

I have found that people who know that they are preferred or favored by their mother[s] give evidence in their lives of a peculiar self-reliance and an unshakeable optimism which often seem like heroic attributes and bring actual success to their possessors.

Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*

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CHILDHOOD ON THE FRONTIER



“God bless my mother,” Lincoln told his law partner, William Herndon, in 1850. “All that I am or ever hope to be I owe to her.” This simple, direct, and perhaps eternal human sentiment had particular poignancy for Lincoln because he believed his mother was illegitimate. This statement to Herndon was one of the few times Lincoln mentioned his mother. He and Herndon were riding in a buggy to court in Menard County to handle a suit that raised the issue of hereditary traits. Lincoln said his mother, Nancy, was the illegitimate daughter of Lucy Hanks and a well-bred Virginia farmer or planter. From this Virginian, Herndon remembered Lincoln saying, came all the traits—his power of analysis, logic, mental activity, and ambition—that distinguished him from the Hanks family. He even appeared to believe that “illegitimate children are oftentimes sturdier and brighter than those born in lawful wedlock.” Having unburdened himself, Lincoln became quiet and was “sad and absorbed.” The buggy moved on but not a word was spo-

ken. “He drew round him a barrier which I feared to penetrate. His words and melancholy tone made a deep impression on me. It was an experience I can never forget.”¹

There are a variety of ways to interpret Herndon’s account of this experience. One is to dismiss it as improbable. To do so, however, is to reject Herndon as a source in the one area where all thoughtful observers agree his word is valid: where he recounts an actual experience he had with Lincoln. The episode, of course, proves nothing about Lincoln’s genealogy. It only suggests that Lincoln doubted his mother’s legitimacy. A more interesting question that could be asked is which mother Lincoln had in mind when he spoke of his gratitude, for he deeply loved his stepmother, Sarah Lincoln, and yet undoubtedly had a residue of feelings for his biological mother, Nancy Hanks Lincoln. This question would seem an open one if Lincoln had only credited his “angel mother” for all that he was. Lincoln, however, went beyond that somewhat stereotyped praise to dwell on the issue that really concerned him—his mother’s legitimacy. No one, not even any of the people Herndon interviewed in Kentucky or Indiana, ever questioned Sarah Lincoln’s legitimacy. Many questioned the legitimacy of Nancy Lincoln. Furthermore, in his autobiography, Lincoln described Nancy as his “mother” and Sarah, though she “proved to be a good and kind mother,” as his “stepmother.” Lincoln also told his friend Leonard Swett that he had only faint recollections of his mother, for he was so young when she died, but, Swett concluded, “he spoke most kindly of her and of his stepmother, and of her [Sarah’s] care for him in providing for his wants.”² The distinctions in these statements implied a quality of caretaking (mothering) that Lincoln attributed to the kind and gentle Sarah. Sarah could thus be a “mother” and yet clearly be distinguished in Lincoln’s mind as stepmother. Lincoln used words carefully.

The issue of Nancy Hank’s illegitimacy may seem trivial, but

few aspects of the Lincoln story have been more exhaustively investigated. During the 1920s two formidable genealogists—Louis A. Warren and William E. Barton—debated the Hanks ancestry. They tramped through graveyards, combed Virginia and Kentucky archives, and pulled together every scrap of relevant and irrelevant information. Ideally, this kind of basic research produces general agreement on the facts; in this case, however, passionate disagreement resulted. Both Warren and Barton were serious, honest, diligent, informed; yet they came to opposite conclusions. Warren felt he had demonstrated the legitimacy of Nancy Hanks; Barton persuaded himself of the opposite. Nor is the issue in this debate one of sentimentality versus realism. Many rigorous scholars accept Warren, while Barton’s research influenced the misty-eyed Carl Sandburg:

The mother of Nancy was nineteen years old when she made this trip [from Virginia to Kentucky] leaving Nancy’s father, who had not married her, back in Virginia. She could croon in the moist evening twilight to the shining face in the sweet bundle. “Hush thee, hush thee, thy father’s a gentleman.” She could toss the bundle into the air against a far, hazy line of blue mountains, catch it in her two hands as it came down, let it snuggle to her breast, and feed, while she asked, “Here we come—where from?”³

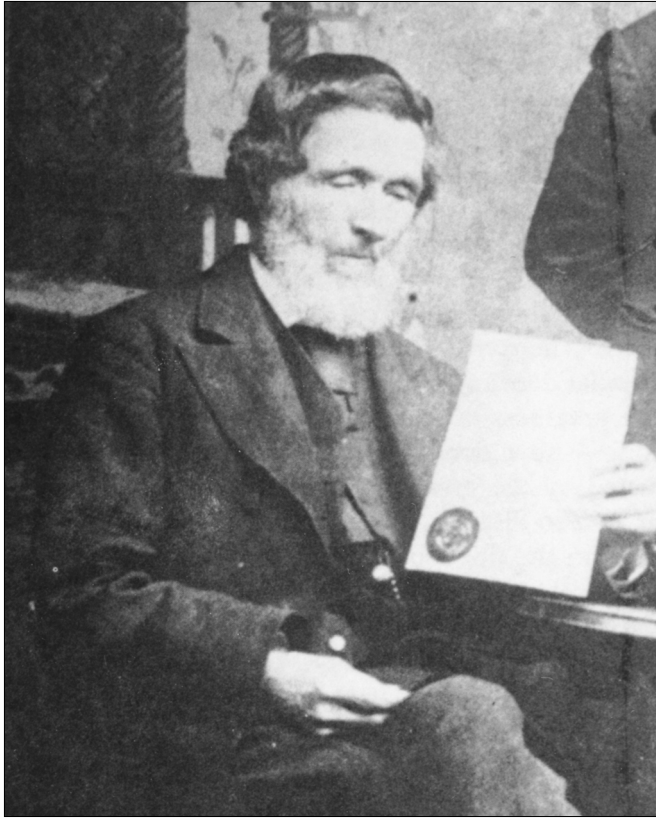
There is little to be gained by rehearsing the endlessly complex details that support each side of the argument over the legitimacy of Lincoln’s mother. All of the “hard” evidence needed to settle such a discussion is absent.⁴ Nevertheless, as David Donald has pointed out, Lucy was once charged with fornication in Mercer County, Kentucky; no marriage license has come to light to show that Lucy was wed before the birth of her daughter; the Kentucky and Illinois settlers whom Herndon interviewed agreed

on the illegitimacy of Nancy; and Lincoln in his autobiography said his mother was “of the name of Hanks” (Lucy’s maiden name). On the other side of the argument, the position of Louis Warren is quite strong, and Donald feels that “there is room for honest difference of opinion.” Still, as Donald concludes, there seems to be a “slight preponderance of testimony favoring the Herndon theory of illegitimacy,” and most scholars now accept the fact of Nancy’s illegitimacy.⁵

