

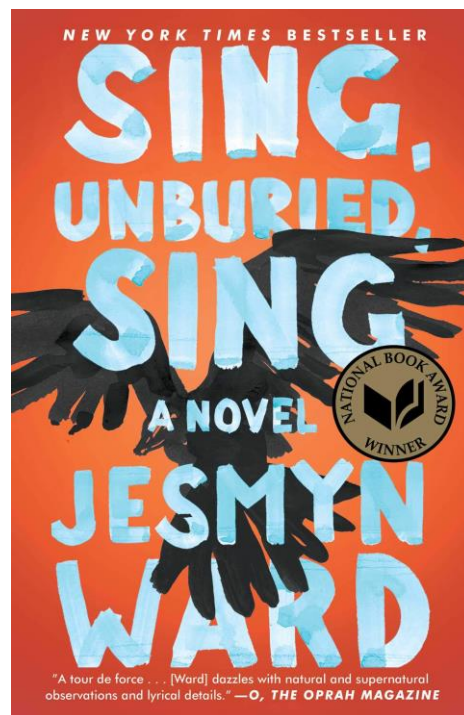
Lesson Plan

# Sing Unburied Sing

By Jesmyn Ward

## Lecture Plans / Ideas for Post-Secondary Students

Jesmyn Ward  
*Sing, Unburied, Sing*



Jesmyn Ward, *Sing, Unburied, Sing* (New York: Scribner, 2017).

Cover Design: Hellen Yentus

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## Laying the Groundwork: Background and Introduction



Jesmyn Ward (b. 1977)

- Grew up in DeLisle, MS, a location that has heavily influenced her writing.
- BA in English and MA in Media Studies and Communication from Stanford University.
- MFA from University of Michigan.
- Family displaced by Hurricane Katrina, an event that also has heavily influenced her writing and contributed to a three-year writing hiatus.
- Only woman to win the National Book Award two times (2011, *Salvage the Bones* and 2017, *Sing, Unburied, Sing*)
- Published works: *Where the Line Bleeds* (2008), *Salvage the Bones* (2011), *Men We Reaped* (2013), *The Fire This Times* (2016), *Sing, Unburied Sing*, (2017), *Navigate Your Stars* (2020).

Background Reading on Ward:

Alison Flood, "Hurricane Katrina novel wins National Book Award," *The Guardian* (November 17, 2011), <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2011/nov/17/hurricane-katrina-novel-national-book-award>.

Judy Johnson, "Jesmyn Ward," *Current Biography* 75, no. 3 (March 2014).

Boris Kachka, "The Rise and Return of Jesmyn Ward," *New York Magazine* (August 24, 2017), <https://www.vulture.com/2017/08/jesmyn-ward-sing-unburied-sing.html>.

Jesmyn Ward, "No Mercy in Motion," *Guernica* (September 2, 2013), <https://www.guernicamag.com/no-mercy-in-motion/>.

Paula Rogo, "Jesmyn Ward Wins Second National Book Award for 'Sing, Unburied, Sing,'" *Essence* (November 18, 2017), <https://www.essence.com/culture/jesmyn-ward-second-national-book-award-sing-unburied-sing/>.

### Settings and Themes to Explore with Students

1. *Parchman Farm (Prison / Mississippi State Penitentiary)*

\* Only men's maximum security prison in MS

\*The state's oldest prison (1901)

\* Post-Civil War "Black Codes" (Jim Crow Laws) designed to restrict freedom of black people and to continue their role as a cheap labor force.

\*Prisoners worked the fields, under armed guard, were whipped and tortured

\*System of trusties (“trusty-shooters”): The most violent offenders were given guns oversaw the other prisoners.

Background Material:

Hannah Grabenstein, “Inside Mississippi’s notorious Parchman prison,” *PBS News Hours*, (January 29, 2018), <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/arts/inside-mississippis-notorious-parchman-prison>. From Ward: “Growing up on Mississippi’s southern coast, Ward said that Parchman loomed over her childhood. ‘When I thought about prison, that’s the prison that came to mind,’ she said. ‘I didn’t know much about it, but I knew it was a place I never wanted to end up. And the danger that I would end up there was a real thing, for me and for people that I know and loved.’”

