

Heta Uimaniemi

**WE-NARRATION AND COMMUNITY IN
GEORGE SAUNDERS' *LINCOLN IN THE
BARDO***

Faculty of Information Technology and Communication Sciences
Bachelors Thesis
October 2021

ABSTRACT

Heta Uimaniemi: We-Narration and Community in George Saunders' *Lincoln in the Bardo*
Bachelor's Thesis
Tampere University
Degree Program in Languages
October 2021

This thesis examines how George Saunders' novel *Lincoln in the Bardo* (2017) establishes itself as a we-narrative both structurally and thematically. We-narration refers to narratives that utilize the first-person plural as the dominant narrative point of view. We-narration is increasingly more common in contemporary fiction, making such narratives increasingly interesting for literary research. The theoretical framework for this thesis is largely based on structural elements of we-narration, such as shared subjectivity, collective experiences, and the us vs. them binary that often informs the narrative structure of novels narrated in first-person plural, including *Lincoln in the Bardo*.

Lincoln in the Bardo is narrated by a group of characters stuck in a "bardo", a purgatory state between life and death modeled after Tibetan Buddhist concepts. The narrating we-group, which I have called the narrating collective in this thesis, is defined not only through their own selves, but also through oppositional groups, which are referred to as 'they'-groups in the thesis. These outside groups are analyzed through their connections to the narrating collective. The thesis examines how their presence in the mental and physical spaces occupied by the collective both strengthen and weaken the shared identity and experience within the bardo.

We-narration as a dominant mode of narration creates a sense of community within a novel, and this thesis examines we-narration more specifically from this communal point of view. *Lincoln in the Bardo* employs a tight-knit collection of characters and voices as its we-narrator. This thesis examines how community is built from this amalgamation of individual voices brought together by death and the bardo. The bardo is a temporary place for those in the narrating collective, and the battle between having to leave the bardo and wanting to cling to its temporary safety is a key element bringing the narrating collective together. Thus, we-narration is not only a structural element of *Lincoln in the Bardo*, but a more overarching theme that informs the novel's characterization and the building of communal identity within the narrating collective.

The us vs. them binary in *Lincoln in the Bardo* is broken by the appearance of Willie Lincoln, whose character is based on the real-life son of President Abraham Lincoln. The thesis further examines Willie's role in the novel as an outsider character, disconnected from any other group represented in the us vs. them binary. The thesis examines how an outsider perspective is necessary for the narrating collective of *Lincoln in the Bardo* in freeing them from the stunted temporary state they are in, as well as from the us vs. them binary informing the narrative structure of the novel.

Keywords: we-narration, collective narration, community

The originality of this thesis has been checked using the Turnitin OriginalityCheck service.

TIIVISTELMÄ

Heta Uimaniemi: We-Narration and Community in George Saunders' *Lincoln in the Bardo*
Kandidaatintutkielma
Tampereen yliopisto
Kielten tutkinto-ohjelma
Lokakuu 2021

Tämä tutkielma tarkastelee me-muotoisen kerronnan sisällöllistä ja rakenteellista merkitystä George Saundersin romaanissa *Lincoln in the Bardo* (2017). Me-muotoisella kerronnalla tarkoitetaan monikon ensimmäisen persoonan kerrontaa, jossa kertova ääni käyttää me-pronominia viitatessaan itseensä. *Lincoln in the Bardo* on kerronnaltaan me-muotoinen romaani, jossa yhteisöllisyys syntyy sekä temaattisella että rakenteellisella tasolla. Tutkielman keskeisiä näkökulmia ovat yhteisöllisyys, jaettu kokemuksellisuus, sekä Saundersin romaanille keskeinen jaottelu meihin ja heihin.

Lincoln in the Bardo sijoittuu bardoon, joka on buddhalaisessa maailmankatsomuksessa välitila elämän ja kuoleman välillä. Romaanin keskeinen me-kertoja, jota tutkielmassa kutsutaan kertovaksi yhteisöksi, koostuu bardoon jääneistä henkilöihahmoista. Nämä henkilöihahmot muodostavat bardossa kertovan yhteisön, joka jättää ulkopuolelleen teoksen tematiikalle keskeisiä ryhmiä. Nämä ryhmät koostuvat sekä elävistä että kuolleista henkilöihahmoista, joiden avulla romaani muodostaa jaon meihin ja heihin. Tutkielma analysoi näiden ulkopuolisten ryhmien merkitystä kertovan yhteisön identiteetille ja kokemuksille.

Tutkielma käsittelee myös romaanille keskeisen me vastaan he-jaottelun ulkopuolelle jäävää henkilöihahmoa, Willie Lincolnia. Willie Lincolnin hahmolla on merkittävä vaikutus romaanin juoneen ja rakenteeseen. Willie on ulkopuolinen sekä kertovasta yhteisöstä että romaanin muista keskeisistä ryhmistä. Ulkopuolisuutensa avulla Willie esittelee kertovalle yhteisölle uusia näkökulmia bardoon ja sen väliaikaisuuteen liittyen. Näiden uusien näkökulmien avulla kertova yhteisö irtautuu bardosta romaanin lopussa. Willien ulkopuolisuus kyseenalaistaa myös romaanin keskeisen erittelyn meihin ja heihin. Tutkielma analysoi ulkopuolisen henkilön merkitystä tällaiselle jaottelulle ja sen rakenteelliselle murtamiselle.