Illegitimacy has always been a common but sensitive aspect of American family life. Our religious and social traditions place a heavy weight on those who are, or believe they are, born out of wedlock. The precise meaning of illegitimacy, however, has varied enormously over time for different individuals in various parts of the country. African Americans in slavery, for example, out of necessity developed a much more accommodating attitude toward bastard children than their hypocritical white masters who often sired these children.⁶ And in white society itself there was a great deal of difference between the sentimentalized domesticity of the urban middle class and the raw reality of life on the frontier. The “cult of domesticity” in the first half of the nineteenth century extolled the virtues of a benevolent, wise father, as idealized in the figure of George Washington, and a devoted, present, capable mother, as described in Catherine Beecher’s *Treatise on Domestic Economy*.⁷ There were, of course, variations in this picture, and recent work on the history of women has noted several competing “styles” of domestic adaptation during the period.⁸ Still, idealized family life in the antebellum days glorified paternal values of moral authority and maternal values of acquiescent warmth and devotion to the hearth. A generation of American statesmen credited their “angel mothers”—exalted, pure, pious—for all they became. The ideal carried with it an implicit condemnation of illegitimacy.

Lincoln's experience with and attitudes toward illegitimacy departed sharply from this middle-class, urban ideal. For the Lincoln family, and probably for the frontier community at large, illegitimacy formed an integral and accepted part of life. Charles Friend, who had grown up with Lincoln in Kentucky, told Herndon, "In this country all bastard children are taught to call their mothers 'aunt' . . .," which is what Nancy apparently called her mother, Lucy.⁹ For a number of years after the move to Indiana, Nancy's illegitimate first cousin, Dennis Hanks, lived with the family, and Sophie Hanks, who resided in the area, was one of six illegitimate children of a Sarah or Polly Hanks.¹⁰

Even Lincoln may have doubted his own paternity: At least there is *some* evidence that the painstakingly honest Herndon *thought* Lincoln implied as much. "From what Lincoln has casually and indirectly said," Herndon wrote Ward Hill Lamon on February 25, 1870, "I was convinced that his illegitimacy was thrown up to him when a boy."¹¹ When Lamon balked at this information, he drew forth Herndon's wrathful reply: "If I thought Mr. Lincoln an illegitimate I should state it. . . . He was born into the social world with a curse on him, a millstone tied to his neck."¹² In 1886 Herndon spelled out his elaborate theory in a long letter to his coauthor, Jesse W. Weik: Thomas Lincoln was sterile; he married the pregnant Nancy because his first love, Sarah Bush, had rejected him; Nancy had been made pregnant by Abraham Enloe, who continued to live in Kentucky and who later fathered two more children by Nancy (including Abraham); sometime in 1815 Thomas found Nancy and Enloe together, and a terrible fight resulted in which Thomas bit off Enloe's nose; Thomas then left Kentucky for Indiana; and Nancy never again became pregnant, nor did Thomas's second wife, his first love, the widowed Sarah Bush Johnston. However, there is not much evidence to recommend Herndon's theory. William E. Barton



William Herndon in old age, when he wrote his classic biography of Lincoln with the help of the younger and more disciplined Jesse Weik. Courtesy of Meserve-Kunhardt Collection.

and Louis A. Warren have effectively discredited the Enloe thesis, and David Donald has remarked that the notion of Lincoln's illegitimacy is "utterly groundless."¹³

Herndon seemed to feel that Lincoln carried "a millstone tied to his neck" with the knowledge of his mother's illegitimacy and whatever murky misgivings he carried about his own paternity. But here Herndon went beyond reporting, which he did well, and turned to interpretation, which he usually botched. Rather than shame, Lincoln felt a secret pride in his clouded past.

On the confessional buggy ride, after telling Herndon of Nancy's illegitimacy, Lincoln continued: "Did you ever notice that bastards are generally smarter, shrewder, and more intellectual than others? Is it because it is stolen?"¹⁴ The distant and mysterious "Virginia planter" thus gave Lincoln a genetic explanation for the profound differences between him and his crude, illiterate, low-born family. "He told me," Herndon reported at another point, "that his relations were *lascivious, lecherous*, not to be trusted."¹⁵ The workings of fantasy seldom follow the rules of logic. Thus, Lincoln failed to question his implicit distinction between his angelic, genetically "high-born" but illegitimate mother and the rest of his crude, lascivious, and lecherous—but legitimate—relations (except for Dennis Hanks). It seems that, as a child, Lincoln had worked out a rather elaborate genetic myth that both explained and nourished his separateness from his family and environment. It may well be that Lincoln in the core of his being harbored the idea that he was a grandson of Thomas Jefferson or George Washington.

Little else is known about Lincoln's mother. Because she is so obscure, Nancy has inspired poetry that has become, for better or worse, part of the record. "She believed in God," wrote Sandburg, "in the Bible, in mankind, in the past and future, in babies, people, animals, flowers, fishes, in foundations and roofs, in time and the eternities outside of time; she was a believer in keeping in silence behind her gray eyes more beliefs than she spoke."¹⁶ Lincoln's account of Nancy in his autobiography is sparse indeed. "Getting back into Kentucky, and having reached his twenty-eighth year, he [Thomas] married Nancy Hanks—mother of the present subject—in the year 1806." Lincoln added simply that his mother was from Virginia and that relatives of hers "of the name of Hanks, and of other names, now reside in Coles, in Macon, and in Adams counties, Illinois, and also in Iowa."¹⁷

The accounts of Nancy by those who knew her differ in detail but are remarkably consistent in tone and overall impression. “She was a tall slender woman,” wrote Lincoln’s cousin, John Hanks, “dark-skinned, black hair and eyes, her face was sharp and angular, forehead big. She was beyond all doubts an intellectual woman, rather extraordinary if anything.” A neighbor in Indiana, William Woods, who knew Nancy for a year and a half before her death in 1818, also noted how “very smart, intelligent, and intellectual” Nancy was. Dennis Hanks, probably the best source, confirmed the picture painted by others who knew her but added some important details:

