkson is quickly revealed to be a man named Victor, an African American U.S. Marshal who captures escaped slaves and returns them to the plantations they have fled. Victor is currently attempting to infiltrate the United Airways organization in order to locate and capture an escaped slave named Jackdaw. Victor identifies himself as someone without an actual, true identity who serves the Marshal's service with little consideration of the moral nature and larger social and political consequences of his actions.

While in pursuit of Jackdaw, Victor takes interest in a woman named Martha Flowers and her young son Lionel. Martha, as Victor learns, is searching for information about her lover and father of Lionel, an escaped slave named Samson who was recaptured some time before the novel begins. Though Victor makes every effort to isolate himself from others and focus on his task, he nevertheless attempts to help Martha and her son. During the course of Victor's investigation and assistance to Martha, he begins to feel sympathy for Jackdaw and reveals himself to be an escaped slave who, after many years on the run, was captured by the Marshal's service and offered his eventual freedom in turn for working as a slave tracker for the Marshal's service. Victor agreed and has spent the last six years traveling around the country, capturing escaped slaves and returning them to the plantations that own them.

Victor eventually locates Jackdaw, finding him hiding in a cave. Once he encounters Jackdaw, Victor realizes that he has been misled. Jackdaw reveals that he is not an escaped slave, but rather an undercover agent named "Kevin" who is working on behalf of Underground Airways who entered into a plantation, pretended to be a slave, and gathered evidence of mistreatment and a conspiracy that, if revealed, might serve to put an end to legalized slavery. Kevin, however, refuses to hand over the evidence until his lover, who is a slave, is also released. Kevin is shot to death by agents working on behalf, seemingly, of the Underground Airways after he flies into a violent rage when told that his lover is dead.

After revealing that Underground Airways is conspiring with the government, Victor is given the option of going to the plantation Kevin is from and retrieving the evidence, or



being track down and killed by the government. Reluctantly, Victor agrees and takes Martha with him to help him gain access. Victor is increasingly filled with self-doubt and confusion, especially in terms of his identity and the morality of his actions. Once he and Martha are permitted access to the GGSI facility, Victor finds evidence of the company's overt abuse and brainwashing of slaves. Upon locating the evidence Kevin had hidden with a white truck driver in a restricted whites only living area, Victor realizes that the evidence does not pertain to abuse of slaves or illegal trade activated, but instead is a flask that contains a sample of genetic material being used to clone slaves who, by law, would be without identities and able to still be used on plantations if slavery is abolished.

After being confronted by people from Underground Airways, Victor discovers that members of Underground Airways are themselves undercover Marshals who have been manipulating Victor in order to obtain the evidence for the United States government. After the Marshal operatives are killed in a scuffle with Victor, Victor surrenders the flask to his handler at the Marshal's service, who explains that the government had been cooperating with the southern plantations in developing cloned slaves for reasons even he does not understand. Victor's tracker is removed and he is set free. However, instead of escaping from the United States, he stays with Martha and together they join an abolitionist movement and work to free more slaves from servitude.



Part One: North - Chapters 1 - 4

Summary

Chapter 1 – As the novel opens, the narrator (referred to as “Jim Dirkson” at this point) is meeting with Father Barton, a Catholic priest, in a café. The narrator offers Barton his apologies for his earlier outburst in Burton’s office and expresses his desperate need for Barton’s “services.” Father Burton explains that there is nothing he can do to help the narrator and that he has “never been in ... in ... in those sort of activities” (6) and offers his apologies. The narrator notices two police officers in the café, one of whom is black and one of whom is white, and feels apprehensive. The narrator tells Barton that while he is, himself, a “free man,” his wife is still enslaved on a violent plantation and that he wishes to facilitate her escape. Barton, who admits that he does not agree with the practice of slavery, says that he cannot help the narrator. The narrator is enraged by Barton’s comment, feeling that it is easy for him to renounce slavery when such, due to him being white, will never directly affect him. The narrator excuses himself and leaves the café, feeling his anger drain but feeling “broken by pain” (11).

Chapter 2 – While driving away from the café, the narrator thinks about how he has been “free” since he was 14 years old, nearly 26 years ago. He takes note of some of the simple pleasures that freedom from slavery allows him, such as the high-quality car he is driving and the variety of foods he can enjoy. He describes how most foreign trade to the United States is denied by the “European Consensus,” which has led to technological limitations such as compact disc technology not being imported from Japan. America, as he describes it, is a deeply fractured nation, “gray and ugly, redolent of violence and fear of violence” (13). The nation is in the midst of the “Bastlich hearings,” (which the narrator does not define at this point in the novel) and that there are protests occurring across the country. While driving, the narrator is stopped at a security check-point and searched because of a “heightened security environment” (13) that allows law enforcement to pull over and question black drivers without reason. The narrator regards this occurrence with a feeling of emptiness.

Chapter 3 – Having arrived at his destination in Indianapolis, the narrator reveals that he earlier stole and photographed the contents of Father Barton’s wallet. He uploads the information into a computer system in order to trace Father Barton’s activities. The narrator reveals that the name he is currently using and traveling under (“Dudley Victor”) and the name he had used when he encountered Father Burton (“Jim Dirkson”) are false. He (now identified as “Victor”) describes himself as “not really a person at all ... I was a mechanism—a device. That’s all I was” (16). Victor defines himself strictly in terms of his job: tracking down a man who is missing. He is able to correlate Burton’s movements and locates him in a largely black populated part of the city called “Freedman Town.” Victor takes note of his pleasure at being able to locate Barton and self-satisfaction.



Chapter 4 – Later that night, Victor receives a phone call from Mr. Bridge, his handler at the U.S. Marshals Service, an organization Victor also works for in exchange “for my own past remain[ing] buried” (20). Mr. Bridge and Victor have never met directly, though Mr. Bridge has called him every night at 9:50 p.m. for a progress report on whatever case he is working on. Victor is currently tasked with locating a missing slave who, it is suspected, was helped to freedom by Father Barton and an underground network (“The Underground Airlines” of the title) that helps escaped slaves into the “northern states” (the states in which slavery is now illegal) and out of the country. The U.S. Marshals service, operating under the “Fugitive Persons Act” (20), locates and captures escaped slaves from the “Hard Four” states where slavery is still legal anywhere within the United States. This act has existed since 1793 and was strengthened throughout the 19th century, with President Roosevelt proposing in 1935 a “comprehensive regulatory framework” (2) for plantations that provided protection for U.S. Marshals from Northern law enforcement in states where slavery was illegal. Many law enforcement agencies in northern states refuse to assist in searches for missing slaves, and African American law enforcement officers are legally allowed to not participate in “slave-hunting” (20). Mr. Bridges asserts his confidence that Victor’s missions will succeed. After concluding his phone conversation with Mr. Bridges, Victor feels “low and mean, which is how I always felt after talking to Mr. Bridge” (20) and a variety of undefined emotions as “certain kinds of memories” rattled through his mind. He immediately suppresses his emotions and asserts that he is going find the “terrified and tired” runaway slave he is pursuing and “have him dragged home” (20).

Analysis

In the first four chapters of the novel, the author introduces us to a mysterious world that is both very similar to contemporary America (musicians such as Michael Jackson are mentioned, as well as businesses such as Starbucks) yet radically different (CD players are not available due to trade treaties against the United States, African Americans can be stopped and searched by law enforcement without reason, and slavery is still legal in four states). While the alternate United States depicted in the novel is not post-apocalyptic as it is often described as in other works of alternate American history, there is, nevertheless, a sense that the United States Victor lives in is hardly a pleasant place. The nature of the historical difference between Vincent’s world and contemporary America reality is not made clear in these chapters, though the author provides a number of allusions and suggestions as to the difference between the two worlds. Based upon some of the historical dates and events described, it appears that the American Civil War never occurred in this reality and the United States was never divided between 1861 and 1865 over the issue of the legality of African slavery. The author’s depiction, however vague at this point in the narrative, between the world of the narrative and contemporary America is jarring. The author offers a vision of America in the 2010s that reflects, in terms of attitudes toward African-Americans and slavery, that of mid-19th century America. The “Underground Airways” that Father Barton is part of is depicted as a modern day version of the 19th century Underground Railroad movement that helped escaped slaves from the south travel to the northern states, suggesting both how much has changed in a century and a half and yet how little has changed in terms



of slavery and the treatment of African Americans. Furthermore, the author's rendering of the U.S. Marshals as a villainous, oppressive organization in this counter-reality is especially jarring, given the U.S. Marshals service throughout the 1950s and 1960s in enforcing the civil rights movement.

Victor is reminiscent of countless other literary noir detectives such as Raymond Chandler's Philip Marlow, Mickey Spillane's Mike Hammer and countless other hard-bitten, morally comprised investigators. Victor is a loner who defines himself entirely in terms of his job. He possesses a sardonic sense of humor and cynical outlook toward not just the state of the nation, but also his own work. Victor presents himself as being quite cold and efficient, willing to lie and manipulate other people for the purpose of his mission. Like many other archetypal noir detectives, he is also guilt ridden, self-destructive and working on behalf of a corrupt social system that he disdains. The reader is told very little about his background, aside from the fact that Victor has been free from bondage since he was 14 years old. While Victor seems to feel some measure of disdain for the practice of slavery and (such as the tears he sheds after meeting with Father Burton), he is still a participant – which, being an African-America law enforcement officer, he does not have to be – in the rounding up of escaped slaves. Victor's coldness and denial of his own intrinsic identity appears to allow him the ability to disassociate himself from his actions and their consequences. Victor can be conceptualized, then, as an antihero, even at this early point in the novel. While he lacks the usual attributes of a heroic protagonist – such as idealism and a strict code of morality – the complexity of his character – and his alienation from society, suggestions of self-doubt and angst, as well as his deeply repressed emotions and hidden personal history – renders him an engaging figure who is clearly not intrinsically evil and, given his obvious internal conflict as to the nature of his actions, is perhaps still capable of doing good and acting in a heroic manner.

Discussion Question 1

Do you consider Victor to be a heroic character? How so or how not?

Discussion Question 2

Why do you think it is that Victor, being a former slave and presently a slave hunter, does not give much consideration to the contradictory nature of himself?

Discussion Question 3

Why does Victor disavow having any sort of set and permanent identity?

Vocabulary

bondage, morality, U.S. Marshals Service, Underground Railroad, plantation



Part One: North: Chapters 5 - 9

Summary

Chapter 5 – The following morning, Victor eats breakfast alone in the lobby of his hotel while reading a newspaper article about a current national controversy known as the “Bastlich hearings”: a woman (identified only as “Bastlich”) is nominated to chair the president’s Securities and Exchange Commission. Bastlich once wrote a paper arguing for the punishment of companies that trade in plantation profits. While she claims she will fulfill the duties of her job fairly, a number of politicians from both southern and northern states are concerned that she will attempt, through her position, to eliminate slavery. The unnamed president is identified as a centrist – “as you had to be to get to be president (22) – on the “Old Question” of whether slavery should be outlawed but is refusing to withdraw the woman’s nomination. Victor notes that this is hardly a “watershed” (22) movement in terms of eventually abolishing slavery.

At the same time a young woman, who is white, enters the hotel lobby with her son, who is of mixed race. The woman attempts to feed herself and her young son breakfast before being asked by a staff member if she is a guest at the hotel, which she is not. The woman explains that she will be checking in later, but is nevertheless declined service and forced to give back the food she has taken. Her son approaches Victor and asks him about the newspaper he is reading and asks him what various words mean on the page. The woman retrieves her son, attempts to engage Victor in conversation, which he declines, explaining that he had been raised and taught not to engage in conversation with white people and white women unless necessary. However, after she leaves, he brings a plate of food from the buffet and leaves it by the woman’s car in the parking lot.

