

The Weight of Heritage

The history and heritage of a people has an undeniable impact on the lives of their descendants. Often this impact is beneficial, enriching the lives of the people within a culture or subculture with a sense of belonging and support, but in some cases the opposite is true. The balance between these two extremes is one of the underlying themes of Jesmyn Ward's novel *Sing, Unburied, Sing*. It is a theme that may not be immediately apparent as it is somewhat overshadowed by the louder more forward-facing ones covering family, race, and poverty, but it shapes the characters, nonetheless. The shared and disparate heritage of the central cast effect each in different ways, Leonie desires a connection she lacks, while Jojo is shaped by both sides of his. The only character that disrupts this theme, at least in the scope of the novel, is Kayla/Michaela who as the youngest has a different relationship to the past than the older characters.

On some level each of the characters struggles to shape their lives and identity in the context of the American South. The positioning of each character, and the methods they attempt reflect in many ways the flaws in the post-colonial attempts to form a national identity for African nations that Frantz Fanon presents in his 1963 essay *On National Culture*. At first glance it may seem to be a stretch to compare the story of a single family to the collective efforts of a myriad of African Nations, but the comparison works on two levels those of the societal and personal. First it is necessary to limit the scope of Fanon's arguments to only those pertinent to this case, as he makes several points in his essay and not all of them are relevant to a character analysis. The section of his essay that resonates with this story is his point that in the face of a colonial power that seeks to dissolve a colonized nation's culture and identity the intellectuals of that nation have a tendency to reach back into their past to hold onto relics of their now

marginalized culture. An emphasis is placed on cultural heritage as it is often the extensive history of civilization that a colonial power uses to justify their right of rule, so in turn a post-colonial nation seeks to re-instill the notion of their own equally extensive cultural heritage. Fanon's argument about this reflex in the intellectual community is that it has a negative impact on the establishment of a new national identity as it overemphasizes a past that is no longer representative of the current present. It is this argument that resonates with Ward's novel as her characters are tied down by, and in Leonie's case succumb to, their collective past.

Starting from the broadest level of the world created in Ward's novel she presents the modern-day present of Mississippi and through River's stories and Richie's ghost its past. It is not entirely clear what the exact year the novel takes place in is as there is an odd lack of modern technology mentioned in detail, but it is safe to say that it would be the 90's at the earliest which changes little in saying that it is not the picture of a post-colonial society. However, there is one regard that it could be considered post-colonial and that is in its culture. While it is not a shift in governance, the image of the south Ward' creates is one that has made a change in its culture and law on a fairly recent timescale. Lines like "This ain't the old days" that Big Joseph says after Given is killed show that a cultural change has occurred, only it has yet to be accepted by those that lived through the transition (Ward, 50). This is a similar clash of past and present that occurs in a post-colonial transition, as a shift in power is rarely met amicably by those that feel that they are losing something in the process.

The death of Given is one of the inciting incidents of the novel, especially for Leonie's arc, however it impacts all the characters as it drives Leonie and Michael together causing the formation of their family overall. The wider racial tensions presented in the novel shade the two's relationship from beginning to end, and as it is never resolved presumably long after. The

mistrust and hate between based on race that these characters experience manifests throughout the novel in scenes from the various instances of conflict with Michael's parents on account of Leonie's race to the officer holding Jojo at gunpoint when they are pulled over. These are important scenes, and themes of race tie heavily back into the story of River and Richie but given the scope of the novel as one focused on a single family there is no large-scale change in this state. The characters are not activists or revolutionaries, rather they are just a family written to feel believably realistic and as such simply exist within the status quo. There is commentary on the topic of racial conflict to be found in Ward's novel, but it drives neither the plot nor any of the character's arcs. Instead the focus is placed on the character's internal and personal growth or lack thereof, and with this focus it brings the novel further in line with Fanon's argument on national heritage.