Mrs. Lincoln, Abraham’s mother, was five feet eight inches high, spare made, affectionate—the most affectionate I ever saw—never knew her to be out of temper, and thought strong of it. She seemed to be immovably calm; she was keen, shrewd, smart, and I do say highly intellectual by nature. Her memory was strong, her perception was quick, judgment was acute almost. She was spiritually and ideally inclined, not dull, not material, not heavy in thought, feeling, or action. Her hair was dark hair, eyes bluish green—keen and loving. Her weight was one hundred thirty.¹⁸

There is no question that Nancy could only sign a mark for her name. But she seemed to have a quality of mind that distinguished her in the frontier settings in which she lived. Lincoln himself, interestingly enough, told Herndon that his mother was “an intellectual woman, sensitive and somewhat sad.”¹⁹ Many of the contemporary observers whom Herndon interviewed also called her “intellectual.” All this has influenced people like Sandburg who would have her reading the Bible to young Abraham.²⁰ That seems unlikely though not impossible. Many children on the frontier learned to read but not to write. Even some slaves,

who almost never wrote anything, learned to read. This quiet, strong woman who never had any opportunity to get an education absorbed readily and thoroughly the oral culture of her environment, a culture that was based much more than today's on the Bible.²¹ A smart, receptive person on the frontier could "know" the Bible and still sign with a mark. Nancy must have shared this knowledge with her special son, who in turn was deeply influenced by Biblical phrasing, style, and content. He was also, in his style of intellectuality and creativity, much more a listener and speaker than a reader and writer. Most of his important and memorable prose was written to be read aloud.

Nancy's character can never be fully known. Contemporary observers tended to remember distantly that "Nancy Hanks was as above Thomas Lincoln as an angel is above mud." There is so little to go on that "her face and figure waver through the mists of time and rumor." For Dennis Hanks she was warmly affectionate, never out of temper, and immovably calm. Another theme in the sources notes Nancy's "habitual sadness" that may have some connection with her primitive Baptist faith.²² It would seem that Nancy was a remarkably intelligent woman who responded warmly and empathically to Lincoln during his earliest years, nourishing him with rich emotional supplies into his late infancy. This is the psychological message one gets from people like Dennis and John Hanks, and it was implied in Lincoln's own memory of his mother when he told Herndon of her angelic quality. Certainly, one suspects that Lincoln's adult strengths—his flexibility, empathy, humor, and creativity—derived from a close, loving relationship with his mother.²³

But ambivalence affects any relationship. As a young man of twenty-nine, Lincoln wrote a humorous letter on April Fool's Day 1838 to his good friend and maternal figure, Mrs. Orville Browning. The letter mocks his recent unsuccessful courtship of

Mary Owens, whom he could not behold without “thinking of my mother; and this, not from her withered features, for her skin was too full of fat, to permit its contracting into wrinkles; but from her want of teeth, weather-beaten appearance in general, and from a kind of notion that ran in my head, that *nothing* could have commenced at the size of infancy, and reached her present bulk in less than thirty-five or forty years.”²⁴ In this letter Lincoln used the image of his mother as a kind of baseline for ugliness. It is true, of course, that Lincoln called Sarah Lincoln “mother,” as he was later to refer to Mary after they had children. But unconsciously “mother” for Lincoln also had to mean Nancy. Perhaps she had become that ugly. Certainly the only form of dentistry in those days was extraction, and on her deathbed she may have looked suddenly old and withered to her young son. The endurance of this image in Lincoln suggests that it carried some sense of childhood disappointment with his mother. In a part of himself he seemed not to trust her.

Lincoln’s father was slightly less obscure than his mother, but he too is a source of endless controversy. The major questions center generally on his competence and possible impotence. These were causally related for Herndon: Thomas was hopelessly incompetent because at some point for some reason he had lost his potency. Herndon was at his worst in handling the primary sources on this question, but he did not invent the story out of wholecloth. Dennis Hanks reported that Thomas and Nancy had no other children after Abraham’s birth. The cause was said to be “a private matter.”²⁵ (Hanks was wrong about dates here, for a third child, Thomas, was born in 1811 or 1812; he died within a few days.) Herndon variously gathered reports that Thomas had castrated himself, had one testicle the size of a pea, had two testicles the size of peas,

had always been sterile, or had the mumps and then became sterile.²⁶ Herndon pondered to himself: “But you say that Thomas Lincoln went in swimming and that people saw his manhood was taken out; grant it, and yet no witness fixed the date.” Herndon never wavered from the idea that Thomas at some point became sterile. In 1886 he told his coworker Jesse Weik to be sure to confirm this issue with Dennis Hanks: “When you see him, ask him, in a roundabout way, if Thomas Lincoln was not castrated because of the mumps when young. Dennis told me this often and repeated it.”²⁷ For Herndon, Thomas Lincoln’s sterility became a crucial factor in his theory of Abraham’s illegitimacy as well as a useful explanation for the physiological basis of Thomas’s “utter laziness and want of energy.” The problem, Herndon wrote, “is due to the fact of fixing.”²⁸

All the talk to Herndon of Thomas’s emasculated or sterile condition carried a decidedly derogatory view of Thomas. A neighbor of Thomas’s, Nat Grigsby, told Herndon that Thomas was not “a lazy man, but . . . a piddler, always doing but doing nothing great, was happy, lived easy and contented.”²⁹ This image of Thomas as lazy and inert long held sway in the literature. Josiah G. Holland, who published a book on Lincoln in 1866 after a conversation with Herndon, first introduced the theme of the shiftless, irresponsible Thomas whom Lincoln thoroughly disliked. Ward Hill Lamon, in his 1872 ghostwritten *Life*—also based on the Herndon documents—so disliked Thomas that he wrote of his own “great pleasure” when he could leave him behind in the biography. In 1889 Herndon and Weik arrived at their own characterization of Thomas as “roving and shiftless,” “proverbially slow of movement, mentally and physically”; “careless, inert and dull.” Thomas could never pay for the parcels of land he purchased, because he never “fell in with the routine of labor.” Various writers echoed the main lines of this view of Thomas, especially

Albert Beveridge, whose 1928 book on Lincoln characterized Thomas as “improvident,” “slow,” and “plodding,” “a carpenter of sorts” who farmed in a “desultory way.” He could sign his name, according to Beveridge, but preferred to use his mark, even on important documents.³⁰

Research in the early twentieth century, however, uncovered some new information on Thomas Lincoln. He always owned one or more horses after he was twenty-one and generally enjoyed credit with no unpaid accounts. An Indiana tax book for 1814 ranked him fifteenth out of ninety-eight in terms of property values for those listed in the local county records. Thomas left Kentucky because of difficulties over title to his land, but many of his contemporaries also suffered from insecurity over land tenure. In post-revolutionary Kentucky, unscrupulous lawyers and speculators exploited the original settlers. In Thomas’s case, faulty surveys and title disputes reduced holdings of 238 acres to 200.³¹ Thomas brought several pieces of property in Illinois after 1830, though he had to sell some of these to cover his debts.

