

A Study of Disease Writing in *Sing, Unburied, Sing*

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This paper examines the disease writing in Jesmyn Ward's *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, focusing on its metaphorical implications at three levels. Through an analysis of three central diseases—Mam's cancer, Leonie's drug addiction, and Kayla's fever and vomiting, this study reveals how Ward employs illness as a lens to critique systemic racism, social injustice, and intergenerational trauma in the American South. Mam's cancer symbolizes emotional repression and historical wounds inflicted upon Black Americans, while Leonie's addiction reflects both personal escapism and the destructive consequences of racial and social marginalization. Kayla's symptoms, along with other people's symptom of vomiting, serve as visceral expressions of psychological rejection and resistance to oppression. Drawing on Sontag's theories of illness as metaphor, the paper argues that Ward's disease narratives transcend individual suffering, exposing the pervasive "diseases" of racism and inequality in society. The novel's portrayal of illness underscores the resilience of Black communities and the urgent need for collective healing from cultural trauma.

Keywords: *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, Jasmine Ward, disease writing

Introduction

In *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, based on Latin American magical realism, Ward presents the racial discrimination suffered by several generations of a black family in the American South, singing the unspeakable pain in their hearts and unveiling the historical truths of the American South that have been covered up, both in real and surreal ways. The novel consists of the names of a mixed-race boy, Jojo, Jojo's black mother, Leonie, and a black boy's spirit, Richie, who take turns to serve as chapter headings for the fifteen chapters of the story, each told orally in the first person narrative. The surface plot is not complicated: Leonie insists on taking Jojo and her three-year-old daughter, Kayla, to the Mississippi State Penitentiary, Parchman, to pick up her white husband, Michael, who has been released from three years' imprisonment, despite the objections of Leonie's father, River. Leonie drives with her white best friend, Misty, who is also addicted to drugs and they even try to smuggle drugs on their way to Parchman. Deals with drug dealers, encounters with the police and Kayla's illness make the journey bumpy. What's more, there is a ghost of the black boy Richie who died in Parchman at twelve years old. He wants to find out the truth about his death in Parchman through Jojo; In the end, Michael and his racist white family break up, and Jojo and Kayla, after their grandmother passes away, have a dialogue with Richie and other ghosts of their ancestors. In the end, the novel finally ends with the ghosts' cry of "going home".

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So far, domestic scholars have conducted several studies on *Sing, Unburied, Sing* from several aspects. Most of them interpret the novel from the perspectives of the novel's magical realist writing, trauma narrative, unnatural narrative, and feminism. However, It is worth mentioning that the spectre of diseases in the novel haunts the protagonists' family from the beginning to the end. Diseases such as drug addiction and hyperthermia follow the protagonists on their journey. The disease narrative encompasses Ward's exploration of racial issues and social ethics. She incorporates a deep knowledge of disease in her work, revealing the mental pain and alienation of black people in the underclass at the end of the 20th century with delicate strokes. According to Sun, disease in literature transcends the realm of medicine, and with the help of fictional or non-fictional literary imagery, it carries many meanings of national society, humanistic ideology, racial humanity, and so on (Sun, 2022, p. 181). Individual diseases become symbols of the diseases of the times and insinuate the diseases of the society, which has a profound research value. Therefore, the study of disease writing in *Sing, Unburied, Sing* is crucial to understanding the novel's exploration of the themes of race, trauma and death, and is of great significance in broadening the study of the novel.

This paper will focus on three typical diseases mentioned in the novel, i.e. Mam's cancer, Leonie's drug addiction and Kayla's fever and vomiting symptoms and an analysis of their multiple metaphorical meanings at personal, familial and social levels. In literature, disease is not only a personal affliction, but is also linked to broader themes of human frailty and social injustice.

