Sing, Unburied, Sing and the Creation of Self

*Sing, Unburied, Sing* by Jesmyn Ward is a novel that follows the creation and recreation of each of its main characters' identities. Each character, Leonie, Jojo, and Richie, struggle with understanding who they are and their places in the world. Leonie struggles to mediate between her obligations as a mother and her desires as a person. Jojo is growing up in a world that has both high and low expectations for him based on the color of his skin. Richie is the ghost of a young boy struggling to understand his death and his place in the universe at large. Each character undergoes a ‘creation of self’ which Jerome Bruner describes in his essay, “The Narrative Creation of Self.”

In Bruner’s essay he explains, quite beautifully, that our image of ourselves is not static, but a constantly changing narrative. As Bruner put it, “(T)here is no such thing as an intuitively obvious and essential self to know, one that just sits there to be portrayed in words. Rather, we constantly construct and reconstruct a self to meet the needs of the situations we encounter, and do so with the guidance of our memories of the past and our hopes and fears for the future.” (Bruner 5) This idea helps the reader gain a better understanding of Ward’s *Sing, Unburied, Sing* as a story not just of a family struggling to understand each other, but as individuals struggling to understand themselves. *Sing, Unburied, Sing* is about self-construction and knowing who we truly are and it teaches the reader that to be truly whole a person needs not only to know themselves, but to be recognized for themselves and that sometimes we hurt the ones we love.

Leonie is a young black woman who is dating a white man who at the beginning of the novel is still in prison. Leonie and this young man, Michael, are both drug users; ironically while Michael seems to use drugs to block out his ghosts, Leonie uses drugs to contact her ghosts.
Leonie's brother, Given, who was murdered by Michael’s cousin, appears to Leonie whenever she gets high. Given's ghost seems to inhabit a form of self-making, as although his ghost is clarified as real in the novel, it can also be read as a metaphor for Leonie's conscience. Leonie sees Given almost every time she takes drugs, a self-destructive action, and notably even sees his apparition when making love with Michael, who is a bad influence on her. Given’s apparition is a sign that she knows she should do better, but lacks the ability to do so. Despite her actions Leonie does want to be a good mother, such as when she tries to give her daughter a herbal remedy, or denying a herbal abortion when she first became pregnant; however her lack of skill as a parent and her self absorbed nature prevent her success in this. However, like most humans, Leonie doesn't see the failings in herself. "Surely, if our selves were transparent to us, we would have no need to tell ourselves about them." (Bruner 2) Leonie tries to be a good mother but she doesn't realize how her actions, such as her recreational use of drugs, affects her children. Ultimately this ignorance is what prevents her from living a good life and becoming a whole person.

Jojo, Leonie’s son, is thirteen at the start of the novel, so the idea of self-making is most obvious in his character as he becomes an adult. Jojo experiences a sort of ‘rite of passage’ throughout the novel; as Bruner says on rites of passage, “(T)hey are often sufficiently painful or taxing to get the idea across. (...) The rite of passage not only encourages but legitimates change.” (Bruner 45) Jojo’s rite of passage from childhood into adulthood is muddled somewhat, due to the fact that he is forced to take on many adult responsibilities that his parents ignore. Jojo acts a bit like a parent with his little sister and later is forced to act as a guide for the ghost Richie. However, out of all the characters, Jojo seems to be the most well-adjusted. Thanks to the care and love his grandparents give him Jojo has a strong base for self-narration, struggling with
normal self-doubts a person of his age would have. Despite Jojo’s struggles he is the most complete main character in *Sing, Unburied, Sing* because of the love and understanding his grandparents provide.

Richie is the ghost of a young boy who simply wants to 'pass on' to whatever is supposed to come after. Since Richie was so young when he died, about twelve years old, he never had the chance to discover who he really was in life. A part of Bruner's essay which sheds light on Richie's character would be this, ““Individuals who have lost the ability to construct narratives have lost their selves.” (Young and Saver, 1995) The construction of selfhood, it seems, cannot proceed without a capacity to narrate.” (Bruner 54) As a ghost Richie has no real control in the world anymore and he can't discover who he is by himself. Like a broken needle Richie can no longer complete the tapestry of his soul. In the novel Richie seeks to discover the nature of his death hoping that that knowledge will set his soul free to move on. However upon learning the truth, that his father figure, River (Jojo's grandfather), killed him to keep Richie from being lynched, Richie is still unable to pass on, still haunting Jojo years later. While this is dark there still might be hope for Richie. "Once we are equipped with that capacity, then we can produce a selfhood that joins us with others, that permits us to hark back selectively to our past while shaping ourselves for the possibilities of an imagined future.” (Bruner 55) Knowledge of Richie's past may not have set him free, but when Kayla sings at the end of the novel his spirit finally seems to be able to let go with this acknowledgment of his suffering. Richie has been identified as a whole human being by someone and this has given him the last piece he needed to feel like a whole person and be set free.

There is also the main theme of the novel: sometimes we have to hurt the ones we love in order to protect them. A mild example of this would be when Jojo forced his little sister Kayla to
throw up a herbal remedy Leonie had given her to keep her from being poisoned. This example is used to set up the idea to the reader that occasionally causing a form of pain to our loved ones is necessary in order to spare them greater harm. This idea is fully explored with the reveal of River’s (Jojo’s grandfather) involvement in Richie’s death. While killing Richie was a haunting moment for River it was the only thing he could do to keep Richie from being killed in an even more brutal lynching. Just like Jojo forcing his sister to vomit, River was forced to hurt someone he loved to save them from even more pain. A note should be made here that there is a difference between the necessary actions of Jojo and River and Leonie’s inadvertent cruelties. Both Jojo and River hurt a loved one out of selflessness and a desire to keep further pain from falling on them; Leonie, on the other hand, hurts Jojo and his sister Kayla out of selfishness and ignorance.

In conclusion, *Sing, Unburied, Sing* is about self-construction and knowing who we truly are and it teaches the reader that to be truly whole a person needs not only to know themselves, but to be recognized for themselves and that sometimes we hurt the ones we love. The novel presents us with three different characters, all in different stages of self-making: Leonie who doesn’t seem to want to know herself, Jojo who, despite his young age, seems to have a good understanding of himself, and Richie who died before he had a chance to know himself. As the story progresses each character either finds themselves or chooses to remain ignorant. Also the message that sometimes we need to hurt those we love is poignantly displayed by a haunting story. Overall *Sing, Unburied, Sing* has something to offer every reader.
Works Cited:
