

Setting/Time and Place: Where in the World Are We?



"The white man who owned the vast endless fields had scattered the cabins of his Negro sharecroppers far apart, like flyspecks on a whitewashed ceiling."

—*Sounder*

S*ounder* takes place in the rural South around the beginning of the twentieth century. There are no place-names and no dates. Throughout the book, Armstrong practices the "art of omission," leaving out specific details that might limit the ability of readers to place themselves in the book.

Although the author leaves out many details, he does give enough for the reader to get a general feel for where the story is taking place. From the descriptions of the land—the foothills and the flatlands, the pine woods and lowlands—we can infer, or make an educated guess, that we are in the southern United States. This is where much of the sharecropping took place after the Civil War. The weather also helps place the story there: It is very hot in the summer, and though it is cold in the winter, there is no snow.

Other details provide clues for when the story is taking place. We can assume that it takes place after the Civil War because the family in *Sounder* are sharecroppers, as are the black families that live in the cabins that surround them, and sharecroppers generally took the place of slaves on large farms and plantations after the Civil War. It is probably a fair amount of time after the Civil War, too, as there is no mention of war or slavery. The story is not too recent, however, as sharecropping became increasingly unpopular in the United States in the early twentieth century. Another clue about the time of the story is the fact that the sheriff and his deputies do not come to arrest the father in a patrol car, but on horseback and with a horse-drawn wagon.

We feel the poverty, desolation, and isolation of this family's world from the very beginning of the book. We feel their poverty when they say, "The crop will be better next year. There'll be more day work. The hunting was better last year." We feel it when we learn that the people, as well as the dog, are hungry, that "corn mush had to take the place of stewed possum, dumplings, and potatoes." And we feel it when we see the father risk his life and his family's livelihood to steal food to fill their empty stomachs.

Under the sharecropping system, a family rented a section of a large farm, which they would pay for with a portion of the crops they raised. The sharecropping families were always poor and often, though not always, black. Because they were poor, they seldom had the money they needed to buy seeds and fertilizer, and would have to get these from the landowner. As a result, by the time the sharecroppers harvested their crop, they owed

money to the landowner for rent and supplies and, sometimes, equipment rental. This often meant the sharecropper had barely enough money to feed his family, if there was any money left at all. There was usually not enough money leftover to buy supplies for next year, so the cycle continued. The poor sharecroppers were always indebted to the wealthy white landowners.

Armstrong also provides many details to give the reader a strong sense of the family's isolation. "No dim light from the other cabins punctuated the night," Armstrong writes, then describes how spread out the cabins are. Even the schoolhouse is on the edge of town, eight miles away, removing the children's chance of getting an education, isolating them even more.

Once in a while, the family visits other families in the "distant cabins," or goes to the meetinghouse, but this happens so rarely that we never see it. As for visitors to the cabin, "Almost no one passed on the road in winter. . . . Even in summer a speck on the horizon was a curiosity." The only time that we see outsiders come to the cabin is when the sheriff and his deputies come to arrest the father.

The setting is desolate as well. The boy describes what he sees when he looks out the window: "Nothing moved except what the wind moved—dead leaves under the cabin, brown blades and stalks from the fields which were dead and ready to be blown away, bare branches of poplars, and the spires of tall pines."

Armstrong also makes us feel the fear, ignorance, and prejudice of the time and place. Fear seems to be a constant in this family's

life. There's the fear of going hungry, but even greater is the fear of what white people can do to them. We start to feel that fear after the father brings home the sausage and ham. We feel it when the sheriff and his deputies push their way into the house and the family freezes, no one in the family speaks, no one moves. We feel the fear when the father is hit in the face with the chain and when Sounder is shot. We feel the boy's fear when he goes to see his father on Christmas and is afraid he will be stopped on the way to town. We feel the fear when the jailer destroys the cake and makes the boy clean up the mess. And we are reminded of that fear when the boy's mother tells him, "Be careful what you carry off, child. It can cause a heap o' trouble."