Chapter 6 – Victor leaves the hotel and travels to “Freedom Town,” a small town outside the city where his subject is likely to be hiding. He locates a Catholic Church he believes might be a sanctuary for escaped slaves and feels a great deal of satisfaction having accomplished part of his mission, thinking how “that’s the problem with doing the devil’s work. It can be pretty satisfying. Pretty Goddamn satisfying” (32). He further describes the “usual equipment” he carries with him to help him accomplish his missions, including a set of disguises, cash, lock picks, and a gun he rarely carries. However, he also does not carry a badge or any form of identification that pertains to his work. He would appear to be a con man, “which I was ... that’s exactly what I was” (33).

Chapter 7 – Back at his hotel, and having just located the likely meeting spot for members of the Underground Airways, Victor inspects a file the Marshall service developed concerning Father Barton and his cell of Underground Airways agents. The file outlines Barton’s connections to other radical political groups, the recent death of an escaped slave in a Federal Express cargo container, and involvement in possible terror organizations. The evidence presented leads Victor to conclude that Barton is directly involved in the disappearance of Jackdaw, the escaped slave he is perusing.



Victor examines aerial photographs of the plantation Jackdaw escaped from, including an area that is blacked out from viewing, feeling a measure of disgust. Victor imagines Jackdaw's standard work day and the brutality that he endured, noting, sarcastically, that "violent slavery is against the law" (38). He follows the details of Jackdaw's escape, which involved him poisoning himself, falling ill, being transferred to a medical facility, and his violent escape into "thin air. An invisible man" (39). Victor reminds himself that he is just doing his job by searching for this man, which, as he explains, "was how I fooled myself" (40). He studies a picture of Jackdaw, who he describes as handsome with a tattoo that reads "CSIG," the initials of the company of his owner, on his neck, with the tattooed initials of previous owners blacked out. Victor mentions the tattoo of his previous owner being blacked out on his own neck. However, as Victor explains, black block tattoos are also, in some parts of the nation, commonly worn by many black people as a "mark of solidarity" (41), Victor hears a sound outside his window and watches as the woman from earlier and her son, who she calls "Lionel," looks up at Victor and "struck a funny muscle man pose," (43) which makes Victor smile.

Chapter 8 – The next day, Victor is accosted by two young black men who accuse him of being an escaped slave. Victor attempts to not engage them but, once they threaten him with violence, he tells them "I am a monster in the shape of a man. I am a man with the skin of a snake and the feel of a wolf ... I am not a slave but neither am I a man" (47). The two men quickly runaway, referring to Victor as being "crazy" (47). Victor takes notice of his own rage, something he keeps repressed but nonetheless sometimes explodes out of him. He continues to search for Jackdaw.

Chapter 9 – Victor and Mr. Bridge discuss Victor's progress. Victor asks Bridge a series of questions about Jackdaw's escape and where he originally originated from, all of which Bridge dodges. Victor questions how they even know Jackdaw is in Indianapolis, a question Bridge also avoids. Victor notices that, in the six years he has worked for Bridge, this was the first time he had raised his voice at Victor or seemed uneasy.

Later, Victor dreams of his time as a slave and his interactions with "Castle," (62) another slave he had come to regard as a brother. Victor remembers when they were enslaved children and how Castle would, when others were asleep, teach him about mechanics and various places in the world beyond the plantation. Victor explains how this was a tremendous risk. Talking after hours at the plantation, could result in a beating or other form of punishment. Castle, as Victor remembers, encouraged Victor to educate himself and prepare to escape. As the dream concludes, Victor questions why he is remembering Castle and his childhood, something he usually avoids, "I worked so hard to keep everything inside, but now here I was" (63).

Analysis

Victor lives a life of isolation, which is a typical character trait of many anti-hero characters, as well as noir detectives. He represses, as best he can, memories of his past, living and relying only upon himself, something that he is self-aware of. Victor is also capable of violence, which becomes apparent during his encounter with the two



young men who accost him. He does not handle the situation like a law enforcement officer; instead, Victor explodes with rage and refers to himself as a “monster,” (47) suggesting that he regards himself as some sort of mutation or violent outsider without a proper place in society.

However, despite his self-isolation, barely contained rage and refusal to engage with other people, Victor's encounter with Martha and her son reveals that he is not nearly as emotionally isolated as he claims to be. Like many other noir detectives, Victor has strong emotional reactions to people – especially woman and children – who are in need. He reacts most powerfully to Martha's son Lionel, who manages to make Victor smile. Victor's strong emotional reaction to Jackdaw's history, and his revolution toward the practice of slavery despite his own position as a Marshall who hunts escaped slaves and is former slave himself, reveals the depth to which his identity and consciousness is divided. Victor considers himself to be a con man, a professional manipulator of others who always lives under the guise of false identities.

At the end of the chapter, Victor's dream of his childhood friend Castle and his time as a slave reveals the horror to which Victor was subject to as a slave, as well as the depth of his emotional suffering. Victor can be understood as suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder. He is haunted by nightmares and flashbacks to the traumatic incidents of his past. He attempts to escape the traumatic memories of his childhood by isolating himself from others, disavowing his own identity, and repressing painful memories, something that is also a common trait of other noir detectives and anti-heroes.

These chapters also provide further information as to the state of Victor's world. We learn that the practice of slavery is accepted, with some regret, by the American government, though the public is convinced that “violent slavery” (38) is against the law, something Victor knows not to be true. However, much like a majority of white Americans in the mid-nineteenth century who considered the practice of slavery to be immoral and openly protested as such, a large number of white Americans in Victor's reality protest slavery and even wear the tattooed markings of a slave on their necks as a mark of solidarity. Several political figures are calling for the outright abolition of slavery, though a majority of the government takes a neutral stance on the issue, which also serves to reflect the political attitudes toward slavery in the United States in the first half of the nineteenth century. Victor's world, then, can be conceptualized as a vision of America that is stuck, in terms of political and social attitudes toward slavery, in the mid-nineteenth century.

Discussion Question 1

Why is the Bastlich Hearing so controversial, even though it seems that a majority of Americans do not agree with the practice of legalized slavery?



Discussion Question 2

Why does Victor feel so much rage, despite his insistence that he pays no regard to who he captures or why and views himself as simply a tool used by the Marshals service?

Discussion Question 3

Why does Victor respond so powerfully to Martha Flowers and her son? What does this reveal about his personality?

Vocabulary

servitude, misery, detection, hound, lobby



Part One: North: Chapters 10 - 15

Summary

Chapter 10 – Victor awakens to find the black police officers he had seen earlier in the diner while meeting Father Barton, sitting at his hotel room desk. The police officer identifies Victor as “Jim Dirkson,” the alias he used when meeting Father Barton earlier. The officer questions Victor about his meeting with Barton. The officer reveals that he is “with” (66) Father Barton and the Underground Airways organization, serving as Barton’s bodyguard. The officer questions Victor about his desire to free his wife from a plantation and explains that he felt that Barton did not give Victor, as “Dirkson,” and his plight fair consideration. He tells Victor that he does not feel that white people consider black people, even free black people, fair trust and respect, even when it comes to freeing slaves “whites are the ones who do the saving. Black folks best hang tight and wait on getting saved ... what I call the Mockingbird mentality” (68). Victor explains that Mockingbird refers to a novel – which would be an alternate version of Harper Lee’s 1960 novel *To Kill a Mockingbird* from our own reality – about a white lawyer who saves an escaped slave from Alabama and how “the hero of the book, the hero and the heart, is the good lawyer: the man is the save, the black man gets saved” (68). The police officer offers to help “Dirkson” to persuade Barton to help with his case. The officer then identifies himself as “Willie Cook” (69).

Chapter 11 – Victor, still disguised as Dirkson, rides along with Cook in his police car. Cook explains how other blacks often consider him a traitor for working as a police officer. Victor marvels at Cook’s ability to lead two lives: as an officer of the law and a member of the Underground Airlines. While riding, Victor takes note of the information of Jackdaw’s escape itinerary he notices, strangely, to be displayed on Cook’s computer, which involves him heading to Canada for sanctuary. They proceed to an area known as “Monument Circle” (72) and park across from a monument for “Old Abe.” The monument is a nine-foot-tall statue of Abraham Lincoln who, as Victor recalls, was killed at that location in 1861.

Victor feels a disconnection between himself and Cook, because Cook’s from the northern states and had never been enslaved like Victor had been, “I was as different from him as I was from Barton or from Bridge because what I had seen, because what moved still beneath my skin” (72). Victor again represses a wave of terrible memories from his own time as a slave and explains how “What the slave wants but can never have is not only freedom from the chains but also from their memory” (72). Cook excuses himself and asks Victor to wait for him. Victor takes the time to study the statue of Lincoln and recalls how Lincoln, in 1861, was assassinated before he could even assume the presidency. With Lincoln dead, Victor explains how six amendments and four resolutions were passed through Congress that kept slavery legal and “balanc[ed] northern sentiments and southern interest, northern principles and southern economic welfare” (72). Cook approaches Victor and introduces him to “Mr. Maris,” (72) an African man who is part of the Underground Airways movement. Maris searches Victor for



weapons and listening devices. Maris is reluctant to allow the organization he is part of to help “Dirkson.” Barton quickly appears but avoids speaking to Victor and leaves.

Chapter 12 – Victor returns to his hotel, feeling frustrated by the amount of leads he has on Jackdaw and his inability to stop dreaming of and remembering Castle and his time as a slave. He considers, with some measure of sadness, the state of America: cities stuck in recessions, the unwillingness of other states and nations to do business with states where slavery was still legal, and all the American industries falling to pieces due to international boycotts. While listening to the music of Michael Jackson and James Brown (both of whom still exists in the world of the novel, yet seem to be politically engaged musicians rather than traditional popular music performers), Victor uses his computer to follow the movements of Maris, who he had earlier put a tracer on, around the city, trying to locate Jackdaw’s likely hiding place.

Later, Victor runs into the woman from breakfast the day before. She introduces herself as “Martha Flowers.” Victor introduces himself as “Jim Dirkson” and claims to be a cellular phone tower site analyst. Victor admires the affection he sees between Martha and her son Lionel, explaining that he learned about parental love not from direct experience but, instead, through literature. Martha explains that she is a medical assistant desperately searching for a job in the area. Victor feels uneasy engaging with Martha and Lionel, and notices how uncomfortable a white woman and her children are seeing a black man and white woman in conversation, and excuses himself.

Chapter 13 – On the third day of his assignment, Victor continues his search for Jackdaw and the Underground Airlines group, waiting for Cook to contact him. He mindlessly follows Maris around the city, feeling desperate to leave and “Get this done. Get out of here. On to some other northern city” (90).

Chapter 14 – As the chapter opens, Victor explains the workings of the Underground Airlines, how “imaginary corporations” (97) ship, often as cargo freight, escaped slaves. However “most people get no help at all” (98) and escape on their own, without any assistance. Victor also explains how Georgia and Kentucky abolished slavery in 1944. However, Georgia, under pressure from Alabama and the united state of Carolina, has kept its airport area “half slave and half free” (99). While eating lunch, Victor studies the face of Jackdaw, wondering where he was and how he felt, whether he was confident or scared, and how much he knew about Barton’s organization.

Chapter 15 – The next day, Victor locates Maris at an office area but can not find him. While aggressively questioning a white man in the area about Maris, Victor slips out his Jim Dirkson persona and “found in myself a hard man, a stile-cold anti-hero from one of those 1970s black revenge pictures ...” (105). Victor violently threatens and questions the man. The man denies having anything to with Jackdaw’s escape but admits to being a former army soldier, for “America. Our side” (105) during a previous war with Texas (which is now a separate country known as The Republic of Texas from the United States due to their refusal to cooperate with slavery). Doubting his denial of any knowledge of Maris’s location, and feeling an undefined rage, Victor shoots the man in the knee and leaves.