Avainsanat: me-muotoinen kerronta, yhteisöllisyys, kertova yhteisö

Tämän julkaisun alkuperäisyys on tarkastettu Turnitin OriginalityCheck –ohjelmalla.

Table of Contents

1. Introduction	1
2. The Narrating Collective	3
3. Us and Them.....	7
3.1. The Living.....	7
3.2 The Dead	11
4. Willie Lincoln.....	17
5. Conclusions	22
Bibliography.....	24

1. Introduction

American author George Saunders' debut novel *Lincoln in the Bardo* is an experimental novel that juxtaposes two distinct storylines: one based on historical sources, both real and fictional, relating to Abraham Lincoln's presidency and the death of his son Willie, and another storyline depicting experiences of deceased characters stuck in a liminal space between life and death. These latter characters narrate their experiences collectively, utilizing the pronoun 'we' and centering the narrative on their collective experiences. This mode of narration is known in literary theory as first-person plural narration or we-narration. Bekhta derives the term we-narration through the usage of the term "we-voice", which she defines as "a recognizably distinct type of first-person plural narration rooted in collective subjectivity" (165). The study of we-narration is especially relevant to American fiction due to the narrative style's rising popularity in contemporary American fiction (Maxey 1), rendering *Lincoln in the Bardo* highly suitable and timely for such analysis due to its place and popularity in the field of contemporary American fiction.

Community and shared experiences are crucial to this narrative of *Lincoln in the Bardo*, and community is defined both through inclusion and exclusion of characters and character groups underneath the labels of 'we' and 'they.' Both the structural and thematic importance of we-narration and the us vs. them binary present in *Lincoln in the Bardo* define the storyline of the bardo portion of the novel. This thesis will mainly focus on the definition of we-narration by Bekhta as "narratives in which collective subjectivity defines the dominant mode of narration" (166), examining ways in which *Lincoln in the Bardo* distinguishes itself as a we-narrative consistent with Bekhta's definition. The novel is well suited for this kind of analysis, as we-narration informs its storytelling both structurally and thematically. It is not merely the pronoun 'we', but the "collective subjectivity" and shared experiences of the narrating collective that makes *Lincoln in the Bardo* suitable for such analysis. This thesis will analyze the importance of these shared experiences and

communal identity to those in the bardo and how these elements inform the plot and themes present in the novel.

Bardo is a term related to Tibetan Buddhism, defined by the *Oxford English Dictionary* as “an intermediate or transitional state; *esp.* (usually with *the*) a state of existence between death and rebirth.” Saunders’ usage of the term *bardo* relates to the “intermediate or transitional state” the characters experience between the ontological states of life and death. The we-narration of the novel is set in the bardo, thematizing the complex relationships to life and death presented by the novel. The bardo that the narrating collective inhabits is at times a haven of sorts of blissful ignorance in which the characters can temporarily exist while giving little regard to their deaths. However, the bardo is also a place of anguish for the narrating collective, as the act of remaining in such a liminal state becomes harder throughout the novel. Liminality is defined by Bamber et al. as “a transitional state, usually bounded in space and time” (1515) – for the purpose of the novel, the bardo exists as a “transitional state”, physically set in a cemetery, and temporally set between life and death.

By applying theory of we-narration and utilizing it for interpretation of the novel, the thematic aspects of community, death and identity can be further delved into. Collective narration creates identity and community within the group of characters based on their shared experiences and emotions triggered by the liminal state in which they exist. Bamber et al. note that liminal spaces are often “painful, unsettling and disruptive” (1515), and it is precisely these kinds of aspects of the bardo that make it an emotionally tough space for the narrating collective to inhabit. The novel presents complex emotional views on mortality, grief, and the afterlife. These thematical aspects of the novel stem from the experiences of narrating collective, rendering it logical to analyze not only the structural elements of we-narration, but the thematical elements of shared emotions regarding the liminal space of the bardo and the emotional reactions it triggers in its inhabitants.

2. The Narrating Collective

Set in 1862, the bardo section of the novel takes place in a graveyard, where the bardo is both physically and spiritually set. A small, confined setting is especially fruitful to we-narration due to its potential to “be read as society in miniature” (Maxey 11). The novel, set in the United States during the Civil War, thus allows for the potential of its narrating collective to represent a sort of microcosm of the society of its time. The theme of death as a unifying experience is foregrounded in the novel from the very beginning through the usage of we-narration. The characters in the bardo come from different walks of life, and it is in this post-death state that they can come together and form collectivity in a way that may not have been possible during their lifetime: for example, a white character, when faced with the horrible treatment of African American slaves during their lifetimes, exclaims “in this place, we are all the same” (Saunders 213). Characters of different racial and socioeconomic backgrounds are grouped under the ‘we’ of the collective narration: in the bardo, these differences no longer matter.