The lack of education of the time is shown in several ways. First, there are the many people—represented by the mother and father—who cannot read and write. A large part of the population lives in ignorance since they have very few opportunities to get an education.

Ignorance is also shown in the hateful and hurtful racial prejudice of that time and place. This prejudice is found throughout the book, especially when the reader looks closely at the sharecropping system. This black family, like many sharecroppers, works hard but is stuck in poverty, while the white landowner reaps the wealth. There is also the prejudice that limits a black person's education—does not even allow it—by making schools hard to get to. And even when the school is not far away, there is often so much work that the children cannot be spared from the fields to go to school. There is the prejudice that sentences a father to years of hard labor for

stealing food to try to feed his family, when food could not be got in any other way.

There are also the physical and verbal abuses of prejudice. The sheriff calls the father “boy,” and at first the elder son thinks the sheriff must be talking to him. By refusing to address the father as a man, especially in front of his wife and children, the sheriff shows him no respect. The father is chained and pushed into the back of a wagon. It’s no better in jail, where the jailer destroys the father’s Christmas cake and pushes the boy out at the end of visiting hours.

Thinking about the setting

- Can you imagine living in the time and place described in *Souder*?
- How do you think you could survive living in that time and place?
- How could education have helped the boy and his family overcome their poverty?

Themes/Layers of Meaning: Is That What It *Really* Means?



"Some people is born to keep. Some is born to lose. We was born to lose, I reckon."

—Mother, *Sounder*

Loss

Sounder is a story of seemingly overwhelming loss. The theme of loss is threaded throughout the book. First, the family loses the father—and main source of income—when he is dragged off by the sheriff and his deputies for stealing food so that his family can eat. Then they nearly lose their pet and hunting dog, Sounder, when one of the deputies shoots him in the head and the dog drags himself off to heal or to die, no one knows which.

When the boy keeps looking for the dog, his mother tells him, "Sounder might come home again. But you must learn to lose, child. The Lord teaches the old to lose. The young don't know how to learn it."

Sounder does come back, very badly injured though alive. That does little to make up for the loss of the father when he is

sentenced to hard labor. His family does not know where he will be sent or when he will be back.

When the boy loses his father, he loses his childhood, or what little of it he had. In addition to doing his regular chores, he now has to go into the fields in place of his father: The rent still has to be paid, the family still has to eat. He also works to help his mother in her efforts to make more money.

Besides being asked to work like a man, the boy must now look at the world like a man. His belief in the strength of his father is shattered with his father's arrest. He watches the white men treat his father like a child, or an animal, and sees that his father has no power or authority to resist them. When Sounder is shot and his father does not even look to see what happened, the boy sees a different man from the one who could lift a hot pot lid with his bare hands, a different man from the one who often took the lantern and went off hunting with the dog.

The loss does not end there. The father returns home severely disabled: One side of his body was crushed in a dynamite blast at the prison quarry. After the father is home for several months, he decides to go hunting with Sounder. When Sounder comes home alone, the boy follows the dog back into the woods, where he finds his father leaning against a tree trunk, dead. Sounder dies a short while later.

Courage

Courage is another important theme in *Souder*. Despite losing a loved one, the boy and his family never give up. Their courage always gives them strength to face another day.

The mother shows this courage when she goes to town to return the uneaten ham and sausages. People will probably be mean to her in town, but she goes anyway, because it might help her husband. She hums a song as she leaves, one that seems to give her the courage she needs throughout the story:

*You gotta walk that lonesome valley,
You gotta walk it by yourself,
Ain't nobody else gonna walk it for you.*

The boy shows his courage when he does all that needs to be done, despite his fears. He is very frightened walking into town to visit his father in jail on Christmas Day, but he doesn't think to say no when his mother tells him he must go. When he goes to work in the fields, he is younger than the other workers, and is "afraid and lonely." But he knows that he must work in his father's place.