Mam's Cancer and Its Metaphorical Implications

Cancer Writing in the Novel

The novel begins with Mam's cancer and ends with her death, and cancer becomes a major thread in the novel. "She's too sick with the cancer that came and left and returned, steady as the rising and sinking of the marsh water in the bayou with the moon" (Ward, 2017, p. 14). As a vital member of Jojo's family, the death of Mam has a significant impact on every family member and successfully drives the plot forward. Ward gives specific, detailed descriptions of Mam's cancer symptoms, giving readers a clear sense of how cancer can destroy a living life step by step: "Years later, that's where she'd first start feeling the pain from the cancer: in her knees. Then it moved up to her hips, her waist, her spine, to her skull" (Ward, 2017, p. 58). Though continually tormented by cancer, Mam tries to heal herself and does not give up hope for life: "For still believing in good in a world that cursed her with cancer, that twisted her limp as a wet rag and left her to disintegrate" (Ward, 2017, p. 42). Through the portrayal of Mam's cancer, Ward succeeds in creating a tenacious black female character who fights the disease with tenacity, and is instrumental in the growth and epiphanies of the other characters in the novel.

Metaphorical Implications of Cancer in the Novel

As Susan Sontag pointed in *Illness as Metaphor and AIDS and Its Metaphors*, "According to the mythology of cancer, it is generally a steady repression of feeling that causes the disease" (Sontag, 2013, p. 10). Cancer in literature has maintained its status as the most parochial of disease metaphors. On the personal level, cancer is a metaphor for Mam's personal emotional repression. As an older generation of black Americans, Mam has experienced the worst years of black oppression and witnessed the persecution of those around her: her husband, River, was once enslaved by white guards and even other blacks in Parchman; her son, Given, was killed by an

enraged white man and dumped in the wilderness just because he showed talent and confidence that was “unbecoming of a lowly black man”. “Several hundred cancer patients, two-thirds or three-fifths report being depressed or unsatisfied with their lives, and having suffered from the loss (through death or rejection or separation) of a parent, lover, spouse, or close friend” (Sontag, 2013, p. 20). Mam’s beloved have been discriminated against and abused by white people, and have been physically and mentally traumatized. As a result of her personal experience, Mam is more aware of the harm done to black race, and therefore more eager on defending racial dignity. In addition, Her daughter, Leonie’s infatuation with a white man is also a source of repression for Mam, especially when she falls in love with the brother of her son’s murderer, But Mam’s inner kindness and her deep love for Leonie compell her to suppress the hatred in her heart, as she acknowledges that “It ain’t his fault what he was born to Where” (Ward, 2017, p. 57). But she is also wise enough to recognize the inequality of their relationship: “Every time you say something, you look at him like a little puppy dog. Like you waiting for him to pet you” (Ward, 2017, p. 56). With Leonie’s insistence on having a family with Michael and getting pregnant, Mam can only suppress her discontent and resentment. The burden of life, the oppression of her surroundings and the suffering of her loved ones all become the boulders weighing on Mam, and the repressed negative feelings in her heart are shown as the symptom of cancer.

“Order is the oldest concern of political philosophy, and if it is plausible to compare the polis to an organism, then it is plausible to compare civil disorder to an illness” (Sontag, 2013, p. 29). Similarly, as a miniature society, illness can also be used as a metaphor for the disorder of a family. Mam is an integral member of Jojo’s family, and her love for the children and care for Leonie hold up the whole family. As a result, her worsening cancer also suggests the collapse and the growing disorder of the family, which is manifested in father’s imprisonment and mother’s addiction. Their inability to fulfil their duty of caring for the family show the parents’ lack of place in the family. Meanwhile, the child assumes the role of guardian in the family. Jojo takes care of his younger sister Kayla throughout the novel, showing maturity and responsibility beyond his age; he clearly recognizes the childishness and dereliction of duty of his parents, and therefore does not treat Leonie as his mother as he never calls Leonie “mom”, but rather by her first name. It is obvious that in Jojo’s family, the identity of parents and children is inverted. The normal parent-child relationship is one in which the parent accommodates and defuses the child’s anxiety. An inverted parent-child relationship means that an adult throws his or her own unbearable negative energy and death anxiety on the child, and the child can’t live his or her life around constructing himself or herself, but around his or her mum or dad, making it difficult for them to complete self-actualization. The misalignment of the parent-child relationship thus creates a kind of “diffuse anxiety”. Cancer thus becomes a metaphor for family conflict, and as Mam’s body is gradually being eroded by the cancer, the conflict between Jojo and his parents becomes more and more intense. In the end, the conflict eases as Mam dies. Leonie accepts her mother’s passing, and Jojo understands Leonie’s pain a little more. Having gone through a series of events together, both Jojo and Leonie become more mature, just as the ghosts in the end of the novel, “They smile with something like relief, something like remembrance, something like ease” (Ward, 2017, p. 100). In the end, Mam’s disease dissipates with her death and symbolizes the easing of their family conflicts.