Thomas was a respected member of the various communities in which he lived. The cabins he built were adequate for his needs. He was a responsible neighbor, a trustworthy citizen, and, with some exceptions as he aged, a good farmer and carpenter. He helped construct local churches and seemed to participate in other community activities.³² Dennis Hanks noted that Thomas “didn’t drink an’ cuss none.”³³ He was definitely illiterate, able to write only his name, but then educational deficiencies were the rule, not the exception, on the American frontier. Thomas was also a devoted husband to his two wives. He always got along well with Sarah’s children, especially John D. Johnston. Dennis Hanks remained a close friend of Thomas’s through his later years. And, finally, Thomas was a perfectly good father to his own children by any criteria relevant for early-nineteenth-century frontier life.

Sarah testified to his determination to see his talented son acquire skills he himself lacked. The two quarreled at times, but nothing suggests an open antagonism; Thomas occasionally whipped young Lincoln but hardly brutalized him. Apparently, Thomas was able to handle easily enough the competitive thrust of his son.

Louis A. Warren concluded in 1926 that “We must now bury the traditional Thomas Lincoln in the ‘stagnant, putrid pool’ discovered by William Herndon, and introduce to future biographers the historical Thomas Lincoln of Hardin County.” Paul Angle, in his 1930 edition of Herndon’s *Life of Lincoln*, reflected this view of Thomas when he felt obliged to interject an entire paragraph on the “real” Thomas following Herndon’s disparaging characterization. Benjamin Thomas agreed with Angle’s revised picture of Thomas Lincoln, though he noted: “In the father, Thomas, there seemed to be a falling off in the general level of Abraham’s ancestry.”³⁴ After Herndon, in other words, scholars revised the image of Thomas from that of a lazy ne’er-do-well into that of sober, hardworking carpenter and farmer who won the respect of his neighbors.

This revisionist work on Thomas Lincoln has effectively stripped away the myths surrounding the despicable figure created by the early commentators. Thomas was not improvident, slow, terribly lazy, incompetent, dull, or dumb. He was interesting enough, among other things, to attract two apparently outstanding women to be mothers to his children. The revisionist research, however, has been fundamentally misplaced. It has assumed that a grasp of what Thomas was actually like will clarify our understanding of his infinitely more important son. Ironically, Lincoln’s mental picture of his father was a good deal closer to Herndon’s characterization than observers have wanted to acknowledge. There is little congruence between the three-dimensional figure

of the “real” Thomas and Lincoln’s psychological conception of him. All the evidence suggests that Lincoln retained some admiration and love for his father but basically grew up with an abiding sense of disappointment with and alienation from him. He struggled mightily with his inner picture of his father, a picture shaped by the distortions of unconscious wishes and fantasies.

The concrete evidence that Lincoln loved his father and dutifully molded his character after him is scant, though not altogether absent. There is no evidence that Lincoln ever openly rebelled against him. As an adolescent, he worked hard at the farming and diverse needs of survival on the frontier. He stayed with the family through its long move to Illinois in 1830 and helped it survive the devastating winter of 1830–31 on the banks of the Sangamon River near Decatur. As an adult, Lincoln often provided financial assistance to his father. Lincoln even named his fourth son Thomas, which at least suggests some degree of affection. In personality, there seems to be a certain line of continuity between father and son. Each had a rich sense of humor and was remembered by neighbors for his friendliness. Both were physically strong and able wrestlers. Both seemed moderate in their habits. At one critical juncture in his own life, Lincoln referred to his father’s old saying, “If you make a bad bargain, hug it the tighter.”³⁵ William E. Barton, in 1929, noted that “some of the qualities which made Abraham Lincoln great, his patience, his good humor, his kindness, his love of fun, he inherited from his father.”³⁶ Such a genial picture of Thomas is questionable, but to the extent that it is true, Lincoln’s most memorable personality traits derived in part from his positive identification with his father. It may also be that the source for Lincoln’s adult interest in the law, and particularly his frequent handling of land cases, lay in Thomas’s difficulty in establishing clear title to his land.

But Lincoln’s own picture of his father was painted in many

hues. Most of the hard evidence indicates that in Lincoln's mind Thomas *was* illiterate and irresponsible, a man who chased rainbows but never managed to find any pots of gold, a typical low-born product of the frontier that Lincoln worked hard to escape and to which, once he had escaped, he never returned. Nowhere does Lincoln ever say anything good about Thomas—a reticence that contrasts strikingly with his openly expressed idealization of Nancy and his deep affection for Sarah. Benjamin Thomas came up with an interesting (if strained) interpretation of this aloofness: it reflected Lincoln's "fundamental honesty"; he disliked his father and therefore remained aloof, the only "honest" position to assume.³⁷

In fact, Lincoln made clear his negative feeling toward his father, who never quite came up to his own standards. Thus Lincoln, in his 1860 autobiographical statement, described Thomas as a "wandering laboring boy" who grew up "literally without education. He never did more in the way of writing than to bunglingly sign his own name." Some twelve years earlier, in response to a question from a relative, Lincoln also stressed his father's ignorance: "Owing to my father being left an orphan at the age of six years, in poverty, and in a new country, he became a wholly uneducated man; which I suppose is the reason why I know so little of our family history. I believe I can say nothing more that would at all interest you." It seemed to pain Lincoln to realize how dull his father was, which tells more about Lincoln's driving ambition than it does about Thomas's character.³⁸ As a boy, Lincoln had aspirations beyond his grasp.