The boy also displays courage when he goes out searching for his father. He is very much alone in his search, and people are often cruel to him, but he keeps looking. Even when he is hurt one day outside a road camp after a guard throws a piece of iron at him, the boy "had not run but stood still and defiant, sucking the blood from his bruised fingers." As afraid as he is—and

Armstrong tells us that the boy is always afraid when he is away from home—he keeps looking for his father.

One of the ways the father shows his great strength and courage is by dragging himself home from the prison quarry where he was badly injured in a dynamite blast. The doctors had told him he would die, but “he would not die, even with a half-dead body, because he wanted to come home again.”

Family

The father’s determination to return home is an example of how important family is in *Sounder*. Although the author hints at other relationships that his characters have—with other sharecroppers, with people at church, with the people for whom the family works—their most important relationships are with one another. The people in this family live in a very isolated world, and a cruel one, too, so they must rely on one another for support as well as companionship.

Loyalty

The theme of loyalty runs throughout *Sounder*. The family members show great loyalty to one another and to Sounder, and the dog shows great loyalty to them all, especially to the father, his master.

There are countless ways the family members show their loyalty: The mother does not say anything about the father stealing the food, because she knows that he did it only to feed his family.

The boy, knowing his mother has probably had a hard day in town, tells his siblings not to bother her when she comes home after returning the ham and sausages. "She won't bring no stick candy," he tells them. "Don't ask her for none. Don't ask her nothin'." When the mother sends the boy to bring the father a cake for Christmas, she tells her son, "Whatever you do, child, act perkish and don't grieve your father." At the jail, the father tells the boy to tell the mother not to grieve and not to send the boy anymore. And the boy decides to hide the harsh truth of the jail from his mother.

The boy shows his loyalty to Sounder by making sure the dog has enough to eat; after his father steals the ham and sausages, the boy says, "Sounder will eat good now." The boy also proves his loyalty to the dog by searching far and wide for him after he is hurt.

Examples of Sounder's loyalty include when he growls and scratches at the door when the sheriff and his deputies are in the cabin. He chases after them and is shot while doing so. He drags himself to the woods to heal himself, then comes home. While he is devoted to all the family, his deepest loyalty is to his master. "Whether he lay in the sun on the cabin porch or by the side of the road, the one eye was always turned in the direction his master had gone."

While his master is away, Sounder's famous voice is silenced. Then his master comes home and Sounder is the first to recognize him: He is "a young dog again. His voice was the same mellow sound that had ridden the November breeze from the

lowlands to the hills.” Sounder goes hunting one last time with his master, then runs home to get the boy when the man dies in the woods. After that, the boy tells his mother, “Sounder ain’t got no spirit left for living. He hasn’t gone with me to the woods to chop since Pa died. He doesn’t even whine anymore.” Sounder lives to see his master come home; two months after his master dies, Sounder dies, too.

Racial injustice

Sounder tries to protect his family against the white sheriff and his deputies, but it is a losing battle: There is no way to protect the family against racial injustice. Struggling to maintain dignity in the face of prejudice is a major theme in this book. Armstrong shows us a world in which a hardworking father, forced to steal so that his family does not go hungry, is given such a harsh punishment that it eventually kills him. He shows us a world where black people cannot fight back, are afraid to walk down the street, and are sent to the back doors of the white men’s houses. And he shows us a world where the only hope, the only way out—education—is often denied to black people.

Importance of education

The boy desperately wants an education and is determined to get it. This leads to another significant theme in *Sounder*: the importance of education.

There is so much that the family is unable to do because none of them can read or write. The family cannot write letters to one

another when they are separated; the mother cannot write to the judge, asking him not to be harsh in sentencing the father; she cannot read the newspaper to find out when the father is sentenced, but must rely on others to do it for her.

The boy wants to learn to read, but not because he thinks education will lead to a different life. He thinks of it as a way to make the life he lives more bearable. He says to himself, "One day I will learn to read." He wants "a book with stories in it, then he wouldn't be lonesome even if his mother didn't sing."

