



Cold and Hot Cognition:

How Jesmyn Ward Cultivates Moral Imagination in *Men We Reaped*

Dr. Avi Ben-Zeev

London Metropolitan University

London, UK

Abstract

Men We Reaped, Jesmyn Ward's memoir about growing up Black and poor in America's Deep South, has been lauded for cultivating moral imagination—a form of perspective taking in which one (a) attempts to simulate others' mental and affective states based on shared understandings while concurrently (b) recognizing inherent individual and sociocultural differences between 'me' and 'them.' That is, Ward lays a fertile ground for readers from outside her community to connect with her characters while honoring intrinsic differences. In this paper, I argue and show support for how Ward achieves this feat via hot and cold cognitive psychological devices anchored in story values. Cold cognition refers to attention, memory, and analytic processes (e.g., categorization; analogical thinking), whereas hot cognition encompasses emotion-based processes (e.g., empathy). I explicate and demonstrate three moral imagination devices: (1) allegories and metaphors that make the personal political, (2) trauma narrative, (3) and truth-telling as a tug of war, alongside two pseudo-moral imagination devices: (4) disruption of temporal sequence, and (5) the color red as a tonal wash.

Keywords: cold and hot cognition, moral imagination, Jesmyn Ward, *Men We Reaped*, empathy, sympathy, race, stereotyping, Black Lives Matter

To cite as: Ben-Zeev, Avi 2023, Cold and Hot Cognition: How Jesmyn Ward Cultivates Moral Imagination in *Men We Reaped*, "PsyArt 27, pp. 101-123.

Zadie Smith recently argued that foundational to writing (and reading) fiction is a desire to tap into shared humanity; ‘It’s a meeting—or sometimes a clash—of sensibilities, which often takes the form, as Dickinson understood, of griefs compared.’¹ Smith’s assertion is intimately related to a dualistic concept known as *moral imagination*,² a form of perspective taking in which one attempts to (a) simulate others’ mental and affective states while (b) concurrently recognizing intrinsic individual and sociocultural differences between ‘me’ and ‘them.’³ As Edmund Burke, who first coined this term in 1790, stated, moral imagination involves ‘sentiment with understanding.’⁴

Jasmyn Ward’s *Men We Reaped*⁵ has been deemed a feat in cultivating moral imagination.⁶ This memoir centers on Ward’s life as a Black woman from America’s Deep South and the untimely and tragic death of five young Black men she had grown up with, including her brother, Joshua. It contributes to the discussion around racism in America but constitutes a departure, as Anna Hartnell claims, from the jeremiads’ redemption narrative.⁷ That is, Ward does not espouse reducing the schism between the promise of the American Dream and the reality of modern-day disparities. Instead, she offers a more sober, survivalist narrative.⁸

Ward navigates this challenge masterfully: conveying outrage without becoming overly didactic, melding the personal with the communal (i.e., intentionally blurring the lines

¹ Zadie Smith. 2019. “Fascinated to Presume: In Defense of Fiction | Zadie Smith.” www.nybooks.com. Accessed October 23, 2022. https://www.nybooks.com/articles/2019/10/24/zadie-smith-in-defense-of-fiction/?lp_txn_id=1278100

² Edmund Burke. 2006. *Reflections on the Revolution in France*. New York, NY: Dover Publications.

³ Catriona Mackenzie and Jackie Lee Scully. 2007. “Moral Imagination, Disability and Embodiment.” *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 24 (4): 335–51. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-5930.2007.00388.x>.

⁴ Heath F. Eugene. 2017. “Moral Imagination,” *Encyclopedia Britannica*

⁵ Jasmyn Ward. 2013. *Men We Reaped a Memoir*. New York: Bloomsbury.

⁶ Travis, Molly. 2016. “We Are Here: Jasmyn Ward’s Survival Narratives Response to Anna Hartnell, ‘When Cars Become Churches.’” *Journal of American Studies* 50 (1): 219–24. <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0021875815001875>.

⁷ Hartnell, 2015. “When Cars Become Churches: Jasmyn Ward’s Disenchanted America. An Interview.”