Lincoln's style of intellectuality and his interest in books created frequent conflict with his father. Dennis Hanks noted that Thomas sometimes had "to slash him for neglecting his work by reading." His inquisitiveness also irritated Thomas: "When strangers would ride along and up to his father's fence, Abe always, through

pride and to tease his father, would be sure to ask the stranger the first question, for which his father would sometimes knock him a rod." This teasing seemed calculated to displace Thomas, who could only respond with anger. Sarah, however, who was undoubtedly more understanding of Thomas, provides a different perspective. "As a usual thing, Mr. Lincoln never made Abe quit reading to do anything if he could avoid it. He would do it himself first." Thomas was sensitive to his own educational deficiencies and wanted "his boy Abraham to learn, and he encouraged him to do it in all ways he could." Lincoln, one suspects, understood these ambitions in his father and played on them. He was "rude and forward" as Dennis noted, teasing, testing, provoking his father by continuing to read when he knew he should be working. Up to a point, Thomas tolerated, even encouraged, his son's independence, but young Lincoln often seemed to push him too far. Then came a whipping, and in Dennis Hanks's phrase, Lincoln would drop "a kind of silent unwelcome tear."³⁹

The homes Thomas built for his family, as they moved west from Kentucky to Indiana and finally to Illinois, were simple log cabins. The cabin in which Lincoln was born had an earthen floor and a roof made of slabs held in place by poles or stones. A small opening in each of the side walls, perhaps covered by greased paper, let in light. Two broad pieces of wood fastened together were hung by hinges to an opening high enough for a man to pass through. A stone fireplace with a chimney of sticks and clay stood at one end of the single room. Everything in the simple structure was made of wood since there was no iron available. The family crowded into the cabin with its one large bed when the children were young; later a smaller bed would serve the children. "The sense of modesty was embryonic," noted Beveridge

of log cabins in general, “and men took off their clothes before women without a thought by either of any impropriety.”⁴⁰

The first cabin Thomas built in Indiana in the fall of 1816 was a simple lean-to that kept out the wild animals, some of the rain, and hardly any cold. The next spring he built an enclosed structure of rough rather than hewed logs with no window and with

Lincoln's second cousins Dennis Hanks (left) and John Hanks standing beside the old Lincoln home. Dennis married Lincoln's stepsister, Elizabeth. Both Dennis and John Hanks were important, if controversial, contributors to the oral historical record on Lincoln. Courtesy of Lloyd Ostendorf.



a roof that was not yet finished when winter came. This crude building, about four miles from Gentryville, stood on a round hill or “knob.” For his growing family Thomas created some additional space by putting in a loft. Sarah Lincoln, who arrived in 1819 as Thomas’s second wife, commented later that this was “a good log cabin, tolerably comfortable. . . . Abe slept upstairs, went up on pins stuck in the logs, like a ladder.”⁴¹ Years later Thomas built a larger, two-room cabin, which the family never lived in because they left to seek a new home in Illinois. By then Lincoln was a young man.

As we think back to this period in American history, so distant in experience if not in time, it is easy either to romanticize the simple joys of the rugged outdoor life or to shrink back in disgust at the dirt, the smells, the hardships. The allocation of social and sexual roles on the frontier followed the “natural” order of things. Thomas cleared the land, farmed during the season, did all the heavy work with animals, and worked as a carpenter in the off-season. Nancy, and later Sarah, took responsibility for all the chores inside and near the house: cooking, gardening, cleaning, child-rearing. As de Tocqueville was to note somewhat later, special attitudes in America gave women independence and self-reliance in carrying out duties that elsewhere were part of an overall pattern of degradation and inferiority. There were hardships to be sure, but a pervasive equality defined the style of life.⁴² Children, too, could acquire certain qualities from the strenuous frontier life—if, however, they were not numbed by the experience. In Lincoln’s case, the frontier, it seems, gave him certain strengths such as self-reliance, patience, and understanding. Survival itself demanded them. Yet Lincoln never retained any attachment to the log cabins of his childhood; indeed, he strove relentlessly to rise socially into the comfortable, even genteel, upper middle class. That he later exploited his humble origins for political pur-

poses should not obscure his essential impulse to escape his own past. Ironically, the cabin in which he may have been born rests now within a marble temple in Kentucky. Thus do we idealize our heroes.

Nancy bore three children in rapid succession. Sarah, her firstborn, came in 1807; she would die in 1828 in childbirth as a young woman. Abraham, born in 1809, grew up with her. Two or three years after Abraham's birth (there is no way to be more precise), his brother Thomas arrived and "died in infancy," as Lincoln was to say.⁴³ The baby was buried in a small grave within sight of the cabin. Many years later, after his father died in 1851, Lincoln filled in his genealogy in the front of the family Bible, but for some reason did not enter the birth of the short-lived boy.⁴⁴ After Thomas's birth in 1811 or 1812, Nancy bore no more children, though she lived until 1818. Nancy's childbearing pattern departed from that of the typical frontier woman, who bore a child every two years or so. We do not know whether the limited size of Nancy's family was due to Thomas's alleged sterility, some physical problem of Nancy's, marital indifference, or control. But the family's small size apparently influenced Lincoln; he and Mary rigorously controlled the size of their family.

The Lincolns stayed only briefly at Abraham's birth site near Hodgenville, Kentucky, then moved some two miles to Knob-Creek. Here Lincoln lived until he was seven, growing rapidly, absorbing the culture of his environment. He and his sister attended for short periods two "A-B-C schools" kept by Zachariah Riney and Caleb Hazel. Of his education Lincoln had a somewhat deprecatory view (which tended to put his self-made success in a better light): "There were some schools, so called," he told Jesse Fell. "But no qualification was ever required of a teacher, beyond '*readin, writin, and cipherin,*' to the Rule of Three. If a straggler supposed to understand Latin, happened to sojourn in the neigh-

borhood, he was looked upon as a wizzard. There was absolutely nothing to excite ambition for education.”⁴⁵

In 1816 Thomas decided to move to Indiana. “This removal,” Lincoln commented, “was partly on account of slavery; but chiefly on account of the difficulty in land titles in Kentucky.” Thomas genuinely opposed slavery and had broken from his local Baptist church during a debate over that institution. The antislavery group Thomas was associated with established a separatist church, “which not only renounced human bondage but eschewed all written creeds and official church organizations, relying on the Bible as the sole rule of faith.” In 1816, Thomas and Nancy Lincoln joined the separatist church and prayed with its antislavery ministers. However, the more important reason for the move to Indiana was, as Lincoln himself said, the confusion over land titles. Dennis Hanks said it was untrue that the existence of slavery in Kentucky had anything to do with the move to Indiana. He felt Thomas wanted to better his material condition by buying land at \$1.25 per acre.⁴⁶

So the Lincolns moved west after packing up their few belongings in an old wagon. At first life went well in Indiana. Lincoln, “though very young, was large of his age, and had an axe put into his hands at once.” The household soon expanded with the addition of Thomas and Elizabeth Sparrow, two of Nancy’s relatives, and Dennis Hanks, the illegitimate eighteen-year-old son of another aunt. Lincoln and Sarah occasionally attended more A-B-C or “blab” schools, the sum total of which “did not amount to one year.” Lincoln went to school, he said, “by littles,” but what he acquired he held onto with pride. “He was never in a college or academy as a student,” Lincoln wrote of himself, “and never inside of a college or academy building til since he had a law license.” After he left home in 1831 he studied English grammar, and later, as a United States congressman from 1847 to



Lincoln's stepmother, Sarah, in old age. She was "good and kind" to Lincoln, whose biological mother died when he was nine years old. Courtesy of Illinois State Historical Library.