When the boy meets the teacher who befriends him, he realizes that an education *can* also lead to a much different life. The boy is amazed when he is in the teacher's cabin: It "had two lamps, both lit at the same time, and two stoves, one to cook on and one to warm by. . . . and there were shelves filled not with pans and dishes, but with books." These are luxuries not found in the boy's home or in the homes of other sharecroppers.

When the boy tells his mother that the teacher wants him to come and stay with him so he can go to school, the mother lets him go, even though it will cause some hardship for her. "It's a sign," she says. "The Lord has come to you." She understands the importance of education.

Personal growth

Personal growth is another theme in *Sounder*, and book learning is just one of the ways the boy grows.

At the beginning of the story, the author shows us a boy whose only wishes are to go hunting with his father and to learn to read. When the story ends six years later, we see a boy who has learned to do a man's work. We see a boy whose father returns severely disabled and accepts it. While his mother sits "suffocated in shock," the boy says to his father in a clear voice, "Sounder knew it was you just like you was comin' home from work." He even knows enough to go around the cabin and warn his younger siblings about their father's appearance. "Pa's home," he says. "He's mighty crippled up, so behave like nothin' has happened."

We also see a boy who has come to understand the meaning of the words "Only the unwise think that what has changed is dead." When he first reads these words in the book he has found, he doesn't understand them. His teacher explains their meaning: "If a flower blooms once, it goes on blooming somewhere forever. It blooms on for whoever has seen it blooming." Even then, the boy doesn't understand him. But as he grows, he comes to understand the meaning of the words. So when he thinks of his father and Sounder, it isn't as how they were when they died. He remembers them at their best: "The pine trees would look down forever on a lantern burning out of oil but not going out. A harvest moon would cast shadows forever of a man walking upright, his dog bouncing after him."

Hope

Finally, *Sounder* is about hope, and that is a theme of great importance in the book. There is hope in this family, and that is

how they survive. By not giving up, the boy is able to get an education. Despite all the difficulties in his life—the fear, ignorance, and prejudice of the time and place—there is hope for the future.

Thinking about the themes

- What do you think is the most important theme in *Sunder*?
- Can you imagine continuing on in the face of so much loss?
How would you do it? How do the boy and his family do it?
- Why does the boy want to learn to read? Why is reading important to you?
- How does the boy remember his father and *Sunder*?

Characters: Who Are These People, Anyway?



The four main characters in this book are the boy, the father, the mother, and the coon dog, Sounder. Other characters include the boy's brother and sisters, the sheriff and his deputies, the jailer, the road camp guard, and the teacher.

Here is a list of characters. Following that is a brief description of the main characters.

boy	the oldest child in the sharecropper's family
father	a sharecropper
mother	the sharecropper's wife
Sounder	the family's pet and hunting dog
brother and sisters	younger children in the sharecropper's family
sheriff and deputies	the men who arrest the father
jailer	the man who keeps watch at the father's jail
road camp guard	a guard at one of the prison road camps
teacher	the man who helps the boy get in school

Boy: The boy—who, like the other human characters in the story, is nameless—is the main character in *Sounder*. Armstrong never tells us the boy's age. Even the boy does not know it; all he

knows is that he has “lived a long, long time.” Based on the fact that he is allowed to hunt with his father and does a man’s work after his father is in jail, we can guess that the boy is somewhere around ten or eleven years old. During the course of the book, we see the boy suffer great loss, we see him take on many challenges, and we see him grow up.

At the start of the story, the boy wants to go hunting with his father. It is clear that he admires his father and that he adores the family’s dog, Sounder. The boy loves him so much that he consoles himself with the fact that if he can’t have an education, at least he can have Sounder.

The boy desperately wants to go to school. For the past two years he has tried to walk the eight miles each way to and from school, but it has been too far. He gets there late, and the other children make fun of him. When it turns cold and his mother tells him to give up, he does, vowing to try again next year, when he is bigger, stronger, and faster.