⁸ See Hartnell, 2015.

between ‘We’ and ‘I’), portraying the brutal aftermath of poverty and racism without becoming pornographic, and showcasing resilience amidst despair. Molly Travis argues that, in large part, Ward’s effectiveness is due to enabling readers from outside Ward’s community to empathize with her characters while recognizing and honoring personal and circumstantial differences.⁹

In other words, the reader from outside Ward’s community is invited into Ward’s world while being kept at an intentional distance. In this way, this narrative is not simply an exercise in empathy or meeting in shared sorrows (i.e., Burke’s ‘sentiment’) but a concurrent exhortation for checking one’s assumptions and projections at the door to appreciate differences in such sufferings (i.e., Burke’s ‘understanding’).

The psychological underpinnings of Ward’s ‘how’ of cultivating moral imagination have not been explored, however. To this end, I argue and demonstrate that Ward achieves this feat, in part, via the use of hot (i.e., affect-based) and cold (i.e., analytical) cognitive psychological devices linked to story values. First, however, I turn to situating *Men We Reaped* in contemporary American culture.

Situating *Men We Reaped* in the Contemporary: Reclaiming Savagery, Survivalism vs. Redemption, and Black Lives Matter

Jesmyn Ward breaks the code of silence she grew up with as a Black woman in DeLisle, Mississippi, America’s Deep South. ‘I wonder why silence is the sound of our subsumed rage, our accumulated grief. I decide this is not right, that I must give voice to this

⁹ Travis, 2016, 222.

story.’ Ward’s urge to write truth (‘real shit,’ see below) is captured in the following conversation between Ward (AKA Mimi), her sister Charine, and Demond Cook (one of the five young men who the author eulogizes):

‘So what you doing up there?’

‘I’m trying to be a writer.’

‘What you want to write?’

‘Books about home. About the hood.’

‘She writing about real shit,’ Charine said.¹⁰

Ward interweaves her life’s story, which she tells in chronological order, with tributes (in reverse chronology) to five Black men from DeLisle who she grew up with and who died young and in traumatic circumstances over four years: Roger Eric Daniels the III, Demond Cook, Charles Joseph (CJ), Martin, Ronald Wayne Lizana and Joshua Adam Dedeaux (Ward’s brother).

The author honors these men simultaneously as unique human beings and the group of men they represent (i.e., Black men from the Deep South), asking poignant questions about the social and personal factors responsible for their deaths. This memoir is a survivor’s narration, witnessing while trying to make meaning, ‘Hopefully, I’ll understand why my brother died while I live, and why I’ve been saddled with this rotten fucking story.’¹¹

DeLisle, the narrative’s primary setting—a small, delapidated Mississippi town nicknamed ‘Wolf Town’ by its early inhabitants—is a crucial part of the storytelling. It is a

¹⁰ Ward, 2013, 69.

¹¹ Ward, 2013, 8.

fraught home with an enraging legacy of racism and classism, ruled by matriarchies who lose their husbands and sons to social-systems-induced affairs, drugs, and violence in a society that deems Black lives as worthless.

‘When people ask about my hometown, I tell them it was called after a wolf before it was partially tamed and settled. I want to impart something of its wild roots, its early savagery.’¹² In an interview, Hartnell asks Ward whether she has reappropriated the word savagery. In turn, Ward explains, ‘For us it means that you’re a fighter and that you’re a survivor. And that you’ll do what you need to do in order to survive.’¹³

Men We Reaped was published in 2013 when the *Black Lives Movement* (BLM)¹⁴ and the #BlackLivesMatter hashtag swept the United States media. Its originators, Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi, were Black women who were compelled to action after George Zimmerman, a white police officer, was acquitted in the shooting of a black teenager, Trayvon Martin. Since then, BLM has established itself as an international movement that protests systematic racism and police violence against Black people, especially Black men. Thus, *Men We Reaped* was a sign of the time to come—a call for protesting historic violence against Black people, and especially Black men, and saying their names.

With this context in mind, I turn to the question of ‘how’ and discuss Ward’s use of hot and cold cognitive devices for cultivating moral imagination.

Cold and Hot Cognition: Ward’s *How* of Moral Imagination

¹² Ward, 2013, 9.

¹³ Anna Hartnell. 2016. “When Cars Become Churches: Jesmyn Ward’s Disenchanted America. An Interview.” *Journal of American Studies* 50 (1): 205–18. <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0021875815001966>.