The bardo is accessed through death: only those who have died occupy it, and only those who have died are aware of its existence. Living people who visit the cemetery in which the bardo is physically set are not able to see or hear those in the bardo. However, those in the bardo can see and hear the living, and are able to enter their bodies and hear their thoughts. As the bardo is a liminal state, it is not a space in which a person stays permanently. The purpose of the bardo is to come to terms with the things one has lacked during his or her lifetime, whether that be one’s physical appearance, stunted emotional state, or possibly a wrongdoing committed during one’s lifetime. These deficiencies are what construct the physical appearance of those in the bardo. A character who refrained from living his life fully is described as having several noses, mouths, and sets of eyes (Saunders 27): in the bardo, these physical deformations force him to utilize all his senses and to live life more vividly. In the same vein, a male character unhappy with his sexual prowess during his lifetime appears naked, with a large, swollen penis (Saunders 28). Once a

character comes to terms with his or her past, he or she can move beyond the bardo into a state of permanent death.

Despite narrating their experiences collectively, all characters in *Lincoln in the Bardo* have separate names and identities. With the historical sources accounted for, the novel contains 166 different identified narrator characters. Most of these are characters in the bardo. The most prominent characters in the bardo are a group of three men: Hans Vollman, Roger Bevins III, and Reverend Everly Thomas. As Willie Lincoln, President Abraham Lincoln's son who died at the age of 11, enters the bardo, the three men come together in a shared effort to assist Willie to move on from the bardo towards death, as the bardo is not a comfortable place for children. These three men can thus be regarded as the central starting point of we-narration in the novel. As the novel progresses and follows Willie's presence around the bardo, several other characters join the narrating collective, broadening the scope of subjective experience of the narrating collective. Instead of utilizing quotation marks, Saunders indicates which character is speaking by writing the character's name underneath the corresponding passage, as in the following:

Sir. Friend.

hans vollman

Am I --- Am I doing it again?

roger bevins iii (Saunders 26).

The we-narrator of the novel is thus not a single mouth speaking for all involved, but a mosaic of voices and passages.

Maxey notes that it is technically demanding for a novel to maintain we-narration for its entirety (3). This demanding nature is apparent in *Lincoln in the Bardo* as well, as the novel occasionally shifts from first-person plural to first-person singular, describing in more detail the experiences of one character at a time. The narrative shifts in *Lincoln in the Bardo* between first-person singular and first-person plural complement each other especially in the sense of complex

identity within the narrating collective. Death is a unifying experience in the novel, as the narrating collective comes together only through their deaths and the resulting liminality of the bardo. However, individual identity remains crucial to the characters and is ultimately the key to escaping the bardo, as the only way to leave the bardo completely is to accept one's individual experiences in life and death. Moments of first-person singular narration also create depth on both an individual and communal level within the narrative. No matter how unified a group such as the narrating collective is, there are bound to be moments, feelings, and experiences that only pertain to one character: for example, after becoming highly emotional at the sight of Abraham Lincoln holding his son's body, while the rest of the group leaves, the Reverend Everly Thomas "lingered there, transfixed, uttering many prayers" (Saunders 60). This is a private moment for the Reverend, allowing the reader a brief glimpse into his personal feelings. Any group is ultimately an amalgamation of individuals, and acknowledging the individuality of group members strengthens the narrative and widens its perspective and scope.

Bekhta writes that we-narration is "not reducible to a single 'I' since it is a community, a collective subject" (171). While the characters in *Lincoln in the Bardo* have individual names and separate physical entities, we-narration remains the dominant narrative mode of the novel. Despite the prominence of certain speakers within the narrating collective, no character in the novel takes the role of the central 'I' except momentarily. The characters of the narrating collective acknowledge this as well:

We thought.

hans vollman

We all thought.

the reverend everly thomas

As one. Simultaneously.

hans vollman

One mass-mind, united in positive intention.

roger bevins iii (Saunders 254).

The removal of one or more characters' voices from this narrative would significantly change the form and content of *Lincoln in the Bardo*. The above style of narration persists throughout the novel. The narrative voice thus becomes an amalgamation of voices all recounting a cohesive experience together. There are limits to the subjective experience of each character, but it is their joint effort to piece together their shared experiences in the bardo that creates we-narration in the novel. The novel is aware of these limits and utilizes them specifically to create collective experience and subjectivity: when one character cannot experience or vocalize something, another character will fill in that gap, piecing together the puzzle of we-narration. The experiences in the bardo represent the experiences of a wide and diverse group of people, who all become subsumed under the collective we-group, further highlighting death as a unifying experience that neutralizes differences the characters had during their lifetimes.

The narrating collective foregrounds its importance throughout the novel on both a structural and thematical level. The collective's presence is the cornerstone for the narration of *Lincoln in the Bardo*, informing the novel's meaning and content in several ways. The novel momentarily delves into the individuality of the members of the collective in order to strengthen its position in the novel as an all-encompassing, diverse group of voices, brought together by the shared desire to remain in the bardo for as long as possible. This desire, however, proves difficult throughout the novel, especially with the introduction of other central groups of characters and the effects these groups have on the narrating collective.

3. Us and Them

Marcus expands the definition of we-narratives to “narratives where there are thematically significant shifts from ‘we’ to other pronouns and vice versa” (2). *Lincoln in the Bardo* is a prime example of how the interplay of the opposing pronouns ‘we’ and ‘they’ create these “thematically significant shifts”. The narrating collective establishes itself in opposition to two groups of ‘they’: those who are still living, and the dead who have passed through the bardo onto the ontological level of the dead. The former is more prominent in the novel in terms of length and scope. However, both outsider groups create turmoil and pain within the narrating collective, thus emphasizing the complex nature of grief and self-identity central to the novel.