Analysis

These chapters provide a great deal of insight into the historical differences between the contemporary United States Victor lives in and the history of the United States the reader is aware of. The novel can be categorized as detective novel and also as an alternative history or work of speculator history. Much like other literary works such as Philip Dick's 1964 novel *The Man in the High Castle* and Robert Harris's 1992 novel *Fatherland*, *Underground Airways* takes place in a version of the United States much different than our own due to a single point of historical divergence. In both Dick and Harris's novel, the point of divergence is World War II. In their novels, Dick and Harris presented worlds where Nazi Germany won World War II and occupy both the United Kingdom and the United States, leading to radically different contemporary worlds that serves, ironically, to reveal aspects – such as intrinsic racism and the willingness of conquered people to betray their own morality under the threat of state-sponsored violence - of our own reality. In *Underground Airways*, the historical point of divergence is early 1861. In this world, Abraham Lincoln was assassinated not in 1865 after the Civil War but just before his presidency was to began in 1861. Without Lincoln's presidency and strong abolitionist politics, the Civil War never occurred and slavery was not abolished throughout the country. Instead, the United States followed a radically different historical track. Slavery was kept legal in the southern states well into the 1940s, with the Carolinas, Louisiana and Mississippi ("The Hard Four States") maintaining the legal right to own slaves.

Other historical events of the twentieth century, such as The United States' involvement in the World Wars are not mentioned, suggesting perhaps that they never occurred. The presidency of John F. Kennedy – who was elected in reality in 1960 with a strong civil rights platform – is not mentioned. Other historical events from our reality have occurred, such as the popularization of black music and film and even the existence of such novels as *To Kill A Mockingbird*, though in much different ways. Michael Jackson is regarded as a politically active musician and *To Kill A Mockingbird* tells a much different story than it did in our reality. The nation also seems to be divided, in terms of ideology, quite distinctly between "Northerners" (people who do not believe in slavery) and people who accept what they consider to be the necessities of slavery. The revelation that Cook, despite being a police officer, works on behalf of *Underground Airways*, suggests the complexity and conspiratorial nature of this reality.

Over the course of these chapters, Victor begins to feel a great deal of remorse for his actions as a Marshall. He finds himself identifying with Jackdaw and his plight and questioning his own actions. He continues to be haunted by memories of his on times as a slave, frequently suffering from post-traumatic flashbacks to the violent memories he has repressed. Like many noir detectives and anti-heroes, Victor has found himself involved in a case that forces his own repressed emotions and memories to the surface, causing him, despite his best efforts to repress such, to question himself and his actions. Victor also reveals himself to be highly educated and cultured and aware of the history behind the reality he lives in. While he was never given the benefit of formal education, he is a voracious reader who spent much of his time upon escaping hiding in



libraries and reading. He indicates that he learned about love not by experiencing such, by reading about it. It seems likely that Victor learned to build his personality, perhaps even his projected personality as a noir detective, from his studies and readings of literature rather than life experiences.

Discussion Question 1

Why might Victor feel such a disconnection from African-Americans who have never been slaves?

Discussion Question 2

Why might the author have chosen the murder of Abraham Lincoln to be the historical departure point for his story?

Discussion Question 3

Why does Victor not reveal his true identity and history to Martha?

Vocabulary

tolerance, deception, execution, senate



Part One: North: Chapters 16 - 19

Summary

Chapter 16 – Victor is shaken by his violent actions and begins to question what he is doing. He explains how Texas left the American Union in 1864, an action which resulted in an 11-year civil war between Texas and the United States, “a useless, nasty war, and nothing to do with me” (108). Victor returns to his hotel and overhears Martha arguing on the phone with someone, seemingly upset by a request being made of her. Victor tries to calm her, feeling surprised by his own warmth toward Martha and concern for her son. Martha demonstrates a strong concern for the racism she sees throughout America, pointing out that despite slavery being illegal in most states, “People think it’s far away, but it’s not. It’s here. It’s everywhere. Clouding over everything. Hanging over everything. Don’t you feel the same way sometimes?” (113). She mentions that the recent Batlisch hearing indicates that maybe some large scale change is about to occur, something Victor claims to agree with while thinking about how things rarely change in America.

Bridge calls Victor at the same time, asking him for a progress update on his case. Victor updates Bridge on his progress and recent events. Bridge suggests that Victor is not being honest with him, asking “You holding out on me, boy?” (115). Victor is surprised by the suggestion from Bridge that he is withholding information from him, especially by the racist implication of referring to Victor as “boy” (115). Afterward, Victor reflects upon his own escape from slavery, how he has escaped to Chicago several years before, lived quietly, and was captured by Marshals. After being captured, Victor met Bridge who, recognizing Victor’s unique intelligence and ability to hide himself, offered him a job hunting escaped slaves for the Marshals service, an offer Victor immediately agreed to for the sake of maintaining his own freedom.

Victor feels something changing with himself, “something was piercing through me ... something I couldn’t then explain ... something was happening. A dial was turning” (117). Victor falls asleep and dreams of his time as a slave, remembering when, at some point in his youth, he was moved from working outdoors to inside the plantation, and the brutal job he was assigned of using machines to skin cattle, an activity that disgusted him. He recalls Castle’s promise, made back then, that an “opportunity” (12) would soon come for them. He remembers Castle telling him how they were “from the future” (122) and “in the future we got somewhere else. Some other time” (122) and imagined them in another city, living free. He encouraged young Victor to focus on his future life and to remember that a brighter future awaited him, something Victor has come to realize has not quite happened.

Chapter 17 – The following morning, Victor visits the office of Dr. Venezia-Karbach, a doctor he believes helps to treat escaped slaves. Quickly dropping his act of being a patient, he aggressively interrogates the doctor about Jackdaw’s whereabouts. He pretends to be Jackdaw’s “brother,” “not my biological brother; I mean he’s my brother,”



(129) and demands to know Jackdaw's status. He tells the doctor a fictitious story of Jackdaw and he being slaves together and how he was suddenly sold without any warning or notice. She assures Victor that Jackdaw is well, but that she does not know his current location. She explains how she was recently blindfolded and taken to an unknown location to see him. He asks her "why did he need to see a doctor?" (131) a question which, for now, goes without an answer.

Chapter 18 – Later, Victor encounters Martha again who asks him for a car ride for her to "Freedman Town," an area she only feels comfortable entering in the company of a black person, so she can run an "errand" (135) for a friend. Despite his misgivings, and due to a desire to help Martha, Victor agrees to take her. In Freedman Town, Martha and Victor meet with representatives of an unnamed person. Martha tries to cancel the meeting. However, Wanda's associates insist that Martha, Victor and Lionel meet with the woman, something which causes Martha more concern and fear than it does Victor.

Chapter 19 – Victor, Martha and Lionel are taken to meet with a woman named "Mama Walker" (142). Feeling anxious, Martha explains how her son's father – himself an escaped slave – was killed by a group of whites and that she needs to borrow \$29,500 immediately. Mama Walker demands to know why Martha needs the money and Martha refuses to tell her. Mama Walker offers to loan Martha the money, provided Walker can keep Lionel as a collateral until the debt is paid, a suggestion which causes Martha to become upset and for Victor to take her and Lionel away.

Chapter 19 – Victor, Martha and Lionel have lunch in a diner. The Batlisch hearings play on the television and show Batlisch facing a number of senators that Victor refers to as "tormentors" (150) who question whether her abolitionist stances reflect the beliefs of a majority of Americans, to which Batlisch responds: "If the question is, do these ideas put me outside of the mainstream of American opinion, then I think the answer is no. I think the answer is a resounding no" (150). Victor describes how everyone in the diner is watching the hearings, even Lionel, with "rapt" (150) attention and how such might indeed be a "watershed moment" (150) in American history. Victor is unable to feel the same as the rest of the diner and believes, even if a mass movement is undertaken to finally end slavery "nothing would change" (150). Still, Victor, having just helped Martha and her son yet still chasing Jackdaw, keeps asking himself "what was I doing?" (152). Martha, under Victor's questioning, explains that she needs the money she was attempting to borrow for access to a database where all the slaves, present and past, are listed. She begins to tell Victor about Samson, the slave she had fallen in love with and had Lionel with. Samson is not dead, Victor learns, but had been recaptured and Martha was attempting to locate him.

Analysis

In these chapters, the nation is revealed to be deeply divided and standing, perhaps, on the cusp of radical change in terms of the legality of slavery. The nation is intrigued by the Bastlisch hearings and the possibility of a major political figure being openly against the practice of slavery. In the American government, slavery is a rarely addressed issue,



with most politicians, including the president, taking a neutral stance on the topic in fear of inciting anger and leading the country into a civil war over the issue. It appears, however, that most Americans are against the practice of slavery and are ready for the practice to end, something Victor, for all his cynicism, feels to be unlikely. Victor feels the nation, including the states where slavery is illegal, to still be deeply racist, with black people being treated as lesser citizens and subjected to constant suspicion and civil rights violations. Given that so many citizens do not believe in the legality of slavery, the question lingers as to why and how slavery is still legal and when and how - if ever - it will be abolished. In Victor's world, the majority will of the public is being neither respected nor obeyed by the federal government (akin to the federal government's unwillingness before Lincoln's presidency to ban the practice of slavery in the 19th century), suggesting that a larger force is controlling the government or that the government is reaping some reward for keeping slavery legal in the Hard Four States.

Another remarkable difference between our reality and Victor's is revealed in this chapter: Texas is now, in Victor's world, separate from the United States because of the state's strong abolitionist stance. The Vietnam War did not occur in this reality, instead a Civil War between Texas (known as the Texas War) and the United States occurred throughout the 1960s well into the 1970s (replacing the Vietnam War) that concluded, after massive casualties and destruction, with Texas becoming its own Republic. This reveals the deep divisions in terms of the legality of slavery that have existed throughout the United States for generations. While the extent of the destruction that followed the war is never fully described in the novel, the reader might infer that Victor's world has undergone a great deal of damage from the conflict. The idea of the nation going to war with an American state might serve to surprise the reader - for such an event has not occurred in the United States since the mid nineteenth century - and force the reader to imagine the extent of the destruction and social division the nation has undergone and currently is engaged in. The description of the Texas War also suggests to the reader just how tenuous peaceful existence is throughout the United States and how the possibility for all out warfare over the issue of slavery might be. The author's choice of using Texas as the rebel state is symbolic. Historically, Texas has famously served as the "lone star state," a state which often challenges the norms and rulings of the federal government. In addition, the Texas state flag uses the colors of red, white and blue, with blue symbolizing "loyalty," white symbolizing "purity," and red symbolizing "bravery." The implication, perhaps, is that slavery can only be abolished through the bravery of others willing to stand against the government, loyalty to one's belief, and a willingness to return to the purity of humanity and a government that does not use illegal slaves for labor.

In these chapters, Victor is revealed to be not simply an escaped slave that went to work for the opposing side, but a man being held hostage. He serves as a Marshal not because of a particular loyalty to the service but because doing so offers him an opportunity for ultimate freedom from not just his past but, moreover, the United States. He justifies his actions to himself as being a matter of personal necessity: either he hunts down and captures escaped slaves or is returned to the plantation he escaped from and put back into slavery. His choice tortures him, as he feels he is actively betraying his fellow slaves. He is becoming increasingly suspicious of the nature of his



assignment and Bridge's attitude toward him and the case. Victor continues to be haunted by nightmares and memories of his past, which indicates that he is beginning to lose his grip upon his distant, cold and aloof attitudes toward the world around him. His encounters with Martha and her son, and his sympathy for Martha and her desperate need to find her missing lover suggest that despite his proclaimed detachment from people he nevertheless is able to feel empathy for the plights of others. He still attempts to convince himself that it is not likely that slavery will ever come to an end, but he nevertheless attempts to help Martha and finds himself haunted by Castle's insistence, from the time when they were slaves, that a brighter future awaited them.