Mam’s cancer symbolizes that the damage done to black people by anti-Black racism pervades the environment like a virus, eating away at black people physically and mentally, and that it is difficult for them to escape from their hostile environment. Sontag pointed out that “It may be, is increasingly thought to be,

something in the environment that has caused the cancer. But once cancer is present, it cannot be reversed or diminished by a move to a better (that is, less carcinogenic) environment” (Sontag, 2013, p. 8).

In the United States, black people have been squeezed out of their living environment. Although white oppression of black people has been moderated in recent years since the abolition of slavery by Abraham Lincoln and the Civil Rights Movement of African Americans, malice and discrimination cannot be eliminated in one day and they are still deep-rooted. “Illnesses have always been used as metaphors to enliven charges that a society was corrupt or unjust” (Sontag, 2013, p. 28). Disease is often used to express anxiety about the social order and to blame society for its repression. “To use only fatal diseases for imagery in politics gives the metaphor a much more pointed character. Now, to liken a political event or situation to an illness is to impute guilt, to prescribe punishment. This is particularly true of the use of cancer as a metaphor. It amounts to saying, first of all, that the event or situation is unqualifiedly and unredeemably wicked” (Sontag, 2013, p. 31). As a predatory disease, the ravages of cancer in the body is similar to what white hegemony has done to black Americans. While cancer is not an incurable disease, it is a fatal blow to a black family crushed by drugs and poverty. The story takes place in the aftermath of the African-American Civil Rights Movement. Although the status of black people has been improved, the trauma of history lingers, the fear of whites among the new generation of blacks is still rooted in their hearts, white discrimination and oppression of blacks remains high, and the status of the oppressed blacks in the United States has not been fundamentally changed. Just as cancer cells cannot be eradicated by Mam’s herbal medicine, discrimination and ill-will against blacks cannot be easily eradicated, and only the combined efforts of both races can dissolve the plight of blacks’ marginalization.

Drug Addiction and Its Metaphorical Implications

Drug Addiction Writing in the Novel

As William Barnes, the father of American drug literature, said, “drugs are like a pyramid: the upper levels devour the lower levels. Drugs are a framework for monopoly and control.” *Sing, Unburied, Sing* takes place during a period of massive drug proliferation. The United States is the largest consumer of drugs in the world and drugs has become the biggest public health problem in the U.S. On 18 June 1971, the American War on Drugs campaign began. War on Drugs was applied as a justification for increased policing and arrests, as well as harsher prison sentences, primarily targeting the black community. Former Nixon-era domestic policy chief John Daniel Ehrlichman admitted that this effort was designed to hurt black families.

In the novel, in which the adults are addicted to drugs, Ward recounts the thrill of addiction and the emptiness of the aftermath of addiction through the meticulous depiction of the addicts, “The coke done had me chewing like this since last night. Pop’s talking to me, but all I can think about is my jaw” (Ward, 2017, p. 18). Drug-addicted people are unable to control their actions and thoughts and thus become complete slaves to their desires. The novel mercilessly exposes the damage that drugs do to individuals and families: Jojo and Kayla’s father, Michael, is arrested for drug use and trafficking, and Leonie, under her husband’s influence, is also addicted to drugs, and makes drug-addicted friends to use drugs with. They even smuggle methamphetamine secretly on their journeys. Drugs take a devastating toll on people, and even relatively privileged white people fall deep into this trap. American underclass use drugs as a means of escaping poverty, racism, violence, and trauma. It is worth noting that the white drug users in the text not only use drugs themselves, but also contribute to the

spread of drugs through drug trafficking, thus they become both victims and perpetrators. Although the harm caused by drugs is spread to every corner of the United States, due to the difference in race and identity, black people are hurt and discriminated against in a way that is far beyond the imagination of white people.

Metaphorical Implications of Drug Addiction

Whether a drug is harmful to a person or not depends on how the person uses it. The correct use of drugs such as morphine can provide pain relief, and it is the desire to be away from pain and the excessive dependence on and pursuit of illusory happiness that makes drugs what they are.