¹⁴ Black Lives Matter, <http://blacklivesmatter.com/>

Psychological theory-based findings suggest the existence of two types of cognition: cold and hot. Cold cognition refers to attention, memory, and analytic processes (e.g., categorization, analogical thinking), whereas hot cognition encompasses emotion-based processes (e.g., empathy).¹⁵

In literature, cold cognition is foundational to understanding context (e.g., an exposition that works as a summary), structure (e.g., cause and effect), and forming mental representations (e.g., analogies, metaphors, allegories), among others. On the other hand, hot cognition is paramount in efforts to stir readers' emotions, such as invoking sympathy and empathy (e.g., As Toby Litt suggests, writing an unsympathetic world, which the reader fills with sympathy for the protagonist¹⁶).

The social neuroscientist, Margaret Niznikiewicz, argues that *theory of mind*—the ability to infer others' mental and emotional states—necessitates both cold and hot cognitive processes.¹⁷ For example, inferring sadness involves labeling (cold cognition) and affective simulation (hot cognition). Given that moral imagination is predicated on developing theory of mind, it is reasonable to conjecture that it, too, synthesizes cold and hot cognitive processes.

Based on the above, I argue that Jesmyn Ward cultivates moral imagination by using literary devices that combine cold with hot cognition. Moreover, I qualify the context to be one in which there exist conflict between story values, which according to McKee are 'universal qualities of human experience that may shift from positive to negative,'¹⁸ such as

¹⁵ Randall W. Engle, Grzegorz Sedek, Ulrich von Hecker, and Daniel N. McIntosh, eds. 2005. Review of *Working Memory Capacity in Hot and Cold Cognition*. In *Cognitive Limitations in Aging and Psychopathology*, 19–43. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

¹⁶ tobylitt. 2021. "Sympathetic Central Characters." TobyLitt. December 18, 2021. <https://tobylitt.wordpress.com/2021/12/18/2021-05-31-sympathetic-central-characters>.

¹⁷ Margaret Niznikiewicz, 2013. "The Building Blocks of Social Communication." *Advances in Cognitive Psychology* 9 (4): 173–83. <https://doi.org/10.5709/acp-0145-6>.

¹⁸ Robert McKee. 1997. *Story: Substance, Structure, Style, and the Principles of Screenwriting*. New York: Harper Collins, p.34.

wanting to live versus wanting to die and self-love versus self-hate, among others. For example, Ward's desire to keep living changes at times into a desire to end her life, and this conflict between the two (i.e., live/die) creates dilemmas and conflict throughout the narrative. I will show how this tension between two changeable extremes of the same story value is an important context for cultivating moral imagination. (Of note, the arisings of dilemmas or conflicts¹⁹ are inherent to the construct of consciousness itself.²⁰)

The following list is meant to be illustrative rather than comprehensive of Ward's moral and pseudo-moral imagination devices: (1) the personal is political: allegories and metaphors, (2) living with ghosts: trauma narrative, (3) truth-telling as a tug of war, and finally, two pseudo-moral imagination devices, (4) disruption of temporal sequence:²¹ Black men's deaths told in reverse chronology, (5) the color red: symbolism and affect. The reason for introducing pseudo-moral imagination devices is to highlight what a moral imagination device is by further explicating what it is not. Next, I will discuss and demonstrate each device.

The Personal is Political (I am WE): Allegories, Metaphors, and Symbols

In an interview with Anna Hartnell, Jesmyn Ward discusses how James Baldwin affected her work, especially, *Notes on a Native Son*²²—personal writing that is simultaneously a social commentary on racism in America.²³ In this subsection, I will focus on her use of allegory and metaphors for making the personal, political. Cold comes from

¹⁹ McKee, 1997.

²⁰ Ezequiel Morsella, Jeremy R. Gray, Stephen C. Krieger, and John A. Bargh. 2009. "The Essence of Conscious Conflict: Subjective Effects of Sustaining Incompatible Intentions." *Emotion* 9 (5): 717–28. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0017121>.

²¹ Roger Luckhurst. 2022. "JESMYN WARD'S MEN WE REAPED (2013)" "Birkbeck Moodle: Log in to the Site." n.d. Moodle.bbk.ac.uk. Accessed October 23, 2022. <https://moodle.bbk.ac.uk/course/view.php?id=36011>.

²² James Baldwin. 1987. *Notes of a Native Son*. London: Pluto Press.