Discussion Question 1

Why is the American public seemingly so intrigued with the Bastlich hearing?

Discussion Question 2

Why is Victor so sure that slavery will never be outlawed and banned in the United States and that "nothing will change" (150)?

Discussion Question 3

Why does Victor begin, at this point in the novel, to dream obsessively about Castle and their time together on the plantation?

Vocabulary

annihilation, restructure, indentured



Part One: North: Chapters 20 - 25

Summary

Chapter 20 – Victor comes to realize he has enough information about Jackdaw and the people helping him to bring the case to a close, send in a team to capture him, and move on to his next assignment. Victor decides to call Bridge's office but is surprised to learn, when Bridge's secretary looks up the case file, that it does not exist. He realizes that Jackdaw's case is not official, and that the Marshal's were hunting Jackdaw not so he could be returned, but for another unknown reasons that fills Victor with dread and fear. Victor finds himself in a crisis of conscience, wondering about who he was as a person: "I was a monster, but way down underneath I was good. Wasn't I?" (163). He feels an overwhelming need to locate Jackdaw quickly.

Chapter 22 – Following his lead on Maris, Victor visits a trailer park and finds a tunnel in which escaped slaves had been hidden. He squeezes himself into the tunnel and crawls down through it until it opens wide enough for him to walk. He walks a few miles in the dark with his gun and flashlight drawn. He eventually finds a bruised and exhausted Jackdaw who, when he sees Victor says, with some amusement, "So you him, huh?" (171). When Jackdaw makes an allusion to being familiar with film – "I see the movies!" (172) – Victor realizes that a slave should never have seen any films and tells Jackdaw: "You're not a real slave" (172). Jackdaw responds that he is a "Free man. Born and raised" (172).

Chapter 23 – Victor carries Jackdaw away. Jackdaw is "half-dead" (174). They emerge from the cave and Jackdaw expects Victor to torture him. Victor denies that he is going to torture him. Jackdaw identifies himself as "Kevin." Cook approaches them with his gun drawn and Father Barton also appears, identifying Kevin as a "soldier in the army of the Lord" (176) and reveals that he is aware that Victor is an undercover agent.

Barton explains that five years before, the Underground Airways organization found out that certain plantations were engaging in a certain activity that could, if made public, bring down the entire institution of slavery. Kevin was an agent for Underground Airways who was sent "south" (178) as undercover slave in order to secure a piece of evidence against the southern plantations. Kevin reveals that he is withholding this piece of evidence until a girl named Luna, who he is in love with, is freed from plantation slavery. Cook reveals that Luna is, in fact, dead. Barton explains that he believes death is the will of God. This revelation sends Kevin into hysterical rage. Kevin grabs the gun from Victor, points it at Barton, and is gunned down and killed by Maris.

Victor is overtaken with guilt, feeling that "I should have died" (182). He realizes that Kevin, unlike himself, never sold himself out to the government, that "I should have fought against the men in the vans until they were forced to shoot to kill" (182) when he was captured. Victor is held at gun point by Marris under Barton's orders. Feeling a tremendous feeling of guilt, Victor remembers all 210 people he had help to recapture.



Marris takes Victor to Barton's community center where Barton shows Victor how he has been tracking him via a tracking implant installed in his neck by the Marshals service. Barton does not explain how he has gotten access to the implant. Barton explains that Victor will either track down the evidence package Kevin left hidden and be, then, released to freedom or be killed. He is told that he is to locate an envelope marked "Garments of the Greater South (GGS)" (188) though Barton refuses to tell him what is inside the envelope.

Chapter 24 – Later, Cook tells Victor about the nature of the evidence he is searching for, how it contains proof that GGS has been in violation of the "Clean Hands Law" (190) with a major American retailer – "Townes Store" (190) – which did not allow textiles and clothing from the states where slavery was still legal to be sold in the free states. However, the evidence that Kevin possessed showed that GGS and Townes stores, using shell corporations and other hidden methods, were in fact selling garments and textiles in the free states. It was thought that the revelation of such might serve to put an end to the practice of slavery in the Hard Four states forever. Victor doubts that will happen, feeling that Townes Stores will simply face responsibility and eventually recover and that nothing will change. He justifies his own acceptance of the offer to locate the evidence by arguing to himself that while the three million slaves in the south will not be freed, at least he has a chance to free himself from his servitude to the government and escape the United States.

Chapter 25 – That night, Victor has an aggressive conversation with Bridge, who accuses Victor of obtaining secret information about the Jackdaw investigation. Victor insists that Bridge meet him in person or he will reveal the details of the Jackdaw case to the public. When they meet, Bridge argues that he originally had no idea about the truth of Jackdaw's case and that he later found out that Jackdaw was to be located not because he was an escaped slave, but located and kept from being able to reveal the truth of GGS's labor actions. Victor explains that Jackdaw is dead and that he is being sent to the Hard Four to find the evidence, which Bridge finds strange given that "you work for the enemy, except you are telling me that you ..." (201) to which Victor replies "I've got layers, Mr. Bridge. I go way down" (201). Victor offers, however, to bring the evidence to Bridge provided his tracking device is removed and that he is allowed by Bridge to flee to Canada. Bridge agrees.

After Victor and Bridge depart, Victor encounters Martha back at the hotel room and begs her for help, though he will not yet tell her with what. That night, Victor dreams of Castle again and recalls their escape from the plantation, making a violent "bailing" one night with another man, Mr. Reedy, and who could not keep up with Victor and Castle and was killed.

Analysis

At this point the novel begins to transform into a conspiratorial thriller. The world Victor lives within becomes, over the course of these chapters, far more complex. As typical in noir detective stories, as well as most alternative history and conspiracy thrillers, all is



not what it seems. The world the reader is initially presented with is revealed to be far more complex and corrupt than it initially appears. Here, the reader learns that some of the plantations are doing business, secretly and illegally, with corporations located outside the Hard Four States. Furthermore, the supposed “non-violent” form of slavery being conducted in the southern states is shown to be anything but peaceful. This revelation also reflects attitudes toward slavery in the nineteenth century. It was often argued and widely believed, outside of plantations, that slavery was not violent and simply a matter of helpless people being provided with employment. It becomes increasingly more apparent that the America of this reality is on the cusp of radical change, and that unknown political and economic forces are actively suppressing that change.

Victor comes to realize, as is traditional in most conspiratorial thrillers, that he has been misled and that the information he has been given, and the case he has been assigned, is not what he thought it was and that he is now involved in a conspiracy he does not understand. Like most protagonists in conspiratorial thrillers, Victor struggles to understand the shifting reality surrounding him and to solve the mystery of the conspiracy while also coming to terms with his own shifting identity. He is haunted by both his past and present and is no longer able to repress his past or his own present day misgiving. His escape from the plantation resulted in the death of his friend Mr. Reedy, something Victor feels responsible for because he was one of the instigators for the escape. In the present, he feels that he has allowed himself to be used, for selfish purposes, to track down and even help to kill escaped slaves. However, despite the adversity Victor is facing, he begins to come to terms with the complexity of his own past and the paradoxical nature of his own identity. His statement to Mr Bridge about having “layers” suggests that he has begun to realize his own internal psychological depths. He becomes less willing to blindly follow the orders Bridge gives him and instead begins to question the nature of his case and Bridge's role in such.

Victor's voyage into the cave to locate Kevin and his later emergence from the cave with Kevin is richly symbolic. As Victor enter into the cave he, symbolically, journeys into the underground, a place that exists beneath the surface of the reality he knows. Within the cave, he encounters Kevin and begins to learn about the true nature of the conspiracy at work within the narrative. While in the cave - the cave, also, can be seen as a place where truth is hidden away from the world above - Victor undergoes a startling transformation, with the knowledge Kevin provides forcing him to reconsider the world he knows and the nature of his mission. Victor's emergence from the cave carrying Kevin symbolizes Victor carrying the weight of the truth Kevin has begun to share with him and his emergence back into the world as a changed person. As in Plato's famous “Allegory of the Cave” (the story of a man who is chained in front of a wall upon which he watches the shadows of puppeteers perform, reflected by a fire burning behind them, hence believing the shows to be the only reality that exists due to his inability to look in any other way), Victor, by allowing himself to listen to and consider Kevin's story, demonstrates his willingness to challenge the assumptions he has held to be true through the duration of the case he is on thus far and, like the protagonist of Plato's story (who bravely escapes from bondage and leaves the cave and comes to realize there's a different reality outside the confines of the cave) begins to realize the



truths he has taken for granted throughout his life are not reflective of the true nature of reality.

Discussion Question 1

Why does the author not explain the entire conspiracy that the narrative suggests directly? Why does he tease the reader with suggestions and hints as to the nature of the conspiracy?

Discussion Question 2

How has your understanding and regard for Victor changed from the start of the novel to this part of the novel?

Discussion Question 3

Why does Victor hold Kevin and his actions in such high-esteem even though Kevin is technically a criminal?

Vocabulary

suppression, avoidance, protest, congress



Part Two: South: Chapters 1 - 5

Summary

Chapter 1 – Victor and Martha use a car provided by Underground Airlines to travel south to retrieve the package Kevin left behind. Traveling as a black man and white woman in the southern states attracts attention to Victor and Martha. In fact, in the Hard Four states, it is illegal for a black person to travel without a white companion. They check into a hotel and Victor explains how he will be paying Martha the money she needs in return for smuggling him into the Hard Four. She makes one further request: that Victor tell her his real name. He tells her his name “Brother.” Martha then repairs Victor’s wound from the earlier shooting of Kevin – Victor reveals that he was shot in the shoulder during the shooting – and asks him if he had ever entered any of the Hard Four states before to which he responds, still lying about his status as a former slave, “never in all my life” (218).

Chapter 2 – Victor and Martha enter into Alabama, crossing through a border staffed by heavily armed federal agents, border patrol agents, and various state, county and “Interstate Colored Persons Patrol” officers. Once they are inside Alabama, Victor suggests Martha take her money and leave, a request she does not respond to. The two arrive in Green Hollow, Alabama, a town Victor describes as “being in another part of the century” (221) with one café carrying a sign reading “THIS IS A PREJUDICED ESTABLISHMENT” (221).

Victor waits to meet a lawyer working for Underground Airlines at 11:28 a.m. While waiting for the attorney, Victor notices Martha sitting in a coffee shop nearby, though he had left her a couple hours before at another location. Victor feels confused and frightened. The lawyer he was scheduled to meet had yet to arrive. Soon, he is attacked by two men who beat him with shovels, all the while a state police officers watches without reacting. A woman joins the two in attacking Victor and knocks him unconscious.

Chapter 3 – Victor awakens in a hotel basement, naked, while a group of people laugh at him. A woman’s voice orders him to sit. His attack is explained to have been a distraction. Victor recovers, surrounded by other black people. Victor realizes they are slaves and asks them their “service names” (231). One of the women explains that they do not use their service names. An older white man appears. Victor is identified as “Elijah” (233) and the old man is identified as the “counselor” he is seeking. Victor is assumed to be a slave who is escaping. It is revealed that one of the women, Ada, is the subject of a famous legal case that argued that a slave who is taken out of the Hard Four by his or her master into a free state did not have to return to a state where slavery was still legal. The case, she says, almost made legal history until a “silver-tongued lawyer from Alabama” argued that if the slave was not intended to be freed while traveling with an owner, he or she could be returned to the state they were from. Victor asks the group of slaves why, given that they have all escaped from their plantations, do not simply escape from the Hard Four states. One man, Otis, explains how he does not



trust the Underground Airways and fears being caught and returned back to plantation servitude.