1849, began to read and master the six books of Euclid. He regretted his "want of education," but the pride of the self-made man shines through when the Presidential candidate, who was soon to write some of this country's best prose, noted how "imperfectly" he knew English grammar and that "What he has in the way of education, he has picked up."⁴⁷

Before moving from Kentucky at the age of seven, Lincoln apparently could not read, but very soon he got "hungry for books, reading everything he could lay his hands on." He was,

Dennis Hanks reported, “a constant and I may say stubborn reader.” His “library” included the King James Bible, Noah Webster’s old spelling book, the *Life of Henry Clay*, *Robinson Crusoe*, Parson Weems’s *Life of Washington*, Aesop’s *Fables*, and Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress*.⁴⁸ In Indiana, Lincoln encountered a number of very good grammar books, as well as *Arabian Nights*, David Ramsey’s *Life of Washington*, and William Grimshaw’s *History of the United States*.⁴⁹ John Hanks, his cousin, reported young Lincoln’s devotion to reading and noted that he had made a kind of bookshelf out of two pins on the wall with a clapboard on them. “Lincoln got it of Crawford, told Crawford and paid it in pulling fodder by two or three days’ work.”

Lincoln’s stepmother, Sarah, described him as “the best boy I ever saw. He read all the books he could lay his hands on.” Sarah added that he read the Bible some, “though not as much as said,” and turned eagerly to newspapers, especially in the later 1820s.⁵⁰

He read diligently, studied in the daytime, didn’t after night much, went to bed early, got up early, and then read, ate his breakfast, got to work in the field with the men. Abe read all the books he could lay his hands on. And when he came across a passage that struck him, he would write it down on boards if he had no paper and keep it there til he did get paper, then he would rewrite it, look at it, repeat. He had a copy book, a kind of scrapbook, in which he put down all things and then preserved them. He ciphered on boards when he had no paper or no slate, and when the board would get too black, he would shave it off with a drawing knife, and go on again. When he had paper, he put his lines down on it.⁵¹

John Romine, a childhood acquaintance and early employer, remembered how Lincoln was always reading and thinking. In fact, Romine, who wanted his chores done, used to get mad at Lincoln

and thought he was “awful lazy.” He would, said Romine, “laugh & talk and crack jokes & tell stories all the time, didn’t love work but did dearly love his pay. He worked for me frequently—a few days only at a time. His breeches didn’t & socks didn’t meet by 12 inches—Shin bones Sharp—blue & narrow. Lincoln said to me one day that his father taught him to work but never learned him to love it.”⁵² This delightful memory expresses the ambivalence of the frontier toward any learning and suggests how determined Lincoln must have been to acquire knowledge (and at the same time to gently tease his self-righteous employer).

Lincoln’s early fascination for newspapers absorbed much of his intellectual curiosity and in turn helped feed his interest in politics. According to Herndon, “Politics were his life, newspapers his food, and his great ambition his motive power.” Nevertheless, he added that Lincoln sometimes dipped into Herndon’s own remarkable library, which may have been one of the best private collections in Illinois in the 1840s and 1850s.⁵³

Lincoln listened with the same energy that sparked his interest in books. As a child, he occasionally went to church, and when he did, he listened closely to the sermon. At home, later, to the delight of the children, he would mount a stump or log and humorously repeat the sermon almost word for word. Sarah noted how young Abe “was a silent and attentive observer” who never spoke or asked questions until the person he was listening to left. Then he had to understand everything, “even to the smallest thing, minutely and exactly; he would repeat it over to himself again and again, sometimes in one form and then in another, and when it was fixed in his mind to suit him, he became easy and he never lost that fact or his understanding of it.” The intensity here is remarkable. Lincoln seemed driven, and his listening, like his reading, had a certain compulsive quality to it. Not to grasp something was impossible. Indeed, “Sometimes he seemed per-

turbed to give expression to his ideas and go mad, almost, at one who couldn't explain plainly what he wanted to convey." Herndon later encountered the same intensity in the adult Lincoln, whom he once described as "persistent, fearless and tireless in thinking." Herndon would greet Lincoln on the street, for example, but Lincoln, lost in thought, would appear not even to notice his friend. Some hours later, he might say: "Billy, what did you say to me on the other side of the square this morning as we passed?"⁵⁴

In the fall of 1818 there were tears to shed. Lincoln's mother, Nancy, and Thomas and Elizabeth Sparrow died of the "milk sickness," a disease cows periodically caught from poisonous roots and then transmitted through their milk. The deaths left Thomas Lincoln alone to care for his nine-year-old son and eleven-year-old daughter. Within a year, in 1819, he married Mrs. Sarah Bush Johnston of Elizabeth-Town, Kentucky, a widow with three children: Elizabeth, twelve, John D., ten, and Matilda, eight. Now the Lincoln household was much larger than ever before: two adults, three boys (counting Dennis Hanks), and three girls. The parents and girls occupied two beds on the first floor and the boys slept in the loft. There is some suggestion of temptation and sexual excitement in this household menagerie, for within a year the twenty-one-year-old Dennis Hanks married Elizabeth Johnston and moved to a cabin a short distance away.⁵⁵

Lincoln also seemed to feel some of the same pressures as the children grew into adolescence. Sarah's daughter Matilda was responsible for taking lunch to Lincoln when he went deep into the woods to cut trees. As Matilda later reported to Herndon, when he was eighteen and she was sixteen, tongues apparently began to wag in the neighborhood about the two young people running wild and alone in the forest together. Sarah ordered Matilda to prepare Lincoln's dinner *before* he left for his day's work. All worked well, except that in time Matilda grew tired of the

restraint. She decided secretly to follow Lincoln into the woods for a “good long chat and a wild romp.” Matilda sneaked up behind Lincoln and jumped on his back to surprise him. In the resulting fall Lincoln’s ax cut a gaping wound in Matilda’s thigh near an artery. Both were frightened. Lincoln tore off the “tail of his undergarment” to staunch the wound. The issue then became what to tell Sarah. Matilda was inclined to lie but Lincoln urged her to tell the truth. “Tell the whole truth, ’Tilda, and trust your good mother for the rest.”⁵⁶ This ruthless honesty is ostensibly the point of the story; Herndon thus labeled it in his notes, “Honest Abe—A Story of Lincoln’s Youth.” However, the sexual play and excitement between adolescent siblings unrelated by blood, living in a one-room cabin, seem the deeper meaning of the anecdote.