*Innocence Project*, “The Lasting Legacy of Parchman Farm, the Prison Modeled After a Slave Plantation” (May 29, 2020), <https://www.innocenceproject.org/parchman-farm-prison-mississippi-history/>.

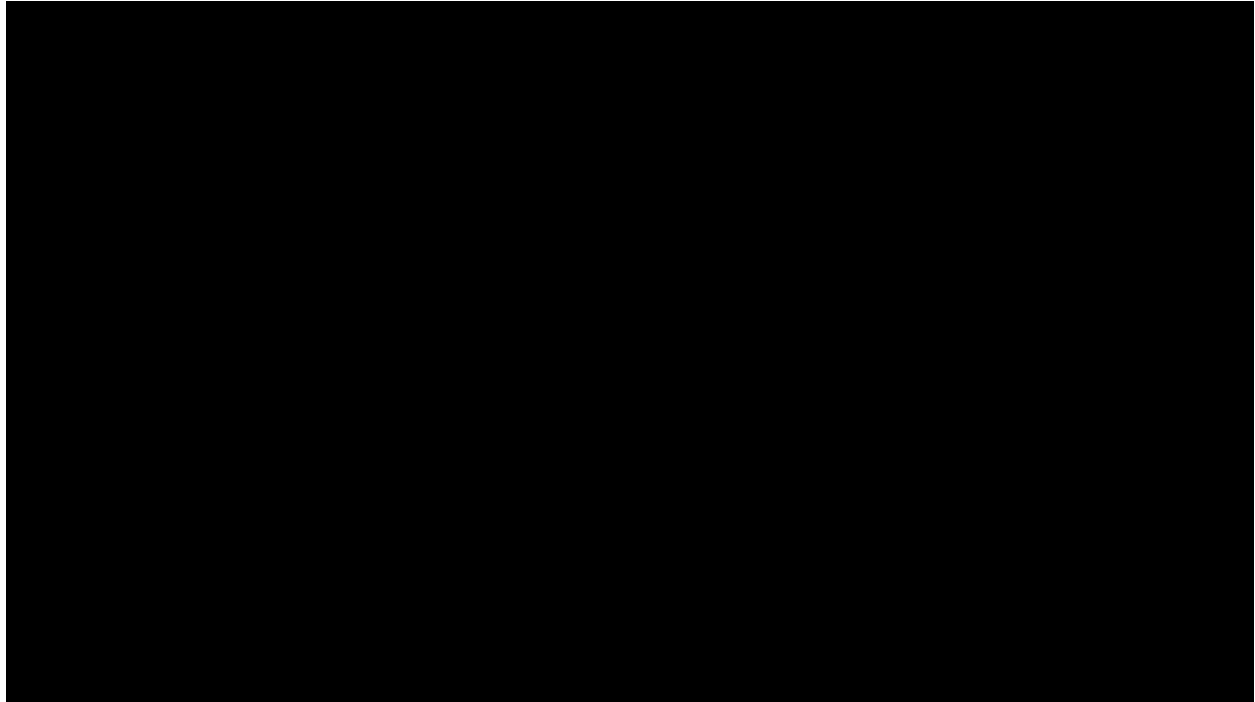
“Tangle Eye, Hard Hat, 22 and Little Read - When I Went to Leland,” from Alan Lomax, *Parchman Farm: Photographs and Field Recordings, 1947-1959*.



## 2. History of Race and Poverty in the US South

\*See Equal Justice Initiative, Racial Justice, which explores the legacy of slavery through U.S. history: enslavement, racial terror lynching, segregation, presumption of guilt (<https://eji.org/racial-justice/>).

\*See Equal Justice Initiative, From Enslavement to Mass Incarceration (<https://museumandmemorial.eji.org/museum>).