²³ Hartnell, 218.

analysis and inference inherent to mapping relations, whereas hope stems from the use of affect-inducing paradox and subversion. The context is crucial as well. Moral imagination applies to charged and changeable story values, namely, equities/social inequities.

Specifically, Hartnell argues that the characters in *Men We Reaped* use cars as ‘magical spaces’²⁴ to seek refuge from unrelenting hardships (e.g., taking long drives that lead nowhere but offer a sense of security and hope). In this way, cars become symbols of shelters.²⁵ Moreover, Hartnell states that such symbolism is (intentionally) paradoxical.²⁶ If Ward’s memoir were a narrative of redemption, the possibility of owning a car could confer safety and even offer the possibility of freedom. But as Hartnell points out, in Ward’s non-redemptive, survivalist narrative, owning a car neither protects Black men from untimely and tragic deaths nor does it lead to worthwhile destinations or upward mobility. In other words, the American dream has become empty and untenable.²⁷

Arin Keeble agrees with Hartnell’s analysis and adds that sibling relationships also provide an allegory to social-systems-based violence and trauma²⁸ in both *Salvage the Bones*²⁹ and *Men We Reaped*. Siblings try to protect one another because no such support exists in their homes (read: system-level structures such as states or governments are no longer protective). In this way, personal trauma, such as losing a friend, family member, or loved one, mirrors Keeble’s ‘slow violence’³⁰ (i.e., systemic violence).

²⁴ Hartnell, 205.

²⁵ Hartnell, 205.

²⁶ Hartnell, 205.

²⁷ Hartnell, 206.

²⁸ Arin Keeble. 2019. “Siblings, Kinship and Allegory in Jesmyn Ward’s Fiction and Nonfiction.” *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, September, 1–12. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00111619.2019.1663145>.

²⁹ Jesmyn Ward. 2011. *Salvage the Bones*. London: Bloomsbury.

³⁰ Keeble, 2019, 41.

Reclaiming and Subverting Socially Pejorative Savagery and Insect Metaphors. In American culture, the dehumanization of Black individuals via cultural metaphors (e.g., ‘savage apes’ or ‘dirty cockroaches’) has been linked with the justification of aggression against these individuals.³¹

Ward subverts these stereotypes (e.g., ‘We crawled through time like roaches’³²) to connote survival and strength (see above section on ‘savagery’) and offers depictions of (a) intersectionality, (b) fallibility, and (c) phenotypic variability (e.g., skin tone) as antidotes to dehumanization.

Subversion takes a value and turns it on its head. Inviting readers to understand (cold) and to feel (hot) these conflicting values helps cultivate moral imagination—the concurrent experience of appreciating similarities (e.g., as a gay man, I know what it’s like to subvert the word *queer*, intellectually and emotionally) while recognizing differences between reader and narrator (e.g., subverting sexuality differs from subverting race, so I should be careful to not overly project). Qualifying one’s experience in this way is a rich exercise in trying to stay humble, curious, and open-minded.

Intersectionality. Ward dispels stereotypical notions of racial entitativity (i.e., ‘all Black people are alike’) by showing the vast difference, for example, between Black men versus women’s experiences in America’s Deep South (e.g., the intersectionality of gender and race). Mimi and Joshua learned gender as follows: being a woman meant ‘working, dour, full of worry,’³³ whereas being a man meant ‘resentful, angry, wanting life to be everything but what it was.’³⁴

³¹ Nour S. Kteily and Bruneau Emile. 2017. “Darker Demons of Our Nature: The Need to (Re)Focus Attention on Blatant Forms of Dehumanization.” *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 26 (6): 487–94. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0963721417708230>.

³² Ward, 2013, 76.

³³ Ward, 2013, 162.

³⁴ Ward, 2013, 162.

DeLisle is dominated by matriarchies who toil, trying to provide stability for children and kinfolk. Men leave by either dying young, pursuing other women, or taking off to try and escape their circumstances. Thus, men are depicted as being more immature than women. They show bravado but can be scared like children (e.g., CJ sits on a toddler's chair).³⁵

Fallibility. Instead of canonizing via pathos or romanticism, Ward humanizes her characters by showcasing their flaws. The depiction of men as womanizers, for example, not only serves to highlight intersectionality but also fallibility—an ironic device, given that so-called negative attributes highlight shared humanity. In this way, readers are forced to contend with Ward's characters as real people versus caricatures.

