

Adaptation Analysis of a Scene from *Lincoln in the Bardo*

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1. What I hoped to communicate, express, or accomplish

Grief stood at the center of this adaptation from the outset, though not as a broad theme or abstract idea. I focused the project on a single scene from *Lincoln in the Bardo*: Abraham Lincoln's return to the crypt to visit the body of his son Willie. While the novel moves through a crowded and unstable world, this moment is comparatively narrow in scope. Its force does not depend on expansion. It depends on duration. Allowing the encounter to remain present long enough for its weight to register became the project's guiding aim.

Personal experience shaped that focus. I did not choose the crypt scene because it was easy to adapt or immediately recognizable. I chose it because it felt unavoidable. Having lost my father at the age of eight, I encountered the moment through a reversal of position. Lincoln's mourning mattered to me, but Willie's condition as a child separated from his parent carried equal significance. That inversion shaped the adaptation's point of entry. The work developed as both an act of witnessing a parent's grief and an effort to register loss from the child's side of that separation.

Once this orientation was clear, Lincoln could no longer function primarily as a historical figure or public presence. Inside the crypt, those identities recede. What remains is a parent moving toward his child's body. The adaptation sought to preserve that narrowing by allowing the encounter to exist without public framing or distanced explanation, so that the scene could remain rooted in a private confrontation with loss.

2. Why this medium mattered

Sound and image offered a way to sustain attention without forcing grief into explanation. A podcast-style narration paired with AI-generated visuals allowed the work to proceed through voice, silence, pacing, and atmosphere rather than through summary. *Lincoln in*

the Bardo relies heavily on voice, and Saunders builds emotional force through testimony, interruption, and tonal shift. Spoken narration and carefully placed pauses made it possible to retain some of that pressure, even though the novel's full verbal complexity could not transfer intact.

Images had a different job. They were not meant to illustrate the narration or supply missing detail, but to hold space while the scene unfolded through sound. In this adaptation, the crypt functions less as a realistic setting than as an emotional interior. A bowed figure, a small still form, or a narrow room carries information the narration does not need to restate. The visuals fix the relationships among bodies, walls, and light, giving form to darkness, confinement, distance, and physical nearness.

Working within this form required compromise. Early visual trials often missed the tone I was seeking and leaned toward polish or theatrical excess. My original hope was for something slower, darker, and eerier, both visually and vocally, but time limits narrowed what could be achieved. Even so, those limitations proved instructive. Decisions about what could be shown, spoken, or left unexpressed became part of the adaptation's structure. The medium did not merely deliver the adaptation. It shaped how much the scene could carry and what had to remain implied.

3. Why this scene became the center

Narrative structure made the crypt scene capable of carrying the adaptation on its own. Much of *Lincoln in the Bardo* unfolds through accumulation and interruption across many voices. The crypt scene is already more contained. It has a defined setting, a limited span of action, and a clear emotional frame. A father returns. Others gather. Physical contact becomes possible. Although more than one presence occupies the room, attention converges on a single

encounter between parent and child. That internal shape allowed the scene to serve as the adaptation's center.

Spatially, the scene offered a self-contained world to build. A battlefield would have required breadth, and a political scene would have required context. The crypt required neither. Its enclosed architecture shapes how bodies, light, and distance relate to one another. Stone walls, dim interiors, and narrowly arranged figures establish proximity and constraint. In a space like that, pauses matter, and small gestures such as reaching, bending, or holding take on emotional weight beyond their size.

Witnessing adds another layer of force to the scene. The ghosts are positioned around the central encounter rather than within it. They observe and register what unfolds yet remain unable to intervene. Their arrangement creates a fixed relationship between awareness and powerlessness. Lincoln and Willie occupy the center, while the surrounding figures hold the act of watching itself. The scene establishes presence without resolution.

4. Decisions the original did not make for me

Once the crypt scene became the adaptation's center, the work moved from selection to decision. Saunders had already written the moment, but its adaptive choices remained mine. The first was simplification. On the page, the scene unfolds amid a swarm of voices and shifting perceptions. That density could not carry over intact. Too many speakers would have dispersed attention and obscured the encounter's shape. I therefore reduced the field to its clearest elements: Lincoln, Willie, the crypt, and a small circle of witnesses.

Sequencing introduced a second constraint. The novel allows experience to move laterally and recursively through interruption and recollection. My version required clearer progression. Memory, illness, death, burial, return, witness, touch, and holding became the

sequence that carried the scene forward. The order needed to remain legible while allowing meaning to emerge through movement rather than declaration.