Each of the characters functions far more like a nation unto themselves rather than existing within a larger post-colonial one. Or perhaps more accurately they behave as the "intellectuals" Fanon is addressing rather than the nations that they inhabit. This is true for the majority of the cast, but is most readily apparent in Leonie, as she is shown to repeatedly desire a connection with her family's heritage and perhaps more importantly places an emphasis on that connection as a way to raise her own personal self-worth. As previously noted, Given's death deeply scars Leonie and goes on to shape a significant portion of her character. This impact is manifested in her visions of his ghost whenever she is high, however it is how this manifestation ties her to her mother that is more notable. The loss of her brother is important, but the effect it has on her is emblematic of her deeper feelings of alienation. His death isolates her, but the appearance of his spirit ties her back to the spiritualistic roots of her maternal line. Her mother, Philomene, is an herbalist and spiritualist and throughout the novel Leonie laments the fact that

she never shared that talent and was never able to carry it on. More specifically, she needs to be able to do what her mother could to justify herself and the herbalism is just one means of doing so. In the scenes where Kayla falls ill, and Leonie uses blackberry leaves to try and cure it unsuccessfully; it is presented as less of a desire to help her daughter and more one to prove to herself that she could. Just as the intellectuals described by Fanon, Leonie reaches back to the heritage that she thinks holds answers, but lacking the context needed to make it work she fails to manifest it in an authentic form. Later on in the novel there is a moment where Mam makes a comment about Leonie's parenting instincts, it is while she is thinking about when Leonie bought food for herself and got nothing for Jojo, and how it showed that motherhood just wasn't a part of her nature. It is not that Leonie is inherently bad, only that she struggles with admitting to herself what she wants, and that she is equally unable to give those things up. She has forced herself into a role she is unsuited for yet denies that and insists that she is not incapable of it believing that she needs to be like her mother to be validated. Ultimately this conflict of personal identity for her is never resolved, and her arc ends with her still stuck in indecision, neither committing to leave for good, or to actually be present in her children's lives instead existing ineffectually on the periphery.

The effects of the family's shared heritage take on a different form in the character of Jojo, who like his mother can also see and interact with the dead although to a significantly different end. Unlike Leonie, Jojo is caught up in the history of others by virtue of his birth rather than through any personal desire. He is pulled into the lingering resentments of Richie solely because of his relation to River and the abilities inherited from Philomene, yet he attempts to address them to the best of his ability. He eventually brings Richie to hear the end of his grandfather's story about the time they were imprisoned, and the truth of Richie's death that

comes along with it. Jojo is an interesting case for a leading character as when he learns the River killed Richie to spare him a death at the hands of a lynch mob it seems that he simply accepts it without truly processing its gravity. In truth much of Jojo's arc exists to disprove the opening line of the novel where he states, "I like to think I know what death is. I like to think that it's something I could look at straight" (Ward, 1). He is young, and obviously understands far less of the world than he pretends to, but despite the traumatic end to River's story it represents a more positive inheritance of a heritage than the sort Fanon argues against. Unlike Leonie, Jojo is not trying to substitute his own identity with that of those that came before but builds toward something closer to a synthesis. It is somewhat unclear as to how much he learns from his experiences by the end of the novel, since it is not a fully resolved conflict, yet his character still represents the compromise of past and present to an extent. As Richie says to him at the end, "Now you understand life. Now you know death" showing that through following the thread of his grandfather's past and in losing his grandmother Jojo has grown and refined himself in important ways (Ward, 282).

Each character in the novel is a representation of a path to dealing with their heritage, whether that is clinging to it or subsuming it, neither Leonie nor Jojo fulfills the idea of self-awareness or rather self-identification that Fanon argues for on a national level, but surprisingly it is Kayla that comes the closest. As is common with many child characters in fiction she bears an innocence that the others lack. She has yet to have grown to the point that she starts to recognize the differences of eras, instead existing fully in her own present. It is why out of all the character she is the only one that holds the concept of "home" as it is presented by Ward, the idea of a place that resonates with a person on a fundamental level. It is a similar concept to Fanon's ideal for a nation's cultural identity, a sense of place not contingent on any external

concepts but rather one that exists in a self-evident state. The ghosts that appear before Jojo in the final pages are embodiments of the issues that a post-colonial nation like those Fanon describes face, they have suffered injustice and violence, and as a result have defined themselves in opposition to their suffering and its instigators. They cannot forgive the ones that killed them or the world that allowed it to happen and lash out as with Richie raging and striking out at Philomene after learning the truth of his death. Kayla unburdened by the past is able to quiet the lingering ghosts of the murdered, because unlike Jojo she doesn't understand them. Instead she conveys to them what their deaths and histories have drowned out; a song to guide them home.

Works Cited:

Ward, Jesmyn. *Sing, Unburied, Sing*. Scribner, 2017.

Fanon, Frantz. *On National Culture*. Translated by Richard Philcox, 1963.