### 3. *Southern Gothic*

\*Characteristics: irrational, sometimes horrific thoughts, grotesque characters, dark humor, alienation: “The Southern Gothic brings to light the extent to which the idyllic vision of the pastoral, agrarian South rests on massive repressions of the region’s historical realities: slavery, racism, and patriarchy” (“Southern Gothic Literature,” <https://oxfordre.com/literature/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780190201098.001.0001/acrefore-9780190201098-e-304>).

\*Return of the “repressed” in the shape of ghosts.

\*Southern Gothic and black authors and communities -- first as characters created by white writers to project the failures of the American South and then as authors challenging this depiction.

#### Background Material:

Allison Graham, “The South in Popular Culture,” in *A Companion to the Literature and Culture of the American South*, ed. Richard Gray and Owen Robinson (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2007).

Bridget M. Marshall, “Defining Southern Gothic,” in *Critical Insights: Southern Gothic Literature*, ed. Jay Ellis (Ipswich, MA: Salem, 2013).

Flannery O’Connor, *Mystery and Manners: Occasional Prose*, ed. Sally and Robert Fitzgerald

(New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2000).<sup>1</sup>

### Reading the Book: *Sing, Unburied, Sing*

As you read, make note of the following characters, themes, ideas, and quotes. Support your work with proper citations and page references. Feel free to add to these lists!

#### Main Characters

Major Characters	Description / Characteristics
Jojo	
Pop	
Mam	
Kayla (Michaela)	
Leonie	
Michael	
Given	
Big Joseph	
Richie	
Stag	
Misty	
Minor Characters	Description / Characteristics
Maggie	
Michael's Cousin	
Kinnie Wagner	
Hogjaw	
Carlotta	
Fred	
Al	
Police Officer	
Maman Brigitte	
Blue	
Bishop	

#### Themes to Consider

Theme	Key Ideas / Questions
Family	Who are the members of Jojo's family? What role does each family member play? What losses or traumas haunt the family?
Homecoming	Is home a physical place or spiritual?

<sup>1</sup> While O'Connor can be categorized as a quintessential writer of the Southern Gothic, much recent work has raised questions about racism exposed in her correspondence. See Paul Elie, "Confronting Flannery O'Connor's Racism," *Commonweal* (August 12, 2020), <https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/confront-facts-oconnor>.

	What impedes characters' homecoming (Michael's prison sentence, Richie's lack of clarity about his death, Mam's cancer, Michael and Leonie's addictions, Given's presence to Leonie).
The Natural World	How are the boundaries between humans, plants, and animals fluid? How is nature used to ease pain? What is the significance of Gris-Gris bag that Pop gives Jojo?
Illness, Pain, and Death	"Natural" Illness (Mam's cancer) Pain / Death caused by others (Kayla's illness because of Leonie's inability to parent, Leonie's overdose, Given and Richie's deaths at the hands of whites).
Racism	Legacy of slavery, lynching, and incarceration The murders of Given and Blue Unjust imprisonment of Pop and Richie Big Joseph's racism The police officer's treatment of Jojo Systemic issues of poverty, illness, drugs, police brutality.

1. What does the title "Sing, Unburied, Sing" mean?
2. Ward begins her novel with Jojo saying, "I like to think I know what death is. I like to think that it's something I could look at straight. When Pop tell me he need my help and I see that black knife slid into the belt of his pants, I follow Pop out of the house, try to keep my back straight, my shoulders even as a hanger; that's how Pop walks. I try to look like this is normal and boring so Pop will think I've earned these thirteen years, so Pop will know I'm ready to pull what needs to be pulled, separate innards from muscle, organs from cavities. I want Pop to know I can get bloody. Today's my birthday" (1).

What is the significance of this quote? How does it set up the rest of the story? Why might Ward have opened with this scene?