The main reason the boy wants to go to school is to learn to read. He is lonely and finds comfort in the Bible stories his mother tells him and in the songs that she sings. But sometimes his mother doesn’t want to tell stories or sing. The boy thinks that one day he will learn to read. “Then he wouldn’t be lonesome even if his mother didn’t sing.”

The boy loves his father and is very proud of him. He sees him as strong and brave, as a fighter. The boy’s image of his father is destroyed, however, when the sheriff and his deputies come and

arrest him. They call the father “boy,” they chain him up, and he does not resist. Later, the boy must struggle with feelings of pity and anger when he sees his father in jail.

Because he loves him, the boy worries about his father. He worries about how cold he is in the back of the wagon in his torn overalls. He worries about how warm it is in jail. He worries about how he will keep in touch—since no one in the family can read or write—while he is in prison and at the labor camp.

The boy is thoughtful and considerate of his mother. When she goes to town to sell walnuts as well as to return the stolen ham and sausages after his father’s arrest, he knows the people will be mean to her. When he sees her coming back down the road, he tells his younger siblings not to bother her when she returns. He is quiet when he sees that “her eyes were filled with hurt.”

The boy is forced to grow up quickly in his father’s absence. In addition to worrying about his parents, he must do more work to help pay the rent and buy food for the family. He helps his mother string more clotheslines for the laundry, does “yard work at the big houses where he had gathered weeds behind his father,” and goes out to work in the fields. He does so without complaint, despite the fact that he is lonely and afraid.

The boy is also very loyal. He is loyal to the dog he loves after the animal is shot in the road. He leaves food for him. He crawls under the house looking for him. He sleeps with Sounder’s ear under his pillow, willing the dog to survive. When the dog disappears, he searches high and low for him and always waits for his return.

The boy also searches for his father. The searching is hard: He is lonely in his travels, and when he does meet people, they are often cruel to him.

Despite the hard work and the disappointments, the boy keeps one hope very much alive: to learn to read. And his journeys do accomplish “one wonderful thing. In the towns . . . people threw newspapers and magazines into trash barrels, . . . so he could always find something with which to practice his reading.” Then, one day, he finds something even better: a book. “All his life he had wanted a book.”

Although it takes many years to happen, the boy learns to read. Because of this ability, he is able to turn to words from the book he found to help him deal with the deaths of his father and Sounder. The boy, now a man, knows that though his father and Sounder may be buried under the cold, hard earth, they will live on in his memory forever.

Father: The father is another important character in this book. He is tall and strong and protective of his family. Though he doesn't say it, his actions prove how much he loves his family, his home, and his dog, Sounder.

The author describes the father's hands: “hands that could handle a pot lid without a pot rag, open the stove door without a poker, or skin a possum by holding the hind legs of the carcass with one hand and the hide with the other and just pulling.” But these are the same hands that come forward when the sheriff takes out his handcuffs and says, “Stick out your hands, boy.”

The father is strong, but he knows that there are some fights that he cannot win.

Before he is arrested, the father tries to win the fight against hunger. He works hard in the fields, he does yard work at the big houses, and he goes hunting. But when the crops are poor and the hunting is bad, there isn't enough food. So the man goes out one night and steals a ham and some pork sausages from the smokehouse. His protectiveness gets his family three days of good eating; it also gets him sentenced to many years of hard labor.

The father shows how much he loves his family in many ways besides working hard and stealing for them. When the boy comes to visit him in jail at Christmas, he sends him home to tell his mother he'll be back before long, "tell her not to grieve," and "tell her not to send you no more."

He expresses his love for his dog by putting burlap sacks under the porch so that the dog is warm when the frosts come; he tells his wife to "save the ham-boilin' for Sounder."

In the end, after he is very badly wounded in a dynamite blast at the prison quarry, the father shows the strength of his love and his determination when he refuses to die and manages to drag his injured body home.