From a personal point of view, every drug-addicted character in the novel has his or her own trauma and pain. Being at the bottom of the social ladder, they are unable to get out of their predicament by their own personal strength or seek the help of people around them, so they choose to indulge in drugs to escape from their trauma. The process of struggling with drug addiction is essentially a process of self-referencing with personal suffering and inner dilemmas, and the real war is not between human beings and drugs, but between human beings and their inner hearts.

For Leonie, drug use first and foremost represents a personal escape from pain. Leonie has frequent visions of her dead brother, Given, after taking drugs. “Last night, he smiled at me, this Given-not-Given, this Given that’s been dead fifteen years now, this Given that came to me every time I snorted a line, every time I popped a pill” (Ward, 2017, p. 17). The spectre of Given is actually a visualization of Leonie’s inner struggle; she longs to be free of her addiction, but sees herself as weak and powerless, and therefore longs for a strong, external force to take her away from shackles. Though the status of blacks has risen considerably, the long-standing social system of white privilege cannot be changed immediately. Given’s naive view of race leads to his tragedy. His death insinuates the disillusionment of black people’s ideal of affirmative action, and Leonie is thus left in extreme anguish. The first time she sees Given after a drug trip, she cries bitterly and decides never to touch drugs again. But it doesn’t last long, and eventually Leonie fails to resist her desire and becomes addicted to drugs again.

Besides being an escape from pain, Leonie’s drug addiction has a more important metaphorical significance: her pathological obsession with her white husband, Michael, is like an addiction that makes her leave her responsibilities behind and indulge in illusory happiness. Michael’s presence is like a drug that has various negative effects on Leonie, such as drug addiction and drug dealing (Leonie may have started using drugs at the instigation of her husband). She thinks she has a right judgement, yet her morbid obsession with Michael makes her lose herself. Just as Mam says to Leonie, “All you hear, all you see, is him” (Ward, 2017, p. 56). Her love for Michael is pure but pathological, and she puts herself in an inferior position, which may contain an unconscious admiration for the white privileged class, hence Mam’s sharp observation points out that “she looks at him like a puppy”. When Kayla is sick, she revels in the joy of being reunited with Michael and is oblivious to her daughter’s pain: “‘She still looks a little yellow to me.’ Leonie gives a little half laugh and waves at Kayla. ‘Of course she’s yellow. She’s our baby.’ And then Leonie laughs” (Ward, 2017, p. 49). Leonie thus ignores the family and social responsibilities she is supposed to have: as a daughter, she ignores her mother’s feelings; as a mother, she discards her responsibilities to her children; as a sister, she avoids the cause of Given’s death, and as an African American, she avoids the racial harm done to her race. With Michael, she runs away from these responsibilities, just as in drug addiction one runs away from the pain of reality and pursues illusory happiness.

From the social level, the proliferation of drugs has caused a series of damages to the American society, and has become the most worrying social problem for the American government and the public. Drug addiction, as a social disease, is first and foremost a metaphor for the current situation of loneliness and alienation in the United States. The development of drug addiction is similar to the intensification of social conflicts in the United States, and has thus become an important metaphor for the illness of American society. Drugs such as heroin were originally used for anaesthesia, but their abuse leads to addiction, which is a double-edged sword; in American society, this double-edged sword is called individualism. The core of contemporary Western individualism values the human person and is the driving force behind the development of American society. However, the extreme development of individualism has caused serious social ills. The economic crisis in the United States has dealt a severe blow to the capitalist order, which is characterized by free competition. The principle of individualism has also revealed its serious limitations and has become an important source of exacerbated social conflicts. "Equal competition" has resulted in an extremely unequal distribution of personal wealth and serious social polarization. The reason for the prevalence of drugs during the Great Depression was, on the one hand, a placebo for people to seek spiritual relief, and on the other hand, a revolt of the underclass against social injustice. People were neither able to achieve success through their own efforts nor were they able to change the unfair social reality. In the face of this predicament, a "lower class culture" has emerged in recent years that rebels against the moral norms of civilized society. The value centre of this culture is violence and excitement, and the realm it promotes is "adventure, fraud and contempt for the law". Drug addiction is regarded by them as a "weapon" to rebel against the society, which is also the main reason why the lower class people in the novel are addicted to drugs.