Visual style required further judgment. The handmade, faded, slightly distorted quality of the images did not come directly from the novel. It emerged from a refusal of polished realism. A highly finished surface would have implied a kind of closure the scene does not reach. Visible construction permitted expression without pretending to an emotional realism the piece could not sustain.

The same principle guided the treatment of the ghosts. Saunders often renders them grotesque or exaggerated. I reduced that extremity so their presence could register as observation rather than display. Their function became positional rather than decorative. Pacing introduced one final compromise. I wanted the narrator's voice to move more slowly and carry a longer, eerier drag so the atmosphere could settle and linger. Time constraints and the need to include at least one exchange of dialogue prevented that. The narration moved faster than I wanted, and something was lost. The gain was that dialogue gave the sorrow a more immediate human presence.

5. What was left out and what was added

The formal limits established through those decisions made loss unavoidable. In the novel, fragments interrupt one another, witnesses overlap, and no single voice contains the event. Grief arrives through collision rather than through a stable line of narration. My adaptation does not preserve that structure. The reader assembles sorrow from many pieces, while the listener encounters it through a narrower path.

Several aspects of Saunders's design fall away in that change. The page's instability is reduced. The pressure created by many voices pressing together is softened. The novel's dense,

interruptive verbal texture cannot remain intact in a brief audiovisual form, and the Bardo's broader disorder remains largely offstage. The adaptation does not attempt to reproduce the novel's wider range of grotesque, comic, and unsettling energies.

Different possibilities emerged in place of those losses. Grief could take on visual and sonic presence. Compressed interiors, visible construction, sparse sound, faded imagery, and silence became part of the project's expressive language. These elements do not replicate Saunders's methods. They answer them in another register. Prolonged nearness, sustained stillness, and the quiet between spoken lines allow sorrow to be encountered physically rather than assembled fragment by fragment. The adaptation offers not the novel's crowded chorus, but an extended act of attention.

6. How effective the adaptation was

The adaptation was most successful when it upheld discipline. Lincoln's identity stays subdued and restrained, while Willie looks fragile. The ghosts serve as witnesses rather than as spectacles. Sparse sound and deliberate pacing keep attention fixed on the central encounter. The piece works best when it trusts quietness and restraint, allowing feeling to emerge without being amplified or explained.

Visual choices contributed to that effect. The faded, handmade texture of the images supported the emotional register more than a polished surface would have. A rougher, visibly constructed visual world made the project feel vulnerable rather than performative. Reducing the number of voices also helped preserve clarity. Instead of attempting to imitate Saunders's full formal design and risking dilution, the adaptation narrowed its field and protected the emotional line it could sustain.

Limitations remain. I completed it while learning unfamiliar tools and working with only partial control over image generation. Visual consistency shifted, pacing moved faster than intended, and some of the eerie pressure I hoped to sustain was diminished. Even with those

constraints, the adaptation succeeds where it matters most. It does not reproduce Saunders's formal complexity, but it carries the grief of the scene into another medium and remains with it.

7. What the process finally revealed

Working through the adaptation clarified how much of the work lies in choice rather than replication. Each stage required deciding what had to remain and what could be altered or set aside. Fidelity did not mean matching Saunders piece by piece. It meant preserving what gave the scene its force. What needed to survive was not the novel's full chorus or formal complexity, but the experience of return, proximity, and witness that defines the crypt encounter.

The process also revealed something about my own creative instincts. The adaptation grew quieter, plainer, and more controlled than I initially expected. That shift felt uncertain at first. I worried that restraint might read as weakness or lack. Over time, it began to feel accurate both to the material and to the limits of the form. The piece did not need to be fuller or smoother to matter. It needed to stay close to what it could honestly carry.

Seeing my classmates' adaptations reinforced that understanding. Each project reflected not only a reading of a shared text but also the judgment, imagination, seriousness, and humor of the person who made it. Those differences deepened my sense of the course and helped me see adaptation not as a fixed set of rules but as a practice shaped by individual attention and response. That context mattered because it enabled choice. Dr. Cutchins established a classroom built on clarity and trust, fostering experimentation rather than avoiding it. Projects like this depend on a space where students can make mistakes, think aloud, and experiment with ideas without fear of being shut down.

In the end, the adaptation became an effort to hold grief in place. Saunders allows sorrow to move across many speakers and interruptions. My version narrowed that movement to a single enclosed encounter and stayed with it. The novel speaks through a crowd. The adaptation responds by asking one room, one parent, one child, and one act of return to carry the weight.

Bibliography

Saunders, George. *Lincoln in the Bardo*. New York: Random House, 2017.