The pronoun ‘they’ is often associated with the study of we-narration and plural narration as it is often an oppositional group to the narrating ‘we’. Third-person pronouns take on a “delocuted role, the one spoken of” (Margolin, ‘Telling Our Story’ 116). Thus, creating such an oppositional group for the narrating collective to refer to highlights the sense of community as not only a part of ‘us’, but as removed from the characteristics of ‘them’. The subjectivity of a third-person group does not interrupt the narrative point of view coming from the narrating collective, as those referred to as ‘they’ can never speak for themselves. ‘They’ are not, in fact, a subjective ‘they’, but a group entirely constructed through the imagination and observations of ‘we’, the narrating collective. The reader is left with the narrating collective’s point of view and opinion on the oppositional group or, in the case of *Lincoln in the Bardo*, the two distinct groups. ‘They’ are not allowed the same freedom to describe their own experiences as ‘we’ are.

3.1. The Living

The group of those still living is significant to the novel from the very first chapter. As the most prominent members of the narrating collective, identified in Section 2 as Hans Vollman, Roger Bevins, and Reverend Everly Thomas, reminisce on their past lives, the novel begins to draw the ontological line of difference between the living and those in the bardo. The ‘we’ from these

retrospective passages soon shifts from references to the characters and their acquaintances in the realm of the living to referring to the narrating collective, specifically when Willie enters the bardo, and Roger Bevins III is discouraged from discussing his past life by Hans Vollman, who is concerned Bevins is “somewhat alarming our new arrival” (Saunders 26). This marks the first explicit instant of referring to those in the bardo as ‘us’, and is the beginning of foregrounding the importance of collective experiences in the novel.

Through this shift, Saunders posits the narrating collective as the central group of the novel and begins to differentiate it from the living. The experiences of the narrating collective in the realm of the living lose importance, as storytelling in the bardo turns inwards. As Vollman tells Bevins to stop talking about the past because he is scaring Willie, the novel leads not only Vollman, but the entire narrating collective as well as the reader to direct their primary attention to the experiences and events of the bardo. The narrating collective emphasizes its own experiences above any others. This shift is essential to the creation of distinction and distance between the ‘we’ group, being the narrating collective, and ‘they’, those who are distanced from the narrating collective, while remaining interwoven in their experiences and sense of self-worth.

The narrating collective presents a complex relationship with life and the living. On one hand, they reminisce over their past lives with longing and fondness, especially in the beginning of the novel. As outlined in Section 2, even the physical forms of the characters in the bardo are shaped by their past lives: even in the bardo, they are unable to escape the people they once were. However, despite the tenderness towards life, the relationship between the narrating collective and the living is informed with a mixed sense of longing, disdain, and jealousy. The existence of the living is a painful reminder to those in the bardo of who they once were, too, creating a sense of complexity. There is a sense of clinging onto their past lives among the characters of the bardo, as unwillingness to accept the reality of their deaths is what keeps them in the bardo in the first place.

A central scene to the novel in general and the relationship between the narrating collective and the living in particular begins in Chapter XVI as Abraham Lincoln first arrives at the graveyard. Lincoln is described as “an exceedingly tall and unkempt man” whose arrival in the graveyard at such a late hour is “highly irregular” (Saunders 43). Lincoln is the first living person to visit the graveyard, and though he is unaware of it, the bardo, in the novel. His presence is thus the first time one of ‘them’ visits ‘us’, the narrating collective.

Lincoln is, however, not there to visit the community at large, but his own recently deceased son, Willie. The narrating collective describes how Lincoln goes on to hold Willie’s dead body, caressing and touching him lovingly. This is highly unusual for a member of ‘them’ to do, and the collective reacts accordingly:

The holding, the lingering, the kind words whispered directly into the ear? My God!
My God!

the reverend everly Thomas

To be touched so fondly, so lovingly, as if one were still-

roger bevins iii

Healthy.

hans vollman

As if one were still worthy of affection and respect? It was cheering. It gave us hope.

the reverend everly Thomas

We were perhaps not so unlovable as we had come to believe.

roger bevins iii (Saunders 69-70).

Lincoln’s actions act as a moment of reassurance for the narrating collective. Their identity is constructed not only among themselves, but are also influenced by the behaviors of the living. The narrating collective sees itself as “unlovable” because its members do not receive the kind of affection Willie receives from Lincoln. As separate as the living are from the narrating collective, their actions have significant power in constructing views of self-worth among themselves. This

type of tenderness and care is completely new for the narrating collective, who remark that, even though they were deeply loved and cared for in life, “no one had ever come here to hold one of us, while speaking so tenderly” (Saunders 72).