From the perspective of African American, what hides behind the phenomenon of drug proliferation in the United States is the crackdown on African American populations in the United States' control of the War on Drugs. Deng points out that, In drug regulation, an important way of detecting drug offences is the search of suspicious vehicles on motorways (Deng, 2007, p. 92). The prejudice of "skin colour difference" is frequently seen in this context. The colour of the skin is seen as a marker of the suspect group and is a recurring violation of people's rights in the actual enforcement of the law. In *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, Ward focuses on the plot in which Leonie is searched on the motorway, where she is subjected to inhumane treatment and humiliated by a white traffic policeman simply because she is black. Under the dual predicament of heavy criminal control and being treated differently in their daily lives, the African-American population is caught in a vicious cycle of rising crime and incarceration rates. Among those sentenced to imprisonment under drug regulations, people of African descent far outnumber those of other races, and their crime and sentencing rates have remained high for decades. "Drug control has become an alternative system to apartheid, it has become a major system of separating, subjugating, incarcerating and destroying populations based on differences in skin colour. Narcotics has become an instrument of segregationist policy" (Deng, 2007, p. 98). For the United States, racial discrimination is the "drug" of society. It is the oppression of African Americans on all aspects that creates this vicious circle of "heavy penalties—increased crime".

Fever and Vomiting and Their Metaphorical Implications

Kayla's Symptoms in the Novel

In the novel, Kayla's illness continues throughout Jojo's family's journey, and when they leave from Carlotta and Fred's home, Kayla begins to run a fever and vomit. Leonie does not care enough about Kayla's condition, and it is Jojo who takes care of Kayla along the way. Leonie has inherited knowledge of herbalism from Mam. However, affected by her drug addiction, Leonie is unable to make rational judgement, and she picks the wrong herbs to feed to Kayla, which aggravates Kayla's condition instead. It is Jojo who secretly helps Kayla to induce vomiting and relieves Kayla's symptoms. The conflict between Leonie and Jojo deepens, and Jojo thinks that his mother is going to screw everything up. "Leonie kill things" (Ward, 2017, p. 42).

It is worth mentioning that the author not only portrays Kayla's vomiting in detail, but also many other characters in the text: Leonie swallows a bag of methamphetamine to avoid being searched by the traffic police and then vomits; Richie, a black boy whom Pop met in Parchman, vomits intensely after being beaten by the white prison guard... "Vomiting" seems to be a black-specific symptom in the novel. At the same time, the white people in the novel also show indifference and even strong aversion to the black people's vomiting.

Metaphorical Implications of Fever and Vomiting

"Illness reveals desires of which the patient probably was unaware" (Sontag, 2013, p. 18). For Kayla, Leonie fails to fulfil her responsibilities as a mother. Michael's departure leaves her in a state of emptiness and despair, and she takes drugs to escape reality even during her pregnancy. "I knew I shouldn't have: I was pregnant. But I couldn't help wanting to feel the coke go up my nose, shoot straight to my brain, and burn up all the sorrow and despair I felt at Michael being gone" (Ward, 2017, p. 22). Most of the heroin that enters the foetus goes into the nervous system and is stored in the brain tissue, leading to developmental delays and physical deformities. Leonie knows that drug use may have a bad effect on her child, but she still can't control her desire, and her attitude towards her daughter can be described as heartless and indifferent. Leonie's neglect of her child is not only a result of her excessive grief, but also perhaps she is subconsciously repulsed by the arrival of this child as her excessive obsession with Michael has blinded her to everything else around her, and Michael's arrest has robbed her life, including her unborn child, of its meaning. When Kayla vomits, Leonie helps to wipe up the vomit and soothe Jojo and Kayla slightly. Although the two children have grown up with a lack of affection, they still look to adults for protection. Kayla's illness thus becomes a way to get mother's attention and a symbol of the children's desire for care and attention. However, Leonie shows rustiness and awkwardness in the face of her two children, and the mother-child relationship between them is cold and distant. "I stand there, watching my children comfort each other. My hands itch, wanting to do something. I could reach out and touch them both, but I don't" (Ward, 2017, p. 39). By this point, Kayla's illness also becomes a protest, a condemnation of her mother's indifferent attitude, a materialization of the conflict and contradiction between mother and daughter. It is clear that Leonie has not succeeded in resolving this conflict. Just as the herbs she finds do not heal Kayla, Leonie does not find a right way to love her two children; it is the drug addiction that prevents her from thinking properly and distorts her emotions.