Sarah was a gentle woman who helped young Lincoln adjust to the painful loss of Nancy. Dennis reported that Sarah “had been raised in Elizabeth-Town in somewhat a high life,” but adapted easily to the rugged life near Little Pigeon Creek in Indiana. The year or so between Nancy’s death and Sarah’s arrival was difficult for the Lincoln household. The speed with which Thomas found a second wife suggests his loneliness. Dennis reported that when Sarah arrived, “Abe and his sister were wild, ragged and dirty . . . she soaped, rubbed and washed the children clean, so that they looked pretty, neat, well, and clean. She sewed and mended their clothes, and the children once more looked human as their own good mother left them.”⁵⁷ On Friday, September 8, 1865, Herndon visited Sarah and recorded her memories of Lincoln. Her account is honest and informative, warm and yet free of sentimentality. “His mind and mine, what little I had,” she said, “seemed to run together, more in the same channel.” Herndon recalled that as he was leaving, “she arose, took me by the hand, wept, and bade me good-bye, saying: ‘I shall never see

you again, and if you see Mrs. Abraham Lincoln and family, tell them I sent them my best and tenderest love. Good-bye, my good son's friend, farewell.'"⁵⁸

Lincoln loved his stepmother. As a lawyer in Springfield, he occasionally visited Sarah, who lived about ninety miles away, near Charleston, Illinois. "I saw him every year or two," she told Herndon. The most emotional visit to his stepmother was the one Lincoln made just before leaving Springfield for Washington in 1861. According to Ward Hill Lamon, who made the trip with him, "The meeting between him and the old lady was of a most affectionate and tender character. She fondled him as her own 'Abe,' and he her as his own mother." Joshua Speed, Lincoln's close friend in the late 1830s and early 1840s, later spoke of Lincoln's great fondness for Sarah. Lincoln's wife, Mary, echoed this sentiment in a letter of December 19, 1867, to Sarah: "In memory of the dearly loved one, who always remembered you with so much affection, will you not do me the favor of accepting these few trifles?" In Sandburg's evocative terms, Sarah became "one of the rich, silent forces" in Lincoln's life.⁵⁹

It is usually difficult to identify the central events of childhood. Even in clinical psychoanalysis, as Freud discovered, what is remembered as experience may have originated entirely in fantasy.⁶⁰ Even when "real," early memories function primarily as condensed representations of psychological relationships.⁶¹ In this sense, life indeed seems to be a stage—or, perhaps, a dream. But some events, particularly if they occur early enough, do seem capable of significantly distorting all else that follows. Early parent loss is such an event.⁶² The problem with the theoretical literature on this subject is its failure to identify any clear *necessary and sufficient outcomes* for a child who loses a parent. One may hypothesize a desperate

and continuing need for archaic substitutes following childhood parent loss, but one often encounters the same need in a person whose parents have both been alive and well throughout his childhood. Furthermore, there may be a loss without death, for example, divorce or serious illness, that may or may not have similar effects as death, or there may be relative emotional health despite childhood traumas that should make the best of us schizophrenic. When all is said and done, however, there is one universal observation about childhood parent loss that anyone would agree with: It is a significant event that may be central in shaping development. One can only know for sure by a close examination of the facts in each case.

In his autobiography, Lincoln tells a curious story of killing a wild turkey just before his eighth birthday. The story, which he told in the third person and placed in parentheses, goes:

(A few days before the completion of his eighth year, in the absence of his father, a flock of wild turkeys approached the new log cabin, and A. with a rifle gun, standing inside, shot through a crack, and killed one of them. He has never since pulled a trigger on any larger game.)⁶³

The turkey story follows a brief description of the move to Indiana in 1816, when Thomas settled “in an unbroken forest” and Lincoln “had an axe put in his hands at once.” But then the first sentence after the turkey story relates both the death of his mother and his father’s remarriage: “In the autumn of 1818, his mother died; and a year afterwards his father married Mrs. Sally Johnston.” Such a juxtaposition of memories suggests an association between the wild turkey and his dead mother. Both are helpless, and both die. The odd insertion of the turkey scene in parentheses between the description of Indiana and the report of Nancy’s death seems a symbolic way of communicating uncon-

scious feelings about his mother's death. The most important detail in the turkey story is Lincoln's responsibility for killing the bird. This apparently left deep remorse—guilt in our terms—and makes it impossible for Lincoln to pull “a trigger on any larger game.” This guilt, one suspects, has been displaced from his mother onto the wild bird. Thus it seems he felt somehow responsible for causing his mother's death.

It would appear from the story that renounced infantile sexual longings toward the mother prompted the sense of guilt Lincoln felt after her death. This sexual theme enters the story by proxy, for Lincoln killed the turkey “in the absence of his father” and with a “rifle gun” that probably belonged to his father and that, according to Dennis Hanks, may have been loaded by his mother.⁶⁴ If we take the appropriation of the father's gun as a wish—and the story itself seems dreamlike—then the meaning of the condensed memories expressed in the story becomes more apparent. Lincoln unconsciously wished his father away because he wanted to possess his mother. He could only realize the wish, however, by appropriating the magical power of the father's gun as he struggled to beat out his father in competition for the mother. At some point, he must have felt victorious in that struggle, but the gun he appropriated proved more deadly than anticipated, for with it he killed the helpless turkey. Punishment must be extracted: “He has never since pulled a trigger on any larger game.” In the confusion of mourning his mother's death, Lincoln thus seemed to construct an unconscious explanation for her loss that “explained” her death in terms of punishment for his own earlier forbidden sexual wishes. As punishment for his love, she died.⁶⁵

One indirect, if curiously confirming, piece of evidence for this interpretation is Lincoln's lifelong sympathy for animals. Such a sentiment was hardly the norm for the frontier. By his report he was reluctant to hunt large game. He also seemed to have had

bad experiences with animals; when he was ten he was kicked in the head by a horse, and in his words, “apparently killed for a time.”⁶⁶ Several reports later testified he was sensitive “almost to a fault” about animals. Mary S. Vineyard (whom Lincoln courted as Mary Owens) reported Lincoln’s story of helping a mired shoat (young pig) because “the poor thing seemed to say so wistfully: There now! my last hope is gone.” J. D. Wickizer reported Lincoln’s furious anger on once finding an old sow eating her young ones: Lincoln heard the squeals of the little pigs and leaped out of his buggy to break up such an “unnatural” scene.⁶⁷ There is also the story about how Lincoln helped his frightened little dog across an icy bridge on the trip from Indiana to Illinois in 1830. The grateful dog, when safe on dry land, “cut up such antics as no dog ever did before.”⁶⁸ This otherwise innocuous story became a staple Lincoln tale and, apparently, something of a family legend.