Lack of tenderness and care contributes not only to the narrating collective’s views of self-worth, but to their opinion of the living. Lincoln is immediately different from the rest of the living: the collective’s first experiences with him are sweet and kind, shaping their opinion of him as such. However, the rest of the living who visit the graveyard are frowned upon. They are criticized for an attitude of nonchalance towards those in the bardo. They simply arrive, with “their rumors, their discomfort, their hissing of things having nothing to do with us” (Saunders 67). The narrating collective is not able to be absolved of their past life, to the point where even their physical appearance is constructed by what they are still holding on to in their past lives. Simultaneously, they view the living as a separate group who has “nothing to do with us”, and speak with disdain about them and “their warm flesh, steaming breath, moist eyeballs, chafing undergarments” (Saunders 68). Ironically, as the narrating collective displays disdain towards the living, they are ultimately displaying negativity towards themselves. Every member of the narrating collective was once a living person, although they act as if death has absolved them of the traits they possessed while still alive. However, creating such distinction and claiming the living have “nothing to do with us” is crucial for building a temporary identity in the bardo and for maintaining a divide, even though it appears artificial at times.

Lincoln’s arrival and actions in the graveyard instill a sense of humanity back into the narrating collective. They become, even if only briefly, more than their death. The way Lincoln holds Willie is reminiscent of the way the narrating collective themselves were once held and regarded by their living peers. The Reverend Everly Thomas voices the renewed sense of humanity within the collective:

What I mean to say is, we had been considerable. Had been loved. Not lonely, not lost, not freakish, but wise, each in his or her own way. Our departures caused pain.

Those who had loved us sat upon their beds, heads in hands, lowered their faces to tabletops, making animal noises. We had been loved, I say, and remembering us, even many years later, people would smile, briefly gladdened at the memory. (Saunders 71).

These positive emotions evoked by Lincoln and his actions demonstrate how, much like the narrating collective itself, the ‘they’-group of the living also has internal variation. They are not all the same: while some of them bring anguish and discomfort to the narrating collective, others within the group can, at best, restore self-confidence amongst those in the bardo. While the they-groups are not granted subjectivity, their varying nature is still visible through the narration of the narrating collective.

3.2 The Dead

The second group of ‘they’, the dead, present a sort of opposite end of the spectrum to the narrating collective when compared to the living. The living represent something the narrating collective has lost, while the dead are an indication of where the narrating collective, and every inhabitant of the bardo, are destined to go. Those in the bardo, while dead to the living, are not as dead as those who have already passed through the bardo, at least in their own eyes. They can cling to a final resemblance of life, something they would permanently lose should they accept their fate.

Due to its liminality, the bardo is not a space one should inhabit long-term. Bamber et al. write that “the anthropological notion of liminality highlights a transitory, transformational state, during which an individual is ‘betwixt and between’ and moves from one identity state or role to another” (1518): by its very definition, a liminal space is merely a place to occupy between two states, which in the case of *Lincoln in the Bardo* are life and death. In accordance with the brief and transitional nature of the bardo, most of the dead are told to pass through it relatively quickly:

Matthison, *Aged Nine Years?* Tarried less than thirty minutes. Then dispersed with a small fartlike pop. Dwyer, *6 yrs & 5 mos?* Was not in the sick-box upon its arrival. Had apparently vacated in transit. Sullivan, *Infant*, tarried twelve of thirteen minutes, a crawling squaling ball of frustrated light. Russo, *Taken in Her Sixth*

Year, & Light of Mother's Eye? Tarried a mere four minutes. Looking behind stone after stone. "I am investigating after my schoolbook."

hans vollman (Saunders 32).

However, those in the bardo are stuck in such a liminal space due to their inability to let go of their life. The inevitability of death is horrifying to those in the bardo, and holding on to the little resemblance of life they are still granted is important. The dead visit the narrating collective regularly, attempting to get members of the narrating collective to pass through the bardo and enter the peaceful realm that comes with permanent death. This is extremely painful for the narrating collective, who abhor the visits:

All of these things, we knew (the fruited trees, the sweet breeze, the endless food, the magical streams), comprised merely the advance guard, so to speak, of what was coming.

the reverend everly thomas

Of who was coming.

hans vollman

Sent by them to exert a softening effect.

the reverend everly thomas

We steeled ourselves accordingly.

hans vollman

It was best to roll into a ball, cover the ears, close the eyes, mash the face into the earth, thereby plugging the nose.

roger bevins iii

Strength now, all! Shouted Mr. Vollman.

the reverend everly thomas

And they were upon us.

hans vollman

The central categories 'us' and 'them' once again become highlighted, but this time 'they' refers to a group very fundamentally different from the living. Despite the constant shift of 'they', the 'we' at the heart of the story remains rather unchanged in its central composition. The outside 'they'-groups

have a large impact on this unity of the narrating collective, as can be seen in the above passage. As Hans Vollman calls for “strength now, all”, he highlights the need for the narrating collective to stay a unified, cohesive unit through the hardships they face. This foregrounds the importance of ‘us’ on both the thematic and the narrative level. To the narrating collective, is ‘our’ group and ‘our’ story that is being infringed upon by an outside force and that needs to be protected at all costs.

As mentioned in Section 3.1., the ‘they’-groups, while not receiving an opportunity to narrate for themselves, are acknowledged by the narrating collective to include a variety of different types of members. This applies also to the dead, as two very different images of them are depicted. The first group that arrives, despite the almost war-like horror they instill in the narrating collective as seen in the above passage, are depicted as kind, and the land they inhabit as beautiful:

Come with us, he whispered. Here it is all savagery and delusion. You are of finer stuff. Come with us, all is forgiven. (Saunders 93).

