***Sounder***

***Chapter 6***

***Synopsis:***

Sounder still waits for his master and mother hums nearly all the time. The boy helps her string more clothesline, and in the spring he goes to work in the fields. He is younger than all the other workers, and he is often afraid and lonely. The boy also does yard work at the big houses, and one of the men asks how old he is, noting that the boy is a hard worker for someone so young. The boy does not remember his age; he just knows he has lived “a long, long time.” Days, months, and seasons pass, but every time the restless boy wants to look for his father, mother tells him to wait, as it will not be much longer. The boy agrees that it will be a long journey, and he argues with his mother about going. He reminds her of all the great journeys she has told him about from the Bible, journeys taken by men like Abraham, Jacob, and Joseph. The Lord always watched over them, and He will do the same for the boy. The state runs many traveling road camps, so it is hard for the boy to find them; prisoners also work in stone quarries and farms. The boy usually starts searching in autumn, after the harvest is finished. Each year people tell the boy they remember his father, but each time he gets there his father has been moved someplace else. Some guards taunt and ridicule the boy, as do some prisoners. Every time he sees a line of prisoners, the boy looks for his father, certain he will recognize his father’s walk; but he does not find him. The boy learns many things about how prisoners are treated and where to find refuge inside on cold nights. Though he does not find his father, the journey helps the boy accomplish one amazing thing. He finds many discarded newspapers and magazines and teaches himself the rudiments of reading. When he is lonely, the boy tries to tell himself the wonderful stories his mother used to tell him; her stories always end just right and the characters are never afraid. Sometimes the boy tries to incorporate things he reads into his stories, but the endings never come out right and both he and the characters are afraid. When he hears the wind in the trees above him, the boy thinks of the story his mother told him about King David. God told David that whenever he heard the wind moving in the trees, he would know God was fighting for him. The boy imagines the mighty army of David marching to victory, and he is no longer afraid. As he sleeps, the boy dreams and hears Sounder’s distinctive voice echoing through the lowlands

***Summary:***

Even Sounder is lonely in the cabin now, looking out the door with his one eye. The boy goes to work in the fields but soon grows restless. He wants to go looking for his father. His mother does not want him to go, but he points out that in the Bible, many people go on journeys. "And in Bible-story journeys, ain't no journey hopeless. Everybody finds what they suppose to find." The boy knows that the state moves the men assigned to hard labor from camp to camp. He has seen people in striped suits go riding by in wagons, so he has an idea for what to look. He begins searching for his father, walking the roads and looking for men working. The search is unsuccessful, but he ends up picking up newspapers and magazines to practice his reading. The boy continues to practice reading and trying to teach himself new, bigger words. The stories in the papers are discouraging, he learns, and "the ends never came out right, and they made him more afraid." He recalls how his mother would tell him stories from the Bible, mostly about Joseph and David. The story about David hearing the wind through the cedar trees and knowing that God was on his side is especially salient for the boy, and he remembers it every time he goes looking for his father. "The boy listened to the wind. He could hear the mighty roaring. He thought he heard the voice of David and the tamping of many feet. He wasn't afraid with David near."

***Analysis (Ch 5-6):***

Sounder's return is surprisingly anticlimactic. Perhaps it is because he is so badly mangled, or perhaps it further illuminates the boy's father's absence because only one of them is home and because Sounder visibly misses his master. Sounder is not the same dog in many respects, especially without his bark. Even though he has a name, he is in a sense being stripped of it. He was named after his bark and the enormous sound it made ringing across the valley. Without that bark, his name and his identity are misplaced.

Time passes, but little changes. They are all lonely and life is still difficult. The boy begins working, but instead of feeling a sense of accomplishment, he only feels restless. By now, the boy is no longer really a boy, but the way Armstrong refers to him does not change. The anonymity is still present, but now even the generic name, "the boy," is a misnomer. There is some irony in that, most apparent in the sentences, "The boy did not remember his age. He knew he had lived a long, long time." Right away Armstrong establishes the contradiction between a boy and someone who has lived a "long, long time." Armstrong suggests that the boy's childhood has been stripped away and is now lost and gone.

The biblical references in Chapter 6 are particularly strong. The boy seeks solace in the stories because there is little else to seek comfort in. He juxtaposes the stories in the Bible that "always ended with the right thing happening" with the stories in the papers he reads that "never came out right." The boy learns the harsh distinction between the stories he reads in the Bible and the stories that take place around him. It seems that in some ways, God and the characters in the Bible fill the void left by the boy's father. The stories involve people who are role models and older men. They serve as examples and as motivation for the boy, providing him with a sense of hope. The hope is not a tangible one, but a faith that eventually good will overcome evil and that the hard aspects of life will become easier.

Chapters 5 and 6 do not much serve to move the plot forward, except to accentuate the passage of time and to show how little things have changed in the cabin. The return of Sounder is less joyous than the boy or his mother might have anticipated because little changes; Sounder's return just signals one more being in the house who misses father, wishing he were home. Sounder is also a painful reminder of what happened to the boy's father and where he is. Armstrong also uses Sounder as a foreshadowing device; he comes home, but he comes home changed for the worse and missing something that once defined him.