Consider, for example, Ward's description of her father: '...there was something at the heart of my father that felt too big for the life he'd been born into. He was forever in love with the promise of the horizon: the girls he cheated with, fell in love with, one after another, all corporeal telescopes to another reality.'³⁶

Phenotypic variability. Ward uses a range of descriptions for skin tones and physical appearances, debunking the stereotype that all Black people look alike. (This context also contains a conflict of social values—a discrepancy between reality and stereotypes, often-used mental shortcuts.)

Consider the following examples of various skin tones of different Black characters: 'boy the color of pecans,'³⁷ 'brown as a pine bark,'³⁸ and 'sandy skin,'³⁹ among others. Furthermore, some of Ward's phenotypic descriptions invoke emotion-laden imagery (e.g., a

³⁵ Ward, 2013, 119.

³⁶ Ward, 2013, 146.

³⁷ Ward, 2013, 15.

³⁸ Ward, 2013, 24.

³⁹ Ward, 2013, 49.

mouth ‘filled with teeth like candy’⁴⁰), which are likely to increase empathy in addition to humanness.

Living with Ghosts: Trauma Narrative

Ward contemplates ending her life, but instead of making the cut on her left wrist, she adorns it with a sacred memento: Joshua’s signature. Then, when despair hits again, she tattoos ‘Love, brother’ on her right wrist (it’s how Joshua signed off on the one letter he had written to her).⁴¹ While Mimi is alive, so is Joshua’s memory, and in commemorating him and the other Black men who were reaped, Ward has produced a document, a book, that will likely outlive her.

The author thus lives in a real and metaphysical world, surrounded by ghosts. ‘Men’s bodies litter my family history. The pain of the women they left behind pulls them from the beyond, makes them appear as ghosts. In death, they transcend the circumstances of this place that I love and hate all at once and become supernatural.’⁴²

The ghost metaphor is central to trauma memoir.⁴³ Consider Luckhurst’s conception of traumatic memory itself as being ghost-like: ‘We have, as it were, nowhere to put it and so it falls out of our conscious memory yet is still present in the mind like an intruder or a ghost.’⁴⁴

Similar to the personal-is-political section above, the metaphorical aspect here is cold, inviting inference. The hot aspects are shown trauma and grief—changeable and charged

⁴⁰ Ward, 2013, 62.

⁴¹ Ward, 2013, 239.

⁴² Ward, 2013, 14.

⁴³ Roger Luckhurst. 2006. Review of *Mixing Memory and Desire: Psychoanalysis, Psychology, and Trauma Theory*. In *Literary Theory and Criticism: An Oxford Guide*, edited by Patricia Waugh, 497–507. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

⁴⁴ Luckhurst, 2006, 499.

McKee-like values of alive-dead. Once again, this duality of analysis (i.e., what a ghost signifies in the narrative) and affect (e.g., grief and tenderness) sets the ground for readers to imagine how departed loved ones can still feel alive in our hearts even if readers have not lost them to slow violence. This exercise thereby invites appreciation of similarities and differences between reader and narrator.

Truth-Telling as a Tug of War: The Author as an Old-Testament Vs. Benevolent God

Ward's desire to write 'real shit'⁴⁵ is at the mercy of memory's reconstructive nature, confirmation, and other cognitive biases, such as self-enhancement (i.e., the tendency to distort the past in an ego-enhancing way).⁴⁶ Still, it entails an emotional truth,⁴⁷ and subjectivity, after all, is how we understand ourselves and the world.

Writing truth also means reckoning with divulging negative information about people one loves and people to whom society has already been cruel. Ward is transparent about her dilemma between protecting her characters and softening their edges (a 'benevolent God') versus exposing more complex realities, warts, and all (an 'Old-Testament God').⁴⁸ Moreover, Ward's determination to write 'real shit' despite wanting to protect her characters gives Ward's narrative credibility. She is aware of her benevolence bias and, by stating it, becomes more accountable to truth-telling.

Ward is cognizant of the impossibility of capturing real-life moments accurately, even with a camera and in real-time. As one evocative example—Mimi tries taking a photo of CJ playing basketball, but he is too fast, and her camera is too slow. As a result, the photo comes

⁴⁵ Ward, 2013, 69.