And I saw! Where they wanted to take me, the tide would run in, and never out. I would live atop a hill and the stones would roll up. When they got to me, they would split open. Inside each was a pill. When I took the pill, I had – oh, Glory! All I needed. For once. For once in my life. (Saunders 95).

The description of the bardo as “all savagery and delusion” by the dead emphasizes the temporary nature of the bardo and its role in the life-death passageway. Those in the bardo are deluding themselves into thinking they can still cling onto their past lives, the very lives that still unnerve them enough to stop their passing through the bardo into the peaceful lands described by the dead. It is possibly exactly due to this reason that the narrating collective reacts so strongly to the arrival of the dead. The narrating collective is unwilling to accept that to live in the bardo is to live in delusion, and in turn, that the very community they have built among themselves is built on said delusion.

The second major arrival of the dead in the novel happens towards the end, beginning in Chapter LXXXI. As the narrating collective finds Willie Lincoln laying in agony in a small

building on the graveyard, they suddenly become aware of a presence in the foundation of the building:

These voices seemed to be emanating from the carapace itself.

hans vollman

Which seemed comprised of *people*. People like us. Like we had been. Former people, somehow shrunken and injected into the very fabric of that structure. Thousands of writhing tiny bodies, none bigger than mustard seeds, twisting minuscule faces up at us.

the reverend everly thomas (Saunders 267).

This group of the dead bring to question the us vs. them binary at the heart of the novel. They are regarded by the narrating collective as an outsider group to those in the bardo, and are treated by them as such, looked upon with horror, fear, and a sense of disconnect from the narrating collective. However, the irony of their presence stems from the fact that these people, shrunken into the “very fabric” of the carapace, are not speaking to the narrating collective from a different side of the divide. They are, in fact, stuck in the bardo themselves: a far more grotesque, horrifying aspect of the bardo, but it is the bardo nonetheless. There is still an us vs. them divide in the eyes of the narrating collective, but it is no longer coming from different sides of the life-bardo-death continuum, even if those in the bardo fail to recognize that. The faces in the carapace thus highlight ideas of liminal spaces as places of anguish and hurt, as attempts to stay in such places and states can lead to unimaginable horrors, such as those the people in the carapace now must face for eternity.

This later group bring forth the fear of the future the narrating collective experiences – the same fear that forces them into the delusion that allows them to cling on to the bardo for as long as possible. This group consists of criminals and low-life people:

My advice? said a third, and British, voice. Do not massacre an entire regiment of your enemy. Never conspire with your lover to dispose of a living baby, said the bass lisper.

hans vollman

Rather than murdering your loved one with poison, resolve to endure him, said the woman.

the reverend everly thomas

Sexual congress with children is not permitted, said the voice of an old man, from Vermont, judging by his accent.

hans vollman (Saunders 267).

Their fate, being shrunken down and stripped of the last remaining signs of their dignity and humanity, is precisely what the narrating collective fears. The Reverend Everly Thomas recounts his belief that “when I went, it seemed, it would be to join them” (Saunders 268). In reality, if the narrating collective were to stay, they could potentially end up having to join those in the carapace and become shrunken faces stuck in a permanent limbo. Death presents itself as the ultimate monster for the narrating collective, as the idea of leaving the bardo is so horrifying that they cannot comprehend that it is the act of staying, not leaving, that could potentially deform and disfigure them for eternity.

When the kind, sweet dead arrived earlier on, they were regarded by the narrating collective as “sent by them to exert a softening effect”. ‘They’, in this context, could be read as a group similar to what the narrating collective sees in the carapace, as this seems to be what the narrating collective believes will happen to them if they leave. In their delusional view of their situation, the bardo is safety, and leaving it would deem them into the horrors they see in the carapace. In reality, passing through the bardo into permanent death is the only safe haven available for those in the narrating collective. It is the way to avoid being stuck in the bardo and its liminality forever, precisely as the faces in the carapace are.

The divide into ‘us’ and ‘them’ is crucial to *Lincoln in the Bardo*. The divide maintains the narrative structure of the novel as a we-narrative and goes on to create communal identity within the narrating collective. The ‘they’-groups in opposition to the collective are not allowed the opportunity for subjectivity and self-identification. However, the outside groups have a profound effect on how the collective views itself and the bardo they inhabit. The delusion it takes

to remain in the bardo warps their view of the outside groups and, consequently, their own fate.

This delusion allows for the narrating collective to view themselves as independent from the outside groups, when in reality they inform the collective's identity and self-worth in multiple ways.

4. Willie Lincoln

The character of Willie Lincoln is based on the real-life son of President Abraham Lincoln. Born William Wallace Lincoln in 1850, Willie died of what is believed to be typhoid fever on February 20th, 1862 (Adkison et al. 232). He is buried at Oak Ridge Cemetery in Springfield, Illinois. (He was first laid to rest temporarily in a mausoleum at Oak Hill Cemetery in Washington, D.C., where the novel is set.) Willie is a very central character in the novel. His arrival in the bardo after his untimely death acts as a catalyst for the bardo storyline, and the historical sources, both real and fictional, revolve around Willie's death and its circumstances. Despite Willie's importance to the novel, he is not accepted as a member of the narrating collective, nor is he subsumed under the 'they'-groups defined in Section 3. Willie's presence in the novel thus brings the us vs. them divide into question and suggests that an outsider character to such a binary dynamic can help dismantle the artificial divisions created by the narrating collective.