Chapter 4 – Victor learns that the group he has encountered are the same group that helped Kevin escape and explains the details, including how Kevin had poisoned himself in order to fall ill, and was hospitalized away from the plantation with his evidence package in hand. During the course of Kevin's treatment, the package was moved by unknown means from the nurses caring for Kevin to the driver of a delivery truck that would carry Kevin in a barrel. The group claims to not know anything further about what happened to Kevin. Victor asks for more details and assumes that Luna was the person carrying the package ultimately, whom Victor suspects also tried to sicken herself in order to escape the plantation. Victor surmises that Luna was caught escaping, tortured and killed.

Chapter 5 – Martha is brought into the basement, explaining that she had followed the group after she witnessed them attack Victor. Ada asks Victor if he trusts Martha and Victor says that he does. A plan is formulated to locate the driver of the truck who originally had Kevin's evidence package. They plan to break into the plantation Kevin and Luna escaped from and to locate and confront the driver. Martha offers to assist, arguing that the money she has is unlikely to help her locate Samson and that, once inside the plantation, she will have a better chance of locating information about him.

Analysis

Victor begins to come to further terms with himself and his own responsibilities as a former slave and as a human being who does not believe in the practice of slavery in these chapters. His willingness to retrieve the evidence, and to surrender it to the Marshals demonstrates a need he feels, at this point, to escape from his position as a Marshall and flee the United States. Given the horrors he has witnessed, both in the past and present, Victor no longer wishes to be a part of the system that both enslaved him and has forced him to compromise his own morality and identity. His willingness to cooperate is not a suggestion of surrender to the Marshall's service and the government, but instead a desire to be free from control.

Like many other archetypal anti-heroes, Victor's main priority – or so he convinces himself – is his own safety, satisfaction and freedom. He is willing to compromise values he knows to be righteous in order to achieve his own desires. However, Victor is clearly divided, as many archetypal anti-heroes are, between his desire for self-preservation and his intrinsic sense of moral duty, hence his willingness to assist Martha. At the same time, despite his longing for freedom and self-preservation, Victor is also willing to commit dangerous actions and risk his own life. Victor, it seems, has a tendency, especially at this later point in the narrative, toward self-destruction, suggesting that he does not value his own life to the measure that he once did, perhaps due to the overwhelming guilt he feels.



These chapters provide a glimpse into the reality of the Hard Four states. Inside these states the world seems to be frozen in the past, appearing on the surface to be much like the southern United States in the early to mid-twentieth century, which is symbolic of their collective backward social and cultural mentality and refusal to adopt the public's shifting general attitude toward slavery. Businesses are able to openly discriminate against blacks and people even dress in 1940s and 1950s fashion, suggesting that social and cultural development in these states where slavery and open racism are legal has been greatly slowed down, perhaps by direct action of the government. Readers familiar with images of the segregated southern states in the 1940s and 1950s can easily imagine what the world inside the Hard Four states look like, as well as the general attitudes toward racial segregation that existed during that time. Furthermore, the reader is lead to more clearly understand just how deeply steeped in segregation and legalized slavery the general culture within these states is. The case of Ada further demonstrates the unwillingness of the people of the Hard Four States to grant freedom to slaves, as well as the federal legal protections the Hard Four states are allowed to maintain the institution of slavery.

The presence at the borders of heavily armed security personal indicates the looming desire within these states for internal slavery revolts and the fear of outside invasion. Furthermore, the heavily armed border agents serve as symbols of the Hard Four states' willingness to use military force to protect themselves and keep the institution of slavery in check. The narrative might be suggesting to the reader that an attempt by the federal government to abolish slavery in these states might result in a military conflict similar to, or perhaps even more violent than, the Civil War that occurred in the nineteenthth century in our own reality. The reader is provided with a sense of just how dangerous the abolition of slavery might be and, perhaps, part of the reason why the federal government resists doing such.

Discussion Question 1

Why does the author not provide a great deal detail as to the historical occurrences and developments that have occurred in Victor's world?

Discussion Question 2

Why does Victor lie to Martha and tell her his real name is "Brother"? Why does he pick the name "Brother"?

Discussion Question 3

Why does Victor choose to surrender the flask to Mr. Bridge even though he does not trust Mr. Bridge to do the right thing with it and help put an end to legalized slavery?

Vocabulary

static, avoidance, legality, plantation

Part Two: South: Chapters 6 - 9

Summary

Chapter 6 – Victor and Martha enter the headquarters of the GGSI. Martha dresses as a business professional and Victor acts as her servant. Martha pretends to be an acquaintance of “Mathew Newell,” a manager for the company. Once they are cleared for entry, Victor is searched, reminding him of other searches he had endured, something which he notes taught him “Lesson 1: your body is not your own” (252) many years before.

Victor is stunned by the size and scope of the GGSI plantation, which he thinks of as a “different universe of slavery than the little three dozen acres where I’d been raised. Green grass farm country, pig lots, cattle pens, silos ... ultramodern and ultra efficient” (252). Victor locates Martha and finds her in conversation with Newell, who she has apparently convinced knows her and who grants her Victor access to the facility. While showing the plantation to Martha and Victor, Newell praises its efficiency and safety, telling Victor “none of your cousins got a thing to complain about down here, son . . . this is not the slavery of fifty or even ten years ago” (257).

For all Newell’s praise and defense of the organization’s operations, Victor feels enraged at the existence of the continued existence of slavery. Victor also realizes that what Newell is showing them is a show, that “they were out there, hundreds of Persons Bound to Labor too Small to be seen ...” (258). Existing, probably, in the areas he realized were blacked out in the aerial photos of the plantation Marshal had shown him weeks ago. Victor realizes that while he is free, and will soon have the opportunity to be truly free and to be able to escape to Canada, that the slaves before him will never be freed.

While alone with Newell, Martha begins to question him about the plant’s operations and who they sell their materials too, as well as to the obvious abuses that must be occurring at the plantation. Newell tries, helplessly, to defend the organization’s practice of slavery, much to the anger of Victor and Martha. After being left by Martha and Newell, so Martha can tour the plantation, Victor uses his computer skills to access the company’s database in order to find the trucker they are in search of. In the database he finds the listings for all three millions slaves still being kept in the Hard South. Martha and Newell return and Newell catches Victor accessing his computer Victor threatens him with a pair of scissors and demands access to the “Free White Housing” area where he believes he can locate the trucker. He subdues Newell and orders Martha to leave, take their car, and move as far away as she can with her son.

Chapter 7 – After questioning Newell, Victor learns that the true, brutal slavery occurs in the area of the plantation he had seen was blacked out on the aerial photos. Victor disguises himself with gauze, removes his shirt and shoes as a slave, then travels by a hidden subway to the area where the slaves work. On the subway platform he finds



slaves, shirtless and without shoes signing about the Lord “protect[ing] GGSI” (275). He travels with the slaves to their work destination. Victor is shocked to find how deeply the slaves are brainwashed to worship the company and even thank their employers for allowing them to work. Victor quickly escapes the train at the Free White Housing stop, searching for the trucker. However, when he arrives, Victor is quickly approached by a thin, white man who shuffles him into a lobby.

Chapter 8 – The man Victor meets is William Smith, the trucker who he thought was in possession of Kevin’s evidence envelope. Smith speaks nervously to Victor, telling him that he is afraid he will quickly be caught by his supervisors. Victor surmises that William is working as a smuggler for Underground Airways and is being extorted by the organization due to a drug problem. William reveals to Victor that the package he is searching for is hidden in his refrigerator and promptly gives it to him. Soon after, Victor is tackled by a group of guards and knocked out.

Chapter 9 - Victor awakens in an underground room. He is battered and in pain. He damns himself for involving himself in the plot in the first place, “Who did I think I was?” (292). He realizes that he is not alone in his room but is, in fact, in the presence of Officer Morris, Cook’s partner who had seen at the diner when he first met Father Barton.

Analysis

In these chapters, it becomes apparent that the plantations are disguising the horrors of slavery by putting up a public front of willfully and happily employed slaves, which reflects the ways that plantations in the nineteenth century publicly portrayed slavery. In fact, the slavery practices occurring at the GGSI plantation are almost entirely the same as the practices that occurred in eighteenth and nineteenth century southern plantations, including segregated, guarded housing for white employees and brainwashed slaves offering thanks to their masters. The description of the plantations, and the activities that occur within them, demonstrates that the conditions faced by slaves in early twenty-first century America are hardly any different - if perhaps even worse given technological advances - from the nineteenth century. These chapters provide the reader with a strong impression as to the true horrors of slavery and the miserable, violent conditions they face, as well as the brainwashing they undergo and stripping of their identities and ability to think for themselves.

Once Victor gains access to the GGSI database, it becomes increasingly clear that there is a massive conspiracy at work, and one which Victor is struggling to understand. Victor realizes that the system documents not only three million slaves - far more than he believed existed - but also keeps extensive lists of their genetic backgrounds, family relations, abilities and even psychological profiles. Victor is overwhelmed and baffled by the information he encounters and the scope of slavery in the Hard Four states. This is a common plot point in conspiratorial thrillers: the narrator struggling to understand the nature and scope of the situation he is involved in. The apparent shifting allegiances of various characters also demonstrates that Victor is not the only character without a firm



identity or set of moral standards. Also, as in many conspiratorial thrillers, the reader is left - like the protagonist - to doubt the nature of the plot that has been revealed thus far in the novel. The reader, like the narrator, is left confused and desperate to discover the true nature of the conspiracy they have been confronted with. Furthermore, these revelations leave the reader - like Victor - with a nihilistic sense that corruption is absolute and that every institution and character they have so far encountered might be corrupt. This turn of plot serves to bring the reader and Victor closer to each other, as the reader is left able to sympathize more deeply with his position in the narrative and struggle to discover the truth.

The extensive research and documentation of the three million slaves alludes, indirectly, to the earlier twentieth century project in Nazi occupied Europe to document, control, and experiment with Jewish prisoners, something which is widely considered to be one of the most abhorrent yet well designed projects of the twentieth century. While World War II and the existence of Nazi Germany in the 1930s and 1940s is not mentioned in the novel - the reader is not told if these events occurred or if America's isolation from the rest of the world due to the continued practice of slavery kept America entirely out of the war - a reader familiar with even the most basic history of Nazi Germany and the Holocaust is likely to be reminded of the Holocaust while reading these chapters. By demonstrating the the slave holding companies in the Hard Four states are keeping such careful track of the slaves, and working to hide the true nature of the activities that are occurring on the plantations (just as the Nazis went to great measures to hide the nature of the horrors being committed in the concentration camps), the reader is lead to regard the activities of the companies, and the government's willingness to not abolish slavery, as being similar to Nazi occupied Europe several decades before.

Discussion Question 1

Does Newel truly believe that his company's actions as slave holders can be morally and legally justified?

Discussion Question 2

Why are slaves brainwashed into blindly accepting and appreciating their status as slaves?

Discussion Question 3

What other historical atrocities - aside from slavery in the United States and the Holocaust - might the novel be alluding to and indirectly reflecting upon?