3. In chapter four, Leonie describes an exchange with her best friend Misty: "*How you think I paid for all my trips up to Bishop? From tips?* She shook her head and snorted. *You better take advantage.* I hear them four words over and over again when we get in the car and I watch Misty put the package in the pocket under the floorboards. *You better take advantage.* She said them words as though decisions have no consequences, when of course, it's easier for her. The way she said it, *take advantage*, made me want

to slap her. Her freckles, her thin pink lips, her blond hair, the stubborn milkiness of her skin; how easy had it been for her, her whole life, to make the world a friend to her?" (91).

What are Leonie and Misty talking about? Why is Leonie upset? What is easier for Misty?

4. In chapter nine Richie is the narrator. He says, "I know Jojo is innocent because I can read it in the unmarked swell of him: his smooth face, ripe with baby fat; his round, full stomach; his hands and feet soft as his younger sister's. He looks even younger when he falls asleep. His baby sister has flung herself across him, and both of them slumber like young feral cats: open mouths, splayed arms and legs, exposed throats. When I was thirteen, I knew much more than him. I know that metal shackles could grow into the skin. I knew that leather could split flesh like butter. I knew that hunger could hurt, could scoop me hollow as a gourd, and that seeing my siblings starving could hollow out a different part of me, too" (185).

Richie and Jojo are both young black boys who grew up in different eras. How are their experiences similar and different? What, if anything, has changed in regard to racism in the decades since Richie's death? What remains the same?

5. In chapter eleven, Jojo recalls a fishing trip with Michael - one of the few times they'd done anything together: "And then Michael said something I'll never forget: *Some scientists for BP said this didn't have nothing to do with the oil, that sometimes this is what happens to animals: they die for unexpected reasons. Sometimes a lot of them. Sometimes all at once.* And then Michael looked at me and said: *And when the scientist said that, I thought about humans. Because humans is animals.* And the way he looked at me that night told me he wasn't thinking about any humans; he was thinking about me" (226).

Michael is referring to the real-life 2010 Deepwater Horizon Spill in the Gulf of Mexico. Do some research on this event. What happened? What was the impact? What point is Michael making? Why was he specifically thinking about Jojo, his mixed race son?

6. In chapter thirteen, Jojo finally learns what happened to Richie after he escaped Parchman Prison. Pop tells Jojo, "I said: *It's going to be all right, Richie.* He said: *You going to help me? Riv, which way should I go?* I heeled the dogs. Held out my hands to him, light side out. Moved slow. Soothed him. Said: *We gone get you out of this. We gone get you away from here.* Touched his arm: he was burning up. *I'm going home, Riv?* he asked? I squatted down next to him, the dogs steady yipping, and I looked at him. He had baby hair on the edge of his scalp, Jojo. Little fine hair he'd had since he sucked at his mama's tit. *Yes, Richie. I'm a take you home,* I said. Then I took the shank I kept in my boot and I punched it one time in his neck. In the big vein on his right side. Held him till the blood stopped spurting. Him looking at me, mouth open. A child. Tears and snot all over his face. Shocked and scared, until he went still" (255).



Consider this scene in light of what you know about the history of Parchman Prison. Why is Richie in prison in the first place? Why does he run away from the prison? Why is Pop, also a prisoner, sent to find Richie? Why does Pop kill Richie? What's the significance of home?

7. Ward closes the novel with Richie, Jojo, Pop, and Kayla at the "tree of ghosts." Jojo narrates: "'There's so many,' Richie says. His voice is molasses slow. 'So many of us,' he says. 'Hitting. The wrong keys. Wandering against. The song'" (282). A few pages later, Jojo says, "And Kayla sings louder. She waves her hand in the air as she sings, and I know it, know the movement, know it's how Leonie rubbed my back, rubbed Kayla's back when we were frightened of the world. Kayla sings, and the multitude of ghosts lean forward, nodding. They smile with something like relief, something like remembrance, something like ease" (284).

What does Richie mean by wandering against the song? How is Kayla's singing different? What is Kayla doing for the ghosts? Why do they need her song?