The exclusion of Willie Lincoln from the narrating collective creates a distinctive role and position for Willie in the story. While the reasons to exclude Willie from the collective could naturally stem from his position as a new addition to the community, his unfamiliar identity does not seem to be the only thing differentiating him from the others. The collective 'we' is seen to include "individuals we had never seen before" (Saunders 66). These unfamiliar members are a natural part of the collective not only upon first sight, but even before that, as they are readily encompassed in the 'us' of the collective narration, in "our community" (Saunders 66). The narrating collective creates no noticeable distinction between the known and unknown members, accepting them all as part of the 'we' central to the narration of the novel. The reluctance to include Willie in the collective, then, does not stem from the recency of his arrival in the bardo, or from the narrating collective's unfamiliarity with his character.

After President Lincoln visits his dead son at the graveyard, the narrating collective begins to ponder on the role and importance of Willie's presence among them. Willie is still

distanced from the collective: “What did we want? We wanted the lad to see us. I think. We wanted his blessing. We wanted to know what this apparently charmed being thought about our particular reasons for staying.” (Saunders 73). Despite this distance, Willie’s opinions are clearly important to the collective, and they are seeking his blessing for their decision to stay in the bardo. This is very much in accordance with how the narrating collective bases a lot of their self-worth on the opinion of outside groups. The choice to remain in the bardo is one that requires a lot of external validation, reflecting the inner turmoil one faces when remaining in such a liminal space. The narrating collective is constantly faced with “the challenges of staying” (Saunders 113), and they recognize that “our path is not for everyone” (Saunders 103). Thus, if Willie, their “new-established prince” (Saunders 74) has chosen to stay, the narrating collective believes their choices to stay could be validated as well, and they could further cling to the delusions they must maintain in order to remain there.

The novel maintains a sense of ambiguity when it comes to the reasons why Willie is not accepted as part of the narrating collective. In the narrative, he is never referred to as a member of any ‘they’-group, and he does not meet the criteria of those groups, either, as he is neither alive nor dead. Despite this, the narrating collective insists on Willie not belonging in the bardo:

Strange here, he said.

Not strange, said Mr. Bevins. Not really.

One gets used to it, said the reverend.

If one belongs here, said Mr. Bevins.

Which you don’t, said the reverend.

hans vollman (Saunders 117).

By distancing Willie, and insisting he does not belong in the bardo, the narrating collective contradict their own fear of death. By stating that Willie does not belong in the bardo, with no other option for him than to pass through the bardo into permanent death, the bardo is presented as a

place of much more struggle than the state of permanent death. The narrating collective is very eager to make Willie cross over, while simultaneously fearing the crossing themselves. This contradiction is especially apparent in Chapter LXXXI, where the narrating collective tries to protect Willie from the shrunken dead people in the carapace. If they truly believe death to be horrible, their insistence that Willie enters that realm does not support that fear. This further highlights the complex relationship the narrating collective have with death and mortality, as well as their inability to fully accept the bardo as the harmful place it is for those who fail to leave it – they acknowledge that Willie must leave, but cannot extend that same idea to their own selves.

As the narrative progresses, Willie himself recognizes that he is different from everyone else in the bardo in a fundamental way: he does not delude himself, but accepts and acknowledges his death fully (Saunders 187). Through this recognition and acceptance, Willie becomes the character in the story that ultimately helps the narrating collective to accept their death and move on beyond the bardo. Willie holds power in the novel that is not granted to any other character or group in the us vs. them binary, allowing both the novel and the characters a way to break free from the divide. The narrating collective does not accept Willie's message at first, and he is encouraged to stay silent and to not talk about the true nature of those in the bardo (Saunders 296). However, Willie refuses to stay silent about the reality he perceives, and as soon as he vocally accepts his death, the first members of the narrating collective leave the bardo: "Suddenly, from behind us, there occurred, like lightning-cracks, three rapid-fire repetitions of the familiar, yet always bone-chilling, fire-sound associated with the matterlightblooming phenomenon" (Saunders 296). The "matterlightblooming phenomenon" is a term used by the narrating collective to refer to the phenomenon that occurs when a person passes from the bardo to permanent death. It takes someone like Willie, who is unwilling to hold on to any delusions presented by the narrating collective, to finally bring freedom to those in the bardo.

Willie passes from the bardo very soon after vocally acknowledging and accepting his death. As he passes, he acknowledges how “we can’t go back. To how it were. All we can do is what we should” (Saunders 299). By utilizing the “we” pronoun, Willie likens himself to the narrating collective, reminding them that there is no way for any of those in the bardo to return to their past lives, and the only thing left to do is “what we should”, which is to pass through to death. This marks a shift in how the narrating collective regards Willie for the remainder of the novel. After he has passed, once he is no longer with the narrating collective, he is accepted as part of them:

Our Willie would not wish us hobbled in that attempt by a vain and useless grief.

hans vollman

In our mind the lad stood atop a hill, merrily waving at us, urging us to be brave and resolve the thing.

roger bevins iii

But (we stopped ourselves short) was this not just wishful thinking? Weren’t we, in order to enable ourselves to go on, positing from our boy a blessing we could not possibly verify? Yes. Yes we were.

hans vollman

But we must do so, and believe it, or else we were ruined.

roger bevins iii

And we must not be ruined.

hans vollman

But must go on.

roger bevins iii (Saunders 309).