Vocabulary

betrayal, task, endurance, database



Part Three: North: Chapters 1 - 3

Summary

Chapter 1 – Morris takes Victor to a hotel room. Inside the room he finds Cook and Martha. Morris gives Cook the envelope. Victor is baffled, confused as to who is and is not involved in the operation and on what side. Cook reveals that Victor had been tracked by Underground Airways to the plantation. Lionel, he reveals, is being held as “insurance” to make sure Victor and Martha cooperate. Cook reveals that he is also a Marshal. Martha realizes that Victor is a Marshall and, in turn, a slave catcher.

Cook explains that he had also made a deal with the Marshals and was in charge of learning Barton’s secrets for the federal government. Cook, like Victor, was spying on Barton with the promise of being freed from the Marshals service and allowed to leave the country. Victor initially, feels quite judgmental toward Cook and his actions but realizes that he and Cook are quite similar to each other: “Lord, what they had done to this man. What they had done to me. The monsters they had made us into, prowling along, sniffing for chances” (303). Cook further explains how he had manipulated Barton into allowing Victor to be sent with the blessing of the Underground Airways movement to find the package. Cook then made a deal with his handlers at the Marshals service to locate Victor and retrieve the package for them and in turn be set free. As Cook opens the envelope, Martha struggles with Cook and a shootout occurs, leaving both Cook and Morris dead.

Chapter 2 – Victor returns to Indianapolis. He feels empty and confused as to who he, himself, actually is. “I was drained of emotion” (307). Mr. Bridge approaches Victor and the two converse uneasily. Victor reveals what is in the envelope: a flask of clear liquid. Victor draws his gun and points it at Bridge, who reveals the contents of the envelope: human cells. Bridges explains that GCSI was attempting to clone slaves. They had been taking women, separating the DNA, and breeding cell lines. They were cloning slaves without any bloodline, without families or histories, people with no claim to freedom. The Marshals service, along with other government groups, have been providing GCSI with the technology to help with the process. Bridge explains that Victor, once the liquid is proven to be authentic, will have his tracer removed and be set free. However, just as Victor’s tracking device is being removed, Maris and Barton appear, attack Bridge and the doctor in charge of removing the device, and steal the flask. Later, Bridge removes Victor’s tracking device and quickly leaves.

Chapter 3 – Victor meets with Martha and tells her the truth about everything that has occurred and his role in such. He tells her, also, that Samson was sold offshore to an oil rig where he is enslaved, a life Victor considers to be worse than death. Victor realizes that he has been telling his story not to himself but, instead, to Castle, the memory of whom he can never escape. He refuses to repress his memory of being a slave and to serve the government. He reveals that he has not fled to Canada but, instead, stayed in



the United States and together with Martha has joined the abolitionist movement and that they are now attempting to gather information to allow for the rescue of Samson.

Analysis

In these chapters the narrative transforms again and the novel develops into a science fiction thriller. The evidence Victor has been searching for is not a computerized record of the plantation's misdeeds but, in fact, proof of their engagement in attempting to clone slaves, slaves who would be legally without identity or history and not subject to emancipation. The development of cloning technology and gene-splicing of slave DNA suggests that the Hard Four states are aware that, eventually, slavery will be abolished and that such change is inevitable, especially given the changing political climate of the nation. Furthermore, such actions reveal the depth of the nation's dependency upon slavery and their unwillingness, much like the southern states during the Civil War, to abolish slavery, which was widely considered to be a necessary evil in order to maintain economic stability. Additionally, the revelation that corporations and politicians outside the Hard Four states are willing to support slavery reflects the attitudes, before the Civil War, many northern companies and politicians held about slavery: that the abolishment of such could cause an economic recession.

As common in many noir detective stories, as well as conspiratorial thrillers, the larger plot the protagonist finds himself in is not fully resolved. Victor surrenders the flask to Bridge without any promise that such will be used to reveal the larger conspiracy and abolish slavery. In fact, by the end of the novel, it is not entirely clear what side Bridge is on or why he is so desperate to get ahold of the flask. The novel, then, can be understood as ending ambiguously. The reader does not know exactly how the genetic material in the flask will be used or whether slavery will be absolved.

However, Victor is able to free himself from the Marshals service and the tracking implant installed within him. As with countless other anti-heroes throughout literature and popular culture, Victor does not take the opportunity to escape and live for himself. Instead, he and Martha have joined another abolitionist movement and seek to rescue her lover from servitude. Nevertheless, Victor appears to have been able to resolve much of his own trauma. He no longer denies, even to himself, his past, either as a slave or a Marshal. He learns to take joy in some of the simple pleasures of life that all slaves long for and to work to abolish slavery. Interestingly, Victor still does not mention what his real name is; suggesting, perhaps, that he was never given a proper name.

Though it is not directly suggested in the novel, it seems possible that Castle is a creation of Victor's imagination, especially given that he only appears in Victor's dreams and childhood flashbacks. Castle can be understood, perhaps, as a subconscious symbol of Victor's own will for endurance and ambition to be truly free of enslavement. Victor's earlier dreams of Castle suggest that Victor still needs Castle, as a symbol or manifestation of his own subconscious desire to be truly free and need for encouragement, in order to free himself from his own enslavement to the Marshal's service. However, by the end of the novel, Victor no longer dreams of Castle and his



own past as a slave, suggesting that Victor has not only freed himself of his enslavement to the Marshals service, but also begun to move on from his childhood trauma.

Discussion Question 1

Why does the author not reveal the fate or the nature of Castle's identity to the reader?

Discussion Question 2

What do you think happens to the flask of genetic material after Victor surrenders it?

Discussion Question 3

Why does Victor choose to join an abolitionist movement with Martha rather than escape from the United States and live freely in another country like he had planned to?

Vocabulary

flask, encase, clone, DNA



Characters

Victor

Victor is a U.S. Marshal who hunts escaped slaves. He is also a former slave who escaped the plantation he was imprisoned in when he was young. After spending several years hiding and educating himself, Victor is captured by the Marshals and given an offer: either he can be returned to the plantation he escaped from or work as a slave tracker for the Marshal's, to which he agrees. While Victor identifies himself as "Victor," his real name - if he even has one - is never revealed by Victor. Victor claims that he does not have a family, a home life, or any close friends. His only hobbies and interests are his job and reading literature and history.

Victor's history and childhood are not directly recounted to the reader. While he spent much of his childhood and teenage years as a slave on a particularly violent plantation, he makes no mention of where that plantation was located, what his exact tasks were, or what happened to - or if he even knew - his parents and extended family. His past, save for a few stark memories, is largely a void. Even his years spent living underground after he escaped slavery are barely mentioned. His life, as he recounts it, began six years before the novel's opening when he went to work as a U.S. Marshal.

Victor is reminiscent of many noir detective characters and anti-heroes. He is skillful, highly intelligent, and morally compromised. Victor is incredibly talented at catching escaped slaves. His investigation methods are rigorous and careful and he spends a great deal of time and effort examining all aspects and details of the case he is working on. His work appears to be the focus of his life, Victor also possesses high intelligence, owed to his earlier extensive study of literature and history as well as his knack for being able to think like other people and predict their actions. He is tortured by memories of his time as a slave, memories he attempts to repress by focusing on his job as a Marshal but which his current case push to the surface of his mind. Throughout the novel he considers the morality of his position and actions, and begins to realize that he has compromised his own morality, not to mention the suffering of the slaves who have not attained the freedom he has.

Victor appears to suffer from post traumatic stress disorder. He is haunted by nightmares related to his traumatic experiences as a slave and also his experiences as a U.S. Marshal hunting and returning slaves to violent plantations. He often mentions feeling guilty for his status of not being a slave and the few joys (such as being able to drive and enjoy food) he is able to partake in.

Martha Flowers

Martha Flowers is a young white woman Victor meets early in his investigation. She is in search of information about Samson, her lover and the father of her son Lionel. Early in



the novel she attempts to borrow a significant amount of money in order to pay for computer access to help her locate or determine the fate of Samson. She later joins with Victor to help him gain access to the GGSI plantation and ultimately works with Victor to search for Samson and help other escaped slaves flee the country.

The details of Martha's past are hardly recounted. She tells Victor that she fell in love with an escaped slave, Samson, with whom she had a child. Samson was recaptured and returned to slavery by the Marshals service sometime before the novel begins. With her son, she is searching for money that will allow her to pay a hacker to gain access to a computer network that she believes will help her locate and rescue Samson. Her desperation to gain the money she needs is evident throughout the novel, as she is willing to take tremendous personal risks to attain such.

Martha is a strident abolitionist, as she mentions she has been throughout her entire life, and states that she is a medical assistant and was raised in the northern states. For Martha, her life seems to have begun when she fell in love with Samson and gave birth to Lionel, hence the reason she does not discuss her early life with Victor.

For Victor, Martha (and her desperation to find and rescue Samson) serves as a symbol of the possibility of love - something he mentions early in the novel that he understands only through his readings about such in literature - and goodness, something which he also doubts any person possesses. Martha is also the first person Victor allows himself to trust since his time as a slave and share details of his past with, suggesting that she also serves as a symbol of emotional healing for Victor.

Lionel Flowers

Lionel is the young son of Martha Flowers and her lover Samson, a still imprisoned slave. While Lionel does not speak or share his thoughts in the narrative, he nevertheless represents the ideal of pure innocence in the novel, as well as the product of love between people outside the boundaries of servitude.

Mr. Bridge

Mr. Bridge is Victor's handler and supervisor at the U.S. Marshall Service. Victor and Bridge do not meet in person until the end of the novel. Victor only knows Bridge through the nightly phone calls he makes to Victor in which he updates him with information for his cases and checks the status of his cases. Bridge's allegiance to the Marshal Service is naïve, it appears, though he does seem to feel personal disgust toward the practice of slavery.

Cook

Cook is an African American police officer who claims, initially, to be working as part of the American Airways movements. He is later revealed to be a double-agent working



with the U.S. Marshals Service and an escaped slave. Cook serves as a dark reflection of Victor: a former slave and undercover agent willing to sacrifice his morality in pursuit of the promise of freedom.

Father Barton

Father Barton is a Catholic priest involved in the Underground Airways movement to help escaped slaves flee the United States. While he claims to be a deeply moral abolitionist, over the course of the novel he is revealed to be morally compromised and working, to some measure, with the Marshals service to suppress evidence of the wider conspiracy regarding slavery.

Jackdaw/Kevin

Jackdaw/Kevin is the subject of Victor's investigation and pursuit. Initially believing Jackdaw to be an escaped slave he needs to locate and capture, Victor later finds out that Jackdaw's identity is fictitious and that he is, in fact, Kevin, an undercover agent of Underground Airlines that had masqueraded as a plantation slave in order, supposedly, to secure evidence as to GGSI's illegal activities. Kevin, however, refuses to hand over the evidence he has obtained until his lover, who is herself a slave, is granted freedom. Kevin is killed in a scuffle with Underground Airways personnel upon learning that his lover is dead.

Abraham Lincoln/"Old Abe"

"Old Abe" is Abraham Lincoln, the 16th president of the United States in our own reality where he led the Civil War, preserved the American Union and abolished slavery. In the novel's reality, Lincoln was assassinated in 1861, shortly before assuming office, which lead to The Civil War never occurring, the American Union becoming fractured and slavery never being fully abolished. In the novel, Lincoln is widely regarded as a symbol of lost hope and possibility, not as a martyr of freedom and an American hero.

Castle

Victor identifies Castle as a fellow slave from his childhood who helped Victor keep up his spirits and plan to escape. The two seemingly escaped together, though Victor makes no mention of what Castle's fate was. Castle appears only in Victor's dreams, hence it is possible that Castle is a figment of Victor's imagination, a symbol of hope and rebellion against slavery he developed as a child and who still lurks in his consciousness.