But such things are seldom simple. Dennis Hanks reported hunting often with Lincoln in Indiana, and Sarah Lincoln noted that Lincoln disliked hunting but “sometimes went coon hunting and turkey hunting at nights.” Lincoln himself reported the “ludicrous” incident of sewing up the eyes of some hogs. It was 1831 and Lincoln was working for Denton Offutt, who thought of the scheme to make his thirty hogs more manageable. Lincoln did the actual sewing and seemed glad to report that the whole idea was a complete failure. Nor were animals free from Lincoln’s absorbing rivalry with his father. Lincoln often repeated for Herndon the odd story of the way he and John Johnston handled Thomas’s cussed little yellow dog who always gave away their attempts to sneak out late and go coon hunting. One night they took the dog with them and sewed around it the skin of a dead coon. The terrified dog ran for home, but his powerful scent attracted a host of neighborhood dogs who proceeded to kill him. “Father was much incensed at his death,” Lincoln reported to Herndon.⁶⁹

The turkey scene from his autobiography suggests in highly condensed form Lincoln's particular oedipal tensions as they emerged in connection with his mother's death: a competitive sense of regretful victory over his father; a deep and abiding love for his mother that was powerfully libidinal; guilt for feeling forbidden sexual desires which became, in the irrational but psychologically comprehensive mind of the child confronted with parent loss, responsibility for death; and, finally, an unconscious connection between loving and killing that was to severely affect Lincoln's intimate relations as an adult. The rumpled, even dirty appearance of nine-year-old Abraham and eleven-year-old Sarah after their mother's death, and the disarray of their home suggest not only the severe impact of the loss but also that Nancy was being profoundly if crudely mourned. The arrival of the "new" mother, Sarah Lincoln, with her gentle, loving, understanding qualities, may have cut short Lincoln's mourning process, encapsulating his guilt and areas of conflict behind a defensive wall. This is, of course, speculation, but just as Sarah meliorated the pain of Nancy's death for Lincoln, she may have aggravated the unconscious guilt he felt for having somehow caused her death; and as she provided desperately needed continuity to allow Lincoln's further development, she may also have helped create a major discontinuity for young Lincoln that took him a lifetime to work through.

If such an approach to one story deeply embedded in the autobiography seems fanciful, there is other evidence that the wrenching loss of Nancy was the critical point in Lincoln's childhood.⁷⁰ In the fall of 1844 Lincoln, then a rising young Whig lawyer-politician, took a campaign swing through Indiana in behalf of Henry Clay. On the way he visited "the neighborhood in that state in which I was raised, where my mother and only sister were buried." The visit "aroused feelings in me which were certainly poetry," Lincoln told a newspaper editor at the time, "though

whether my expression of those feelings is poetry is quite another question.”⁷¹ Lincoln wrote two lyrical poems after the trip, both of which express the exquisite pain he felt on visiting his “childhood’s home.” The dating of the poems, their internal structure, and even whether they should be considered one rather long poem are unclear. The answer to these confusions may lie in the dreamlike quality that his childhood memories seem to have aroused in Lincoln.⁷²

*My childhood’s home I see again,
And sadden with the view;
And still, as memory crowds my brain,
There’s pleasure in it too.
O Memory! Thou midway world
’Twi’x earth and paradise,
Where things decayed and loved ones lost
In dreamy shadows rise,*

Out of these “dreamy shadows” from the past Lincoln retrospectively isolated several emotionally laden memories. One was:

*When first my father settled here,
’Twas then the frontier line:
The panther’s scream, filled with fear
And bears preyed on the swine.*

A stroke of disaster seemed imminent in the move to Indiana, a “panther’s scream” filling the night with fear.

This part of Indiana in 1816 was, in fact, wild country full of animals. Albert Beveridge, using twelve different accounts of settlers and travelers, described the “raccoon, squirrel, opossum, skunk, deer, bear, wolf, wildcat, panther.”

Wild turkeys ran through underbrush filled with grouse and quail; wild ducks and geese flew overhead. Incredible num-

bers of pigeons hid the sun, darkening the air like a thick passing cloud, and, when settling for the night, broke down stout branches of trees. Swarms of mosquitoes rose from dank, stagnant pools and noisome swamps; large black and poisonous yellow flies abounded. Innumerable frogs rasped the stillness.⁷³

Psychologically, however, Lincoln's fear of the panther's scream and of the bear preying on the swine suggests that he may well have experienced the move from Kentucky as a painful separation and even trembled as a child in anticipatory anxiety at what awaited him in Indiana. Death occurs in these few lines when helpless animals are destroyed by wild and brutal bears and panthers. This, indeed, is the theme of the entire poem, though it takes an ironic twist at the end.⁷⁴

But the poem even more clearly suggests that, at some point, Lincoln invested certain relatively incidental memories from before his mother's death with the predictive power of what was to come. The animals may or may not have been frightening at the point of his moving to Indiana. Probably there was some fear, though nothing beyond a young boy's normal dread of the unknown, of strange and potentially dangerous sounds. After Nancy's death, however, and Lincoln's apparent association between her and helpless wild animals, these earlier memories assumed new significance as Lincoln worked over his confused, conflicted feelings during mourning.

Death is also the central theme of the earlier canto (or separate poem) that begins "My childhood's home I see again." Here he describes the memories and sights of his youth that were so poignantly real: "Now twenty years have passed away" since he last saw his playmates from childhood. "And half of all are dead."

*I hear the loved survivors tell
How nought from death could save,
Till every sound appears a knell,
And every spot a grave.*

*I range the fields with pensive tread,
And pace the hollow rooms,
And feel (companions of the dead)
I'm living in the tombs.*

The feelings of seeing his mother's grave and his childhood home flooded Lincoln with memories of her death and everyone else's from that era. He felt himself to be a companion of the dead and thus separated from the present and reunited with the past through his own death. Such depersonalization at seeing his "childhood's home" suggests incomplete mourning and a repressed encapsulation of everything associated with his mother. This was to play an important role in shaping his personality.