"Bichat calls health 'the silence of organs,' disease 'their revolt.' Disease is what speaks through the body, a language for dramatizing the mental: a form of self-expression" (Sontag, 2013, p. 18). Several black people in

Sing, Unburied, Sing coincide with symptoms of vomiting, and all of their sicknesses are initially linked to external oppression (especially from white): in the face of an impending argument in the white family, Leonie hurriedly takes the children away from the house, and Kayla begins to vomit after escaping from a situation where she could be harmed by white people; after being fed harmful herbs by Leonie, Kayla vomits up the herbs with the help of her brother, which prevents her condition from getting worse; When Leonie and others are stopped and humiliated by a white police officer, she swallows a bag of methamphetamine in order to conceal the fact that she is carrying drugs. After that, she experiences nausea and vomiting; in addition, Leonie also has a strong urge to vomit when they are humiliated by Michael's father, Big Joseph, who is also the father of Given's murderer. "I would throw up everything. All of it out: food and bile and stomach and intestines and esophagus, organs all, bones and muscle, until all that was left was skin. And then maybe that could turn inside out, and I wouldn't be nothing no more. Not this skin, not this body" (Ward, 2017, p. 47). What's more, the Black boy in Parchman, Richie, is beaten up by a white prison guard and vomits in desperation from his serious injuries.

On the one hand, vomiting is a physiological discomfort, a defence reflex of the organism by expelling harmful substances that have been swallowed into the stomach; On the other hand, it is also a metaphor for psychological rejection. Victims long to expel traumatic and painful memories along with the vomit: for Kayla, she longs to banish from her mind the violence she witnesses from the white man and the coercion that Leonie inflicts on her; For Leonie, the vomiting of methamphetamine suggests a subconscious desire to be free of her drug addiction; While she feels disgust when confronted with the intense racism of Michael's father, she is subconsciously disgusted with her blackness and longs to vomit it all out and no longer have such a black skin; the metaphorical significance of the vomiting is even more obvious for Richie. In a moment of despair, the vomiting is saturated with a black boy's extreme hatred of anti-black racism and loathing of racist white people. For these underclass blacks, there is no outlet nor possible solutions for their pain and resentment, which can only be expressed as a physiological reaction of rejection. Vomiting thus becomes the silent cry and resistance of these underclass African Americans.

Conclusion

As Margaret Atwood said, "This gut-wrenching novel digs into the still-beating heart of the American nightmare." In poetic lines, Ward writes a traumatic history of the lives of black Americans, chanting the unspeakable wounds of their hearts. The spectre of drug addiction and other diseases that haunt Ward's novel are tightly tied to her personal experiences. Ward has lost many relatives and friends one after another during her lifetime, including her brother. These misfortunes follow those blacks who live in poverty. When she resolves to write down all the deaths, she suddenly realizes a suffocating fact: Without exception, all of these black people lost their lives because of their races. Thus, death becomes an omnipresent element in Ward's novels, and disease entangles itself with the destinies of the black people like a messenger from hell.

Examining the writing of diseases in *Sing, Unburied, Sing* is crucial to understanding the novel's exploration of the themes of disease, trauma and death. People from three generations in Jojo's family in the novel, namely Mam, Leonie and Kayla, are afflicted by different illnesses, which contain rich metaphorical meanings, highlighting the connection between individual health and social issues such as racism and violence.

Individual illnesses become the symbols of the illnesses of the times, and individual illnesses insinuate the illnesses of the society. By analyzing the writing of diseases in the text, it is obvious that social problems such as racial discrimination and drug abuse have caused deep and wide damage to individuals and the whole black community. Through the writing of diseases in the novel, Ward not only shows the pain caused by racial discrimination and persecution to African Americans, but also writes about the transmission of traumatic memories and the growth of the new generation of African Americans, and thus expresses a strong desire to heal the cultural trauma.

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