⁴⁶ Daniel L. Schacter. 2002. *The Seven Sins of Memory: How the Mind Forgets and Remembers*. Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin.

⁴⁷ Mary Karr. 2015. *The Art of Memoir*. New York: Harper Perennial. P. 187.

⁴⁸ Ward, 2013, 70

out blurry and grainy.⁴⁹ Using this imagery, Wards paints a portrait of CJ as a ghost while he is still alive.

As Mary Karr writes in *The Art of Memoir*, the only truth a memoirist can hope to convey is emotional truth.⁵⁰ We, the readers, believe in Ward's honesty precisely because of her admission of wanting, at times, to (over) protect her characters.

The explication of this tug of war is a moral imagination device, especially in memoir, because it encourages an analysis of the nature of truth and the reliability of a narrator (cold cognition) while grappling with the hurt a truth can cause to oneself or loved ones (hot cognition). This duality of understanding and feeling sets the ground for readers to imagine what the complexities of narrating their own life stories would entail—yet another exercise that invites appreciation of similarities and differences between reader and narrator.

Forward meets Reverse Chronology: A Pseudo-Moral Imagination Device in which Joshua's Fatal Crash Meets Mimi's Story 'in the Middle'

Ward's narration of her biography is linear, from her birth until the present. In contrast, her tribute to the five men's deaths is in reverse chronology, starting with Roger Daniels, who died in 2004, culminating with her brother Joshua's fatal car crash in 2000. In this way, Ward's life story (moving forward in time) and Joshua's death (narrated in reverse) meet 'in the middle,'⁵¹ a point in time she hopes would lead to an understanding of why her brother died while she survived.⁵²

⁴⁹ Ward, 2013, 108.

⁵⁰ Karr, 2015.

⁵¹ Ward, 2013, 8.

⁵² Ward, 2013, 8.

This disruption of time is both cold and hot. Cold, because it takes the readers out of the narrative and forces them into analysis: what is the meaning of this non-linearity? Hot because it builds up to Mimi's most traumatic experience, the loss of her brother. As Roger Luckhurst argues, a 'disruption of temporal sequence' is aligned with the classic trauma memoir's tendency to converge on the central traumatic experience (herein, Joshua's death).⁵³

On the surface, this disruption might seem like a moral-imagination device given that it combines cold with hot cognition and points to trauma, like the section on living with ghosts above. However, the value here, loss, does not change its charge from negative to positive (i.e., emotional loss to emotional connection). Instead, its valence or charge stays negative. Therefore, while disruption of temporal sequence elicits empathy (i.e., 'sentiment') with Mimi's loss of her beloved brother, it does not offer much in the way of understanding Ward's psychological relationship with trauma. (Nor should it. Not all literary devices are aimed at evoking moral imagination.)

The Color, Red as a Pseudo-Moral Imagination Device: Symbolism and Affect in Service of Tone

The title, *Men We Reaped*, is a reference to Harriet Tubman's speech on the attack against the all-Black 54th Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry during the American Civil War:

⁵³ Luckhurst, 2022.

We saw the lightning, and that was the guns; We heard the thunder, and that was the big guns; We heard the rain falling, and that was the blood falling; and when we came to get in the crops, it was dead men that we reaped.⁵⁴

This imagery of red rain is echoed throughout Ward's narrative. A wash of red covers it like a blood splatter—this color appears 39 times and is associated with unhealthy skin (e.g., stretching from tumors), poverty, dirt, and death.

In addition to being symbolic and, thus, inviting analysis (cold), the smattering of red throughout the narrative creates an affective tone that transcends intellectual impact (hot). Psychological research on color and emotion shows that colors are associated with explicit and implicit (i.e., subconscious) affective responses. Specifically, red is most often associated with negative affective states that signal threat and is thus associated with a negative charge.⁵⁵

On the surface, it might seem as though Ward's use of red fits into Burke's definition of moral imagination by connecting 'sentiment' with 'understanding.' I contend, however, that even though the use of red creates a fertile ground for readers to feel what Ward's world is like (i.e., promotes 'sentiment')—an everyday reality imbued with a constant threat—it does not encourage 'understanding' (i.e., identifying similarities and differences between reader and narrator). Instead, Ward's intention with using this device seems to be primarily tonal- or affect-focused.