Samson

Samson is Martha's enslaved lover. While he does not appear directly in the story, he is revealed to be alive at the novel and enslaved on an oil rig off the shore of the United States.



Symbols and Symbolism

Caves

In literature, caves are often symbols of repressed memories and truths, knowledge and ideas that hidden below the surface of apparent reality, such as the true brutalities of slavery that the public ignores, as in this novel. Also, Victor's discovery of Kevin within a cave, and subsequent emergence from the cave also recalls, as a metaphor, Plato's "Allegory of the Cave." In Plato's ancient allegory, he suggested that human beings – as symbols – could be understood as prisoners who are chained to the group, facing a wall. Behind them, according to Plato's vision, there would be a wall, a group of puppeteers performing behind the wall, and a fire behind them that projected the shadows of the puppeteers on the wall in front of the prisoners. Given that the prisoners have always faced the same wall and are enchained, they have no awareness that the performance they are seeing is not their own reality and that a much greater world exists beyond the cave. Plato imagines how one prisoner might, by force of will and curiosity, escape from the cave and be shocked by the reality that exists outside the cave, as well as the fact that he has been deluded for his entire life. He could then return to the cave and encourage others to escape their bondage and partake in the larger reality beyond them. With his encounter with Kevin, who Victor finds out is an undercover agent for American Airways and not an escaped slave, Victor both symbolically and literally emerges from the cave with a new understanding of his own reality, as well as insight into the reality of his own world and circumstance.

Hotels and Motels

In literature, hotels and motels are often depicted as places of refuge and disconnection from reality. Throughout the novel, hotels and motels and hotels are often portrayed as temporary dwellings for people, most particularly victors, in which temporary refuge can take place. Victor, as far as the narrative reveals, lives between motels and hotels, suggesting that he lacks any kind of stable home. He is a transient. However, while in hotel rooms, Victor is able to gather his thoughts and contemplate his investigation, and his own past, in relative peace.

Underground Airlines

The use of the term "airline" instead of "railroad" symbolizes the historical differences between the two time frames and their mutual connection.

During the early nineteenth century, the "Underground Railroad" referred to a group of abolitionists who provided a series of safe houses and secret routes to help escaped slaves flee the United States. Like the "Underground Railroad" groups of the nineteenth century, Underground Airlines help to hide and smuggle escaped slaves to areas where they cannot be legally recaptured.



The Lincoln Memorial

In the novel, the Lincoln Memorial serves as a symbol of the possible abolition of slavery. Located in Indianapolis, Lincoln's Memorial marks the spot where Abraham Lincoln was assassinated in 1961, just before he would be inaugurated as president. Lincoln is highly respected by abolitionists who speculate as to what he might have been able to accomplish, as president, if he was able to serve.

Guns

In the novel, guns serve as symbols of power, violence, and death. While members of the Underground Airways, various police officers and border guards, and other Marshals carry guns, Victor avoids doing so, suggesting that Victor is not as willing to commit an act of violence as he claims to, as well as he respect for human life.

"Castle"

Castles are often symbols of endurance, strength, defensiveness and power, which are reflective of Victor's own regard for Castle. The name of Victor's childhood friend and fellow slave "Castle" is symbolically suggestive. Castle - who is possibly a creation of Victor's imagination - can be understood as a symbol of Victor's own endurance and repressed emotional strength.

"Victor"

Victor's choice of "Victor" for his name is symbolic, suggestive that he considers himself to be - or wishes to represent himself as - a victor: one who wins and achieves his desires.

Automobiles

Throughout the novel, automobiles are presented as symbols of both sanctuary (Victor, when alone in his car, is free to think and consider his case and situations) and ultimate restraint (after all, a car can only travel a limited distance).

Airlines

Throughout the novel, airlines are often presented as symbols of escape from the United States and ultimate freedom from slavery.

Cigarettes

Cigarette smoking, in the novel, can be understood as symbolic representations of Victor's own disregard for his personal safety and need to use stimulants to calm and excite himself.



Settings

The Hard Four

The Hard Four states are the four states in which slavery is still legal: Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama and “Carolina” (the unified states of North and South Carolina). In these heavily guarded states, slavery and racial discrimination are openly practiced, though the true horrors of slavery are kept hidden from public view.

Indianapolis, Indiana

The entire first part of the novel takes place in Indianapolis, Indiana. This setting is uniquely symbolic because Indianapolis is where Abraham Lincoln spent much of his childhood and first formed his disdain for the practice of slavery and racial segregation.

GGSI Plantation

The GGSI plantation is the plantation from which Kevin escaped from his undercover assignment and gathered information and evidence that he believed could bring an end to the practice of legalized slavery in the United States. This is also the location where Victor discovers Kevin's hidden evidence.

Unnamed Plantation

The unnamed plantation is the plantation from which Victor and Castle escaped servitude as children. Its location is never directly revealed in the novel.

Washington, D.C.

While Victor never personally visits Washington, D.C., he identifies it as a place of power and political force, as well as the primary location from which the government operates and keeps itself isolated from the realities of legalized slavery in the Hard Four states.

Themes and Motifs

Alternate History

By setting the novel within a contemporary version of the United States that has followed an alternate historical path than the world the reader is familiar with, the author offers a vision of a reality that is drastically different from the reader's own but which also allows for the exploration of a surprising and sometimes horrifying world and, also, for the indirect exploration of themes that are pertinent to the reader's own reality.

Alternate history novels, films and stories often use the background of an alternate history in order to examine fundamental issues that pertain to our reality. Alternate history narratives, such as this novel, often select a single point of historical departure as the start point of the alternate world in which the narrative takes place, such as a particular historical event never occurring (such as the Reformation, the American Revolution, the United States's involvement in the Second World War) or a particular historical person either dying young (such as Adolph Hitler, William Shakespeare or Queen Victoria) or not dying relatively early into their careers (such as John F. Kennedy, Ghandi, or Martin Luther King Jr), and tracing the radically different long-term historical effects of such. Alternate history narratives tend, such as this novel, to offer a vision of a world that is drastically changed from our own, almost always for the worst, and protagonists who, usually not aware that they exist in an alternate timeline, struggle, often helplessly, to change their world for the better.

This novel explores an alternate contemporary version of the United States. In the reality depicted in the novel, slavery was never fully abolished and is still legal in four southern states. As with most alternate history stories, the alternate world presented in the narrative serves as a stark reflection of aspects of our own reality. In this novel, the alternate history of the United States that is presented shows a country that is deeply racially segregated, where slavery is still legal, civil war broke out in the 1960s between Texas and the United States over slavery, and the truths of what has occurred – and still occur – in terms of African-American slavery remains hidden from the public.

In terms of this novel, the reader is offered a vision of the United States where racism against African Americans is still rampant and where African Americans in some southern states can still be held in legal bondage on forced labor plantations. By focusing on the overt racism that Victor perceives and experiences over the course of the narrative (such as being regularly questioned whether he is a "free man" or not, and subjected to unwarranted searches by law enforcement), the novel also reflects upon and provides insight into the racism that African Americans often still face in the United States in the contemporary world.

While the reader might be surprised to read about the racism and oppression Victor and other African-American characters face throughout the story, he or she might also realize that these sort of oppressive activities against minorities occur in our



contemporary world as well. For example, even in our world a number of African-Americans claim that they are treated differently by employers, non-African-American citizens, and law enforcement due to the color of their skin, claims which countless research sources affirms as being true. What is particularly jarring in this novel is how the manner in which African-Americans are treated reflect the ways they are often treated today, despite slavery being banned in 1865 and full segregation of schools, places of employment and such being enforced throughout the nation for several decades.

Furthermore, alternate history narratives can serve, much like horror stories and conspiracy stories, to allow the reader to experience, vicariously, a reality and world far different from their own, a world which is not as overtly comfortable or safe as their own, but which nevertheless allows them to develop insight into a radically different world and appreciation for the reality they inhabit.

Chaos Theory

The concept of chaos theory, namely the “butterfly effect,” stands at the core of the novel, even though the concept itself not directly mentioned in the narrative.

According to one of the main ideas of chaos theory, a single historical event – however or minor or major such might be in terms of – can serve to radically change history. The example that is often given is that of the “butterfly effect”: a single butterfly, flapping its wings off the coast of Africa, could create a gust that turns into a storm, which then develops into a hurricane, which in turn travels across the Atlantic ocean and causes untold damage to North America.

This novel demonstrates the way in which one historical divergence, the killing of Abraham Lincoln, served to change the entire history of the United States. The other example of chaos theory and the butterfly effect is exactly the primary point of historical deviation that occurs in the novel: how if Abraham Lincoln was killed before becoming president, the Civil War would likely have never occurred, the American Union would never have been restored, slavery would not have been outlawed in the United States in 1865, and civil rights for African Americans would have been greatly held back for several generations.

The underlying theme of the butterfly effect in the novel serves to place a great importance upon Victor and his actions. In the novel, the death of Lincoln demonstrates the importance of a single individual or action to help further a cause. While Victor regards Lincoln as being a lost prospect and someone who died for his beliefs in abolition, the reader is likely to recognize that Lincoln was, in reality, one of the most singular driving forces behind the abolitionist movement. From his death the history of the United States since 1861 has been greatly altered; one man's death caused the institution of slavery to remain legal well into the twenty-first century, and keep several million people within bondage in the southern states.



This incident, and the importance the novel and our own knowledge of American history places upon such, highlights the possible importance of one person's actions in terms of resolving social ills and misdeeds, in turn suggesting the possible importance and ramifications of Victor's own actions throughout the novel. While Victor regards himself as being insignificant and unable to make any sort of change to the world around him, the ramifications of Lincoln's death (and the act of his unnamed killers), demonstrates that one person can, indeed, make a remarkable difference in the world.

Self-Destruction and Trauma

Victor's willingness to take life threatening risks, and his willing disengagement from society and personal relationships, suggests that he is ultimately self-destructive.

At the opening of the novel, Victor claims to be merely a tool that serves the Marshals service and that he, by and large, is without personal agency or responsibility for his actions. Victor works as a Marshal in order to remain free of bondage, to escape the horrible memories of his past, and have the opportunity to eventually escape from the United States and the possibility of being enslaved again. However, Victor is clearly deceiving himself throughout much of the novel. He is attempting to repress his own identity and past in order to escape from the traumatic memories he carries and his own fear of being put in bondage again.

Victor is ridden with subconscious guilt for his actions and his own escape from slavery. He is unable to reconcile his past, his present and his possible future. Throughout most of the novel, he regards himself as a simple tool or mechanism without free agency or choice, and holds no hope for a good future. His self-destructive attitude suggests that he, on some level, wishes to punish himself for the things he feels guilty for.

Victor, in this respect, can be understood as suffering from post-traumatic stress syndrome. He is unable, at the start of the novel, to directly face and conceptualize the trauma of his time spent as a slave and his actions as a Marshal. He cannot fully process or understand his memories and emotions, due to the tremendous psychological pain they cause him, hence he attempts to repress them. The nightmares he experiences, and his memories of Castle and his time as a slave, can be understood as post-traumatic reactions to his past. Over the course of the novel, however, Victor is forced to directly face his traumatic memories and begin to rediscover the identity his trauma has taken from him. Victor can be understood as beginning to resolve his trauma not simply through confronting his past but also by remodeling his present identity in terms of such. Even from the start of the novel, Victor seems to be, at least on a subconscious level, attempting to confront and begin to resolve his trauma by issuing a narration of his present life and bits of his past. According to a number of psychologists, psychoanalysts, and psychoanalytic theorists, a person suffering from post-traumatic stress can best begin to confront and resolve their trauma by issuing a testimony (also known as "bearing witness") or narration concerning such (whether to a therapist, a friend or family member, readers or even to themselves). Victor's willingness to narrate his experience, to tell his story (though the reader is never told exactly who it



is Victor is writing to, whether readers in a book he is composing, or in a diary he is keeping or a story he is tell to himself), suggests from the outset of the novel that Victor is attempting to come to terms with his traumatic childhood and adult life.