By accepting Willie as part of the collective, although only after his passing, the narrating collective is able to accept their own impending passing. The uncertainty regarding death has not vanished, but they now recognize they must trust Willie, even though his “blessing” cannot be verified. Willie is a part of ‘us’ even though he is now in the realm of ‘them’, the dead, further blurring the divides that the narrating collective builds between groups.

The narrating collective focuses on the two binary groups, 'us' and 'them', heavily throughout the entire novel. It is notable that the ultimate salvation for the narrating collective does not come from either one of these two groups, but rather from Willie, who is positioned as outside of the binary groups since his arrival. Willie's character thus transcends the central oppositional groups in the novel, bringing an outside perspective towards life and mortality that ultimately leads to freedom, both from the 'us' vs. 'them' binary at the center of the novel, and from the constraints and struggles of the bardo.

5. Conclusions

Lincoln in the Bardo maintains we-narration as its dominant narrative mode throughout the entire novel. We-narration is not only built by utilizing first-person singular pronouns for the narrators, but also by creating distinctive they-groups in the narrative that are in opposition to the narrating collective and do not narrate their experiences subjectively. *Lincoln in the Bardo* supports its we-narration through momentary narrative lapses into a more traditional first-person singular mode of narration. Communal identity is ultimately built from a collection of individual identities, and the novel acknowledges this need for personal experiences, even in a we-narrative. These narrative moments work to strengthen the multiplicity of identities and voices subsumed under the collective ‘we’ at the core of the novel’s narration.

Despite the prominence and importance of the us vs. them divide at the heart of the novel, *Lincoln in the Bardo* works to move its story beyond the constraints of such a binary opposition. The character of Willie Lincoln is of utmost importance to the dismantling of the binary. The characters in the bardo need salvation from their delusional, unmaintainable state. This salvation cannot, and does not, come from either side of the us vs. them binary, as every group within this divide is narrated and constructed through the delusional view of the narrating collective. Willie, as an outsider, is able to view the bardo and the situation of the narrating collective without such delusion or bias. Through this different viewpoint that Willie’s character is able to have, those in the bardo can be salvaged from their delusions, from the binary, and ultimately, from the bardo itself. This dismantling of the us vs. them divide subverts expectations of *Lincoln in the Bardo* as a novel that adheres to the binary, making it a narrative that aims to break free from it structurally and thematically.

Through we-narration and its oppositional groups, the novel delves deeply into themes of mortality. The novel thematizes the common humane struggle of accepting one’s mortality in a subversive manner through the creation of the bardo, which allows for grief regarding mortality to

flow in several directions: backwards in time towards life, and forwards in time towards an impending, more permanent death. The existence of the bardo and its unique position in time between life and death also allows for the oppositional they-groups in the narrative to be multifaceted, representing very different states of human existence in life and death. *Lincoln in the Bardo* takes an all-encompassing approach to death and subverts the concept of grief, showcasing grief and the struggle with one's mortality from the point of view of those who have already died.

Bibliography

Primary source

Saunders, George. *Lincoln in the Bardo*. Bloomsbury, 2017.

Secondary sources

Adkison, Danny, et al. *Lincoln's Enduring Legacy: Perspective From Great Thinkers, Great Leaders, and the American Experiment*. Lexington Books, 2010.

Bamber, Matthew, et al. "Occupational Limbo, Transitional Liminality and Permanent Liminality: New Conceptual Distinctions." *Human Relations*, vol. 70, no. 12, 2017, pp. 1514–37, doi:10.1177/0018726717706535.

bardo, n. *OED Online*, Oxford University Press, March 2021, www.oed.com/view/Entry/250813. Accessed 16 March 2021.

Bekhta, Natalya. "We-Narratives: The Distinctiveness of Collective Narration." *Narrative*, vol. 25, no. 2, 2017, pp. 164–81, doi:10.1353/nar.2017.0008.

Marcus, Amit. "We Are You: The Plural and the Dual in 'we' Fictional Narratives." *Journal of Literary Semantics*, vol. 37, no. 1, Apr. 2008, pp. 1–21, doi:10.1515/jlse.2008.001.

Margolin, Uri. "Telling Our Story: On 'we' Literary Narratives." *Language and Literature*, vol. 5, no. 2, May 1996, pp. 115–133, doi:10.1177/096394709600500203.

---. "Telling in the Plural: From Grammar to Ideology." *Poetics Today*, vol. 21, no. 3, 2000, pp. 591–618, doi:10.1215/03335372-21-3-591.

Maxey, Ruth. "The Rise of the 'We' Narrator in Modern American Fiction." *European Journal of American Studies*, vol. 10, no. 2, Aug. 2015, pp. 37–52, doi:10.4000/ejas.11068.