⁵⁴ See "Harriet Tubman and the 54th Massachusetts (U.S. National Park Service)." n.d. [Www.nps.gov. https://www.nps.gov/articles/harriet-tubman-and-the-54th-massachusetts.htm](https://www.nps.gov/articles/harriet-tubman-and-the-54th-massachusetts.htm).

⁵⁵ Andrew J Elliot and Aarts Henk. 2011. "Perception of the Color Red Enhances the Force and Velocity of Motor Output." *Emotion* 11 (2): 445–49. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0022599>.

Indeed, in *Meander, Spiral, Explode*,⁵⁶ Jane Alison discusses color as a ‘design element’ in narrative structure that serves to produce tone.⁵⁷ As an example, Alison argues that in *The Emigrants*,⁵⁸ Sebald uses shades of sepia and gray ‘as if he’s poured muddy river-water over the whole, or let it settle in ashes,’⁵⁹ producing a suffocating effect. Similarly, in *Men We Reaped*, Ward pours red rain, creating an affective tone imbued with threat.

Conclusion: (Some) Hope Amidst Survival

Does truth-telling set Ward free? Unfortunately, pointing the finger (justifiably) at horrendous social inequities does not unshackle her from self-loathing: ‘We are never free from the feeling that something is wrong with us, not with the world that made this mess.’⁶⁰ (There’s that ‘WE’ again!)

Not all is bleak, however. Writing this memoir has allowed Ward to re-examine her mother’s and community’s teachings—the courage to provide for one’s family under extreme duress and the importance of collective action in surviving and fighting ‘holocaust and slavery.’⁶¹

In the end, Ward embraces her mother’s teaching to look at life as it is ‘and to make something of it.’⁶² She names her mother’s gifts—courage, strength, and resilience and vows to pay them forward.⁶³ In doing so, Wards honors her mother’s teachings as well as Joshua’s

⁵⁶ Jane Alison. 2019. *Meander, Spiral, Explode: Design and Pattern in Narrative*. New York, NY: Catapult.

⁵⁷ Alison, 2019

⁵⁸ W. G. Sebald. 2013. *The Emigrants*, trans. by Michael Hulse. London: Vintage Digital.

⁵⁹ Alison, 2019, 65

⁶⁰ Ward, 2013, 240.

⁶¹ Ward, 2013, 250.

⁶² Ward, 2013, 252.

⁶³ Ward, 2013, 251.

quest for meaning and his legacy for finding beauty amidst the devastation. Thus, although Ward's memoir is reminiscent of a classic trauma memoir because it is characterized by 'the impossibility of resolving psychic wounds,'⁶⁴ its ending offers a 'twenty-first-century possibility of resilience.'⁶⁵

The conclusion of *Men We Reaped*, thereby, offers some ventilation, a glimmer of hope, however threadbare. Perhaps, as Travis suggests, it is 'hope without redemption,'⁶⁶ but nevertheless, the reader, empowered by moral imagination, can hold onto this hope not just for his or her own sake but for that of humanity's.

⁶⁴ Roger Luckhurst. 2020. "Brexitland's Dark Ecologies: New British Landscape Writing." *Textual Practice*, November, 1–21. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0950236x.2020.1841021>.

⁶⁵ Luckhurst, 2020.

⁶⁶ Travis, 2016, 223.

Bibliography

- Alison, Jane. 2019. *Meander, Spiral, Explode: Design and Pattern in Narrative*. New York, NY: Catapult.
- Anonymous. 2017. *A Defence of Poetry* (Andesite Press) [accessed 31 March 2022]
- Baldwin, James. 1987. *Notes of a Native Son*. London: Pluto Press.
- Burke, Edmund. 2006. *Reflections on the Revolution in France*. New York, NY: Dover Publications.
- Elliot, Andrew J., and Henk Aarts. 2011. "Perception of the Color Red Enhances the Force and Velocity of Motor Output," *Emotion* (Washington, D.C.), 11.2: 445–49
<<https://doi.org/10.1037/a0022599>>
- Engle, Randall W., Grzegorz Sedek, Ulrich von Hecker, and Daniel N. McIntosh, eds. 2005. Review of *Working Memory Capacity in Hot and Cold Cognition*. In *Cognitive Limitations in Aging and Psychopathology*, 19–43. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Eugene, Heath F. 2017. Review of *Moral Imagination*. In *Encyclopedia Britannica*.
- "Harriet Tubman and the 54th Massachusetts (U.S. National Park Service)." n.d.
Www.nps.gov. <https://www.nps.gov/articles/harriet-tubman-and-the-54th-massachusetts.htm>.
- Hartnell, Anna. 2015. "When Cars Become Churches: Jesmyn Ward's Disenchanted America. An Interview." *Journal of American Studies* 50 (1): 205–18.
<https://doi.org/10.1017/s0021875815001966>.
- Holiday, Billie. 1939. *Strange Fruit*. Commodore Label.
- Karr, Mary. 2016. *The Art of Memoir*. New York: Harper Perennial.