Conspiracy

As Victor's narrative develops, it becomes obvious that there is a conspiracy to keep slavery legalized or at least functioning that is lurking behind the plot of the novel and which Victor only slowly becomes aware of. A conspiracy is usually defined as a secretive plan made by a group to do something unlawful or immoral. In a conspiracy narrative, the reader, like the narrator or protagonist(s), struggles to comprehend the nature of the secretive plans that seem to be working behind the scenes.

While the novel, at first, seems to be a procedural detective narrative, it transforms into a conspiracy thriller. In the genre of the conspiracy thriller, the protagonist(s) or narrator is usually tasked, often reluctantly, with understanding the often nameless and furtive plot they have become involved with. However, while a detective narrative usually involves the protagonist(s) or narrator solving a crime and helping to make sure justice is met, a conspiracy thriller focuses on the protagonist(s) or narrator discovering the ultimate truth behind the conspiracy they encounter, something which they are rarely able to full accomplish.

In this novel, the ultimate conspiracy involves the government and several plantation businesses in the Hard South states working to develop a system for cloning slaves. These groups plan, once slavery is made illegal, to continue to practice slavery by using clones, (who would be without histories or identities) instead of people. Like any conspiracy thriller, the conspiracy remains vague throughout the narrative, with the protagonist being distracted, confused and betrayed by trusted allies along the way. Furthermore, as is traditional in most conspiracy thrillers, the conspiracy is never fully revealed to the protagonist or the reader, nor is it fully resolved. By the end of this novel, both the reader and Victor are left confused as to the nature of the conspiracy's intentions, as well as its resolution.

Conspiracy thrillers, such as this novel, tend to offer a particularly nihilistic and dark sense of reality, implicitly suggesting to the reader that the world as they know it does not operate in the way he or she might believe it to. While the protagonist or narrator of such a narrative might feel a sense of renewed self-confidence and purpose by the end of the story, he or she is likely to be left with a skewed and particularly cynical perspective as to the nature of reality and the institutions and ideas he or she once took for granted, just as Victor is at the end this novel.

The Anti-Hero

By the end of the novel, Victor evolves from a selfish anti-hero haunted by the memories of his past that he has repressed into a more traditional heroic figure who is



willing to risk his freedom by staying in the United States, joining an abolitionist movement, and helping Martha to help Samson and other slaves to escape to freedom.

Throughout the novel, Victor can be understood as being a prototypical literary anti-hero. The character archetype of the anti-hero is one of the most common, and popular, character archetypes in literature and popular culture. Anti-heroes can be best defined as protagonists who lack typical heroic traits (such as courage, a strict moral code, idealism, and a sense of serving a higher purpose) yet still, despite their usual selfish motivations, serve to resist people and institutions they consider to be evil and immoral. Often, over the course of a narrative, anti-heroic characters are revealed to be deeply wounded or traumatized figures who have given up on adhering to any sort of moral code and putting themselves at risk by helping others. However, in most narratives, anti-heroes usually find themselves developing into more traditional heroes as they begin to recognize injustice and find themselves confronted with a purpose for them to follow.

Throughout much of the novel Victor presents himself as being selfish, reckless, and without concern for others. While he is highly intelligent and charming, he also reveals himself to be capable of violence and deception (such as when he is willing to use physical torture and his regular use of fictional identities in order to manipulate others). However, like most anti-heroes, Victor is deeply traumatized by incidents from his past and his persona is an invention that he hides himself behind, figuratively, in order to repress his own memories and true emotions.

Furthermore, as is common with literary anti-heroes, Victor feels a weakness for children and, in some cases, people in desperate and immediate need for help. Over the course of the novel, Victor finds himself growing attached to Martha's plight as well as her son, and feels a need – a need which he is initially confused by – to help them. As he begins to assist Martha, and more closely consider the nature of the case he is working on, Victor comes to recognize the grave injustices that are occurring (particularly in terms of the barbaric slave practices that are occurring in the Hard Four states and the questionable involvement of the federal government and private corporations in the practice of slavery) and his own ability (due to his investigatory talents) and responsibility (as an African-American and former slave) to help put an end to such.



Styles

Point of View

The novel is told entirely from the perspective of Victor, who is an experienced investigator and highly-educated reader of literature and history. While other characters speak, the reader's knowledge of what they are saying, and their manner of delivery, is filtered through Victor's narration. Everything the reader knows about Victor, his case, and his world are filtered through the voice and viewpoint of Victor, which, as is the case for any first person narrative, renders Victor's narrative to be unreliable. For example, Victor expresses, throughout the narrative contradictory viewpoints and beliefs about his service as a Marshal, sometimes praising himself for his talent for finding hidden escaped slaves and sometimes damning himself for his actions. Also, his memories of Castle - who he idolizes as a near mythic figure ("Castle's eyes would get so wide in the dark. Castle's bright and beautiful white eyes, like twin planets. His eyes were all I could see when it was just Castle and me under our shared blanket, on our shared cot, in our cabin, which was the one closest to the northernmost chain fence" (60) - suggest that Castle might be a creation of his imagination. Without an outside, third-person narrative voice appearing in the novel, the reader cannot fully ascertain the "reliability" and truth of what Victor explains to the reader.

Language and Meaning

Victor's narrative is delivered, for the most part, very directly to the reader. He is an investigator and person of logic and reason, hence he narrates his actions carefully and calmly to the reader, usually without any strong emotion. However, Victor's sense of humor – a dark, gallows sense of humor – is evident at a few times throughout the novel, especially when he offers sarcastic remarks about legal slavery being "non-violent" (8) and himself as a "mechanism" (6) and not an actual person.

Structure

The novel has three noteworthy structural element. The novel is broken down into three separate sections: Part One: North, Part Two: South, and Part Three: North. Each "part" of the novel tends to belong to a different type of literary genres. Part One's style is reminiscent of a noir-detective story, not unlike the works of Raymond Chandler, Paul Auster and Mickey Spillane. The protagonist narrates the story and addresses the reader directly as he investigates his case. The reader only knows as much as the narrator does, which is a standard feature of a noir style detective story. In "Part Two: South," the story shifts from being a noir detective novel to a conspiracy novel. In this section of the novel, Victor works to understand the nature of the plot he is involved in, as well as the allegiances of those around him. In this section, Victor's narrative becomes more confused, frustrated, and angry than the previous section. The

confidence he voiced in the previous section is replaced, to a measure, with a sense of doubt and fear. In the third and final section of the novel, “Part Three: North,” the novel evolves, somewhat, into a science fiction story. Much of this short section involves Mr. Bridge explaining the nature of the conspiracy to Victor, particularly in regard to the flask of genetic material Victor locates. Here, Victor, along with the reader, are offered scientific information which Victor struggles to comprehend.

A further point about the novel’s style: At a few other points in the novel, Victor narrates his dreams of his time as a slave. His dreams – which the author sets off from the rest of the narrative with italics – are delivered in a first-person, stream of consciousness style, without the sort of logic and analysis that Victor employs in the rest of his narrative.



Quotes

I was a mechanism—a device. That's all I was."

-- Victor (Part One: Chapter One)

Importance: Victor considers himself, at this early point in the novel, to be merely a tool, an instrument that is used by the Marshals service, without any personal agency or control over the matters he is involved in.

I whistled very softly, still sitting motionless, hands still flat on the table. 'All right,' I whispered. 'All right, all right, all right.'"

-- Victor (Part One: Chapter One)

Importance: This quotation provides insight into Victor's own internal rage and his coping mechanism of talking to himself.

I had a lot of names. Or, more precisely, it was my practice at the beginning of a new job to think of myself as having no name at all. As being not really a person at all.

-- Victor (Part One: Chapter Two)

Importance: This quotation highlights Victor's own sense of being without an identity, as well as his ability to leave his past actions behind him and restructure himself before every case.

No future amendment of the Constitution shall affect the five preceding articles [the Crittenden amendments to the Constitution] ... and no amendment shall be made to the Constitution which shall authorize or give to Congress any power to abolish or interfere with slavery in any of the States by whose laws it is, or may be, allowed or permitted.

-- The Alternate United States Constitution (Part One: Chapter Four)

Importance: The alternate United States Constitution, which Victor discusses early on the story, allows for the legalized practice of slavery in the United States and limits the ability of Congress to outlaw or ban slavery.

Violent slavery is against the law."

-- Victor (Part One: Chapter Four)

Importance: Victor, with a note of heavy sarcasm, notes that violent slavery is illegal, while slavery itself – which is itself defined in terms of violence as being a state of restricted freedom and exhausting and dehumanizing labor – is legal. This was also, as Victor is likely aware, a common statement made by those who owned slaves in the 19th century.

I worked so hard to keep everything inside, but now here I was."

-- Victor (Part One: Chapter Six)



Importance: With this line, Victor reveals that he is becoming unable to keep his repressed memories blocked and that the case he is currently working on is bringing those memories to the surface.

Castle's eyes would get so wide in the dark. Castle's bright and beautiful white eyes, like twin planets. His eyes were all I could see when it was just Castle and me under our shared blanket, on our shared cot, in our cabin, which was the one closest to the northernmost chain fence.

-- Victor (Part One: Chapter Seven)

Importance: This quote comes from one of Victor's dreams about his time as a slave and serves to demonstrate the intimacy that existed between Castle and Victor, as well as the clarity with which Victor still remembers Castle.

I was a monster, but way down underneath I was good. Wasn't I?"

-- Victor (Part One: Chapter Seven)

Importance: This quote demonstrates Victor's confusion as to his identity and the righteousness of his actions as a Marshall.

What the slave wants but can never have is not only freedom from the chains but also from their memory."

-- Victor (Part One: Chapter Nine)

Importance: This quote suggests the pain and trauma that slaves, and former slaves, experience and their desire to escape from such. In terms of Victor, this line helps to explain why he has been so willing to betray his fellow former slaves and his own values and morals.

No man – Underground Airlines is a figure of speech: it's the root of a grand, extended metaphor, 'pilots' and 'stewards' and 'baggage handlers' and 'gate agents.' Connecting flights and airport security. The Airline flies on the ground, in package trucks and unmarked vans and stolen tractor-trailers.

-- Victor (Part One: Chapter Eleven)

Importance: This quote helps to explain that Underground Airways is not a literal air travel service, but rather the symbolic representation of an organization that serves to help escaped slaves escape the country to freedom.

There was an Olympic gold medalist from Alabama, boy named Jesse Owens, who took a mess of world records in Berlin in 1936 and then defected to the Soviet Union. For the next half century he was one of the evil empire's prize possessions, turning up in Pravda every once in a while to denounce the degenerate slave-state capitalism."

-- Victor (Part One: Chapter 12)

Importance: This quotations suggests some of the major differences that exist between our history and the alternate American history presented in the novel. In our reality,



Jesse Owens did not defect to the Soviet Union. Instead he became an American icon and civil rights advocate.

[...] two worlds, this world and another one, us now and us later, what we are and what we are going to be...

-- Victor (Part Three: Chapter Three)

Importance: This quotation reveals the extent of the hope that Castle offered Victor. While planning their escape from the plantation they served on, Castle promised Victor that there was a better life of freedom awaiting them in the future, provided they escaped. During the most difficult times they faced in servitude, Victor regularly returned in memory to Castle's promise, a promise which provided him with hope during his most desperate and frightened times.