Mother: The mother, another major character in the book, accepts whatever bad happens in her life as if it were meant to be. She has a strong belief in God. She is patient and stern and, in her own way, loving. She is also a hard worker.

The mother demonstrates her acceptance of her harsh life in many ways. After the father is arrested and Sounder is shot, she does not break down and cry. She simply calls the boy into the house. "Come in, child," she says, "and bring some wood." Later, when the boy cannot find Sounder, the mother urges him to accept the loss of his beloved pet. And when the boy searches and searches but cannot find his father, she says, "It's all powerful puzzlin' and aggravatin', but it's the Lord's will."

The mother believes that much of what happens, bad as well as good, is "the Lord's will." When the boy tells her that the teacher wants him to come back and go to school, the mother says, "Go, child. The Lord has come to you." And when the father dies, the mother is only momentarily sad. "When life is so tiresome, there ain't no peace like the greatest peace—the peace of the Lord's hand holding you."

The mother declares her spirituality in the songs she sings and the stories she tells. She hums and sings spirituals—black religious folk songs—to get her through good times and bad. She also tells stories from the Bible that she has heard at the meetinghouse.

The mother's patience is revealed when she is speaking to the boy. "Don't fret," she says when the boy becomes anxious to go looking for his father. "Time's passin'. Won't be much longer now." Later, after he returns from one of his many fruitless searches, she tells the boy, "There's patience, child, and waitin' that's got to be."

We see how stern the mother is when the boy reaches for a walnut from the pile in her lap, and she slaps his hand. “You eat the crumbs from the bottom of the hull basket,” she says. While that sounds cruel, it’s simply what she has to do to make enough money to feed the family. “I try to pick two pounds a night,” she says. “That’s thirty cents’ worth.”

It is clear, however, that the mother wants the boy to have more than crumbs. She washes his pillowcase and sheet every week, just like she does “for the people who [live] in the big house down the road.” When the boy comes in after not finding Sounder, she says, “You’re tired and worried poorly,” and gives him the icing pan to lick.

She shows her love to her husband by trying to keep the house quiet so that he can sleep the morning after he steals the ham and sausages. And she bakes him a cake for Christmas that is three times bigger than the one she keeps for the rest of the family.

Like the father, the mother is a hard worker. She does laundry for the people who live in the big houses, and after her husband is arrested, she stretches longer clotheslines and does more of it. She also picks walnut kernels to try to make extra money.

Sounder: The dog, because of the loyalty he shows his master and his family, is a main character in the book. Sounder, a cross between a Georgia redbone hound and a bulldog, got his name because of his voice. The author writes that “no price . . . could be put on Sounder’s voice. It came out of the great chest cavity and

broad jaws as though it had bounced off the walls of a cave. It mellowed into half-echo before it touched the air. . . . it was not an ordinary bark. It filled up the night and made music as though the branches of all the trees were being pulled across silver strings.”

Sounder’s bark is very important in the story. First, it is beautiful and it represents the hunt, the special ritual the man and dog—and sometimes the boy—share. It is also significant because it is the one sign of resistance shown to the sheriff and his deputies when they come to arrest the father. Finally, it is crucial because it disappears with the father and does not return until he does, despite the fact that there is no physical reason for Sounder to be unable to bark. When the father returns, so does Sounder’s bark.

The dog’s loyalty is expressed even further by the timing of his death. Although “by a dog’s age, Sounder is past dying time,” Sounder lives until his master returns, and until his master dies. Then Sounder “ain’t got no spirit left for living,” and dies, too.

Thinking about the characters

- What are some of the ways being able to read changes the boy’s life?
- Do you think the father is right or wrong to steal the ham and sausages? What would you have done if you were in his shoes?
- Why do you think the mother is so accepting of her hard life? What, if anything, do you think she can do to change it?
- Why do you think Sounder doesn’t bark until his master returns?