- Keeble, Arin. 2019. "Siblings, Kinship and Allegory in Jesmyn Ward's Fiction and Nonfiction." *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, September, 1–12.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/00111619.2019.1663145>.
- Key, Francis Scott. 1814. *The Star-Spangled Banner*. Warner Chappell Music, Inc, Universal Music Publishing Group.
- Kteily, Nour S., and Emile Bruneau. 2017. "Darker Demons of Our Nature: The Need to (Re)Focus Attention on Blatant Forms of Dehumanization." *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 26 (6): 487–94. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0963721417708230>.
- Luckhurst, Roger. n.d. Review of *Mixing Memory and Desire: Psychoanalysis, Psychology, and Trauma Theory*. In *Literary Theory and Criticism: An Oxford Guide*, edited by Patricia Waugh, 497–507. Oxford: Oxford University Press. Accessed 2006.
- Luckhurst, Roger. 2020. "Brexitland's Dark Ecologies: New British Landscape Writing." *Textual Practice*, November, 1–21.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/0950236x.2020.1841021>.
- Luckhurst, Roger. 2022. "JESMYN WARD'S MEN WE REAPED (2013)"
 <<https://moodle.bbk.ac.uk/course/view.php?id=36011>>
- Mackenzie, Catriona and Scully, Jackie Lee. 2007. "Moral Imagination, Disability and Embodiment." *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 24 (4): 335–51.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-5930.2007.00388.x>.
- Mckee, Robert. 1997. *Story: Substance, Structure, Style, and the Principles of Screenwriting*. New York: Harper Collins.
- Morsella, Ezequiel, Jeremy R. Gray, Stephen C. Krieger, and John A. Bargh. 2009. "The Essence of Conscious Conflict: Subjective Effects of Sustaining Incompatible Intentions." *Emotion* 9 (5): 717–28. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0017121>.

- Niznikiewicz, Margaret. 2013. "The Building Blocks of Social Communication." *Advances in Cognitive Psychology* 9 (4): 173–83. <https://doi.org/10.5709/acp-0145-6>.
- Schacter, Daniel L. 2002. *The Seven Sins of Memory: How the Mind Forgets and Remembers*. Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin.
- Sebald, W. G. 1998. *Rings of Saturn: An English Pilgrimage*, trans. by Michael Hulse. London: Harvill Press.
- Sebald, W. G. 2013. *The Emigrants*, trans. by Michael Hulse. London: Vintage Digital.
- Smith, Zadie. n.d. "Fascinated to Presume: In Defense of Fiction | Zadie Smith." www.nybooks.com. Accessed October 23, 2022.
- https://www.nybooks.com/articles/2019/10/24/zadie-smith-in-defense-of-fiction/?lp_txn_id=1278100.
- "The Strange Story of the Man behind 'Strange Fruit.'" Accessed October 23, 2022.
- <https://www.npr.org/2012/09/05/158933012/the-strange-story-of-the-man-behind-strange-fruit?t=1642082917212>.
- tobylitt. 2021. "Sympathetic Central Characters." Tobylitt. December 18, 2021.
- <https://tobylitt.wordpress.com/2021/12/18/2021-05-31-sympathetic-central-characters>.
- Travis, Molly. 2016. "We Are Here: Jesmyn Ward's Survival Narratives Response to Anna Hartnell, 'When Cars Become Churches.'" *Journal of American Studies* 50 (1): 219–24. <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0021875815001875>.
- Ward, Jesmyn. 2011. *Salvage the Bones*. London: Bloomsbury.
- Ward, Jesmyn. 2013. *Men We Reaped a Memoir*. New York, NY: Bloomsbury.