

# Victorian Gothic in George Saunders' *Lincoln in the Bardo*

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## Abstract

The article focuses on the haunting souls that exist in the transitional state which is portrayed in the novel *Lincoln in the Bardo* by George Saunders. This novel endures the afterlife of dead souls. The research paper focuses on the dead souls where their transition state is expressed as 'Bardo'. The main objective of this article is to give the characters' transition mind where they hardly refuse to submit the fact that they are dead souls. It brings out the universal problem that everyone dies and there is no clear idea about afterlife. It examines the characters' souls by insisting that death is omnipresent.

**Keywords:** Transition, afterlife, dead souls, eternity.

## Introduction

The article highlights the gothic elements in the novel *Lincoln in the Bardo* by George Saunders. It is Saunders' first full-length novel published on February 14, 2017, by Bloomsbury. It receives the 2017 *Man Booker Prize* award. Saunders is known for his famous short stories, reporting, and occasional essays. This novel is considered one of the top ten novels of 2017. The novel takes place in a single night where Saunders activates the characters through dead souls who lay down in grave of Oak Cemetery Hill, Georgetown.

The novel's title denotes that it is an allegory. Saunders borrows a Tibetan word, *Bardo* which means the state of transition. The novel explores the soul's transition mind and afterlife. It is very much evident through their lingering as souls. The characters in the novel portray their attachment towards life in the real world even though they are dead. Instead, they remain in the Bardo where they refuse to accept their reality. They deny to complete the final journey from the afterlife to eternity.

## Discussion

George Saunders' *Lincoln in the Bardo* tells the tale of William Wallace Lincoln, the third son of Abraham Lincoln and Mrs Mary Lincoln. William Wallace Lincoln (shortly known as Willie Lincoln) lies severely ill in 'sickbed' out of typhoid fever. The sickbed suggests a serious tone because there is no proper medicine to heal the fever. In those days, it is considered as a dangerous fever and it creates impact through death. Willie remains in the sick bed for five

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days. Mrs Lincoln and family arranged a grand dinner party at the President's house. Willie dies within a few hours after the party begins.

Willie Lincoln wakes up in the Bardo at graveyard. Hans Vollman and Roger Bevins III are also buried in the same Oak Cemetery Hill. But they always deny the fact that they are dead. They become unaware of their transition state. They forgot the notion that they are just existing in the world. Through their existence, their transition mind appears to be realistic. As Willie died of fever, President Lincoln is filled with grief-stricken which is expressed as 'the President of the United States, as the saddest man in the world'. During this session, the American Civil War lasts for less than a year. On the whole, President Lincoln is sad with the loss of his beloved son and also about the state's condition.

The novel *Lincoln in the Bardo* explores the gothic features that it is a style which is characterized by fear, horror, death and gloomy setting of the Cemetery. Its principal aim is to evoke the chilling by exploiting mystery and a variety of horrors. The gothic fiction first emerged as a jest during the eighteenth century. Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto- A Gothic Story* (1764) applied gothic for the first time as its subtitle. One of the most remarkable and influential writer of this style was Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) gives the dimension of supernatural elements.

President Lincoln immensely mourns for the death of his loveable son and remains in chaos with the state affairs regarding civil war. President often visits his son's graveyard which defines the chaotic mind of Lincoln. It is expressed as "I was in error when I saw him as fixed and stable and thought I would have him forever. He was never fixed, nor stable, but always just a passing, temporary energy-burst... He came out of nothingness, took form, was loved, was always bound to return to nothingness" (Saunders 244). In the cemetery, there is a horde of spirits engage in communicating their life's events and actions. The soul's voices arose a blend of Victorian gothic elements as the official gentleman took off his hat, and the Napoleon did the same, all making the young Prince President a ceremonial salute. Not a bit staggered with the homage, Willie drew himself up to his full height, took off his little cap with graceful self-possession, and bowed down formally to the ground, like a little ambassador. (Saunders 52)

In the novel, President Lincoln belongs to the aristocratic family. Willie is described as young Prince President and he receives the honour and respect from the gentleman of the state. The hat represents the Victorian feature where aristocrats usually dressed up according to their class. It represents the prestigious position of Mr Lincoln and his family. Willie's answer states his genuine and kind nature towards the people. In the *Guardian*, Hari Kunzru states, that waking life, dreams, meditation and in particular, the period between death and rebirth are all "bardos," states of consciousness sandwiched between other states of consciousness. We are always in

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transition, from dreams to wakefulness, from life to death. When someone dies, Tibetan Buddhists believe that they enter the Bardo of the time of death, in which they will either ascend towards nirvana, and be able to escape the cycle of action and suffering that characterises human life on earth, or gradually fall back, through increasingly wild and scary hallucinations, until they are born again into a new body.

### Summation

The dead souls live in transitional state will not complete their journey to the afterlife. The incomplete journey refers to the soul's wishes and desires that are not fulfilled throughout their life. To fulfil it, they linger as souls in real life until they succeed to reach their destination. This is the case with Willie Lincoln. Willie encounters to read his grief-stricken eyes and he wants him with no chaos in his mind. Finally, Lincoln was assassinated and join hands with Willie Lincoln. The inseparable affection is exhibited through their eternal life.

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