

**Women We Buried:**  
**Female Entrapment and Storytelling as Agency in Jesmyn Ward's *Men We Reaped***

Cassandra James

**In a Tortoiseshell:** *In her essay on Jesmyn Ward's Men we Reaped, Cassy uses a clear and evocative prose style to convey her **motive**, using **key words** and well placed quotation to construct incisive **analysis**. Through her essay, she convinces her readers not only of the depth and texture of Ward's original work, but also that academic writing, when done well, may possess a strong argument and **thesis** without wholly giving up the lyrical poignance of a creative piece.*

*Feature*

*“I stand on the stump / of a child, whether myself / or my little brother who died, and / yell as far as I can, I cannot leave this place, for / for me it is the dearest and the worst, / it is life nearest to life which is / life lost: it is my place where / I must stand...”*

In the epigraph of Jesmyn Ward's *Men We Reaped*, excerpted from the poem “Easter Morning” by A.R. Ammons, home is defined as both refuge and tomb. In spite of tragedy, one is unable to leave it; because of tragedy, one is bound to stay, to remember and memorialize the lost. The women of Ward's memoir are uniquely vulnerable to this home-tomb conflation: mothers, sisters, partners, and friends are left behind in the wake of their young men's deaths, struggling to stay afloat. Their lives devolve into a series of claustrophobic imperatives: they must attend funerals and bury the dead, keep house and feed the children, laboring on as if their lives have not been fundamentally, irreparably shattered. They are, in essence, buried alive. But as Ward's memoir reveals, their response to that entrapment is far from passive. Through storytelling, the women of *Men We Reaped* are able to both reclaim their lives from burial and memorialize their loved ones, connecting to the dead while preserving their own agency and individuality.

While both men and women experience entrapment in Ward's memoir, burial as a direct result of being left behind or abandoned is coded as a uniquely female experience. This distinction is clearly demarcated in the chapter “We Are Watching,” when Ward describes the male-female dynamic within her own family, comparing her father's response to the merging of home and tomb with her mother's. Her father, she writes, “saw a world of possibility outside of the confines of the family, and he could not resist the romance of that” (131). He reacts to these restrictive “confines

of the family” by abandoning his wife and children and pursuing his own interests, tugged by an irrepressible desire for escape. Ward’s mother, however, has no such luxury. “My mother understood that she had to forget the meaning of possibility, the tender heat of romance, the lure of the vistas of the world,” Ward explains (131). The word “forget,” here, is particularly poignant—it implies that Ward’s mother must not only surrender her aspirations and desires, but that she must erase them entirely, as if they never existed. She must erase her individuality; she must erase her autonomy; she must erase the full realization of her womanhood. Ward writes that her mother “understood that her vistas were the walls of her home, her children’s bony backs, their open mouths” (131). The scope of her mother’s existence is narrowed and restricted to the domestic space, but even further, it is confined to the role of homemaker by visceral, anatomical imagery. “Open mouths” and “bony backs” demand her mother’s attention, preventing and prohibiting escape (131). “Like the women in my family before her, my mother knew the family was her burden to bear,” Ward writes. “She could not leave” (131). Burial, then, is not an experience limited to Ward’s mother. It is an inherited legacy, a suffocating cycle begun with “the forced fracturing of families...under the yoke of slavery” and perpetuated by “endemic poverty” (131). Ward’s repeated use of the word “understood” in relation to obligation or burden emphasizes this idea of inherited entrapment: burial is not a possibility, but an eventuality, a fact to be understood, accepted, and incorporated into daily life without fuss. The women of Ward’s family “could not leave”—escape was never an option in the first place (131).

This sense of entrapment becomes especially stifling in the wake of death, when abandonment is laden not only with the realities of poverty and racism, but also with grief, confusion, and regret. In the chapter dedicated to Ronald, a friend of Ward’s who committed suicide, Ward recalls a scene in which she and her sister Charine talk to Ronald’s girlfriend several years after the young man’s death. At first, the women attempt to escape their own burial: they flee from the world around them into the comforting, numbing arms of drugs and memory, recounting the last moments of Ronald’s life as they get high in the front seat of his girlfriend’s car. Ward’s diction is appropriately detached from physical reality, with words like “neon,” “glowed,” and “fuzzy” lending the passage a disorienting haziness (179). Disjointed repetition only exacerbates this unreality, as if the scene has been cut from its moorings and allowed to float, unhinged, on the sea of memory—for example, Ronald’s girlfriend’s sobs dissolve into a series of fragments when she cries, “*I did love him, Charine...I did I did I did I did*” (180).

But the temporary release afforded by drugs and memory is deceptive and ultimately illusory. The women fail to access complete or meaningful escape; rather, they attain only a shallow facsimile of it, pretending at a freedom they will never truly know. They are placed in a

car, an object associated with movement, liberation, transportation—yet they are confined to Ward’s mother’s driveway, parked and stranded (179). Charine and Ward eventually retreat indoors to “escape the sunrise”—but the sunrise is, of course, inescapable (180). They attempt to find solace and understanding in memory—but the passage is paced by the relentless forward march of time, with Ward first noting that “It was 3:00 A.M.,” then that the clock “glowed so brightly,” and finally that “the minute changed” (179). In fact, the passage itself, with its flat, staccato rhythm and unvaried syntax, functions almost like a clock, tick, tick, ticking down to some inevitable end. As a result, the women struggle to escape being buried beneath the crushing weight of their own loneliness and grief.

It is an oppressive reality which they are too often helpless to prevent. “We all think we could have done something to save them,” Ward writes. “Something to pull them from death’s maw, to have said: *I love you. You are mine*” (180). The collective consciousness of the female “we” attempts to capture, to claim, to possess the male “you” with the verb “love,” with the adjective “mine”—but Ward’s use of the conditional perfect tense suggests that their actions are ultimately futile, a fantasy that will never be fulfilled. Even further, the fact that the men must be pulled from death’s maw implies that they were already in it to begin with, doomed to their fate long before the women could act. This entrenched sense of fatalism haunts the women of Ward’s community: Ward even goes so far as to compare the female collective to players in a theatrical production, unable to see “the stage, the lights, the audience, the endless rigging and ropes and set pieces behind us, manipulated by many hands” (180). Agency is stripped from them, and they are rendered props, tools, even entertainment—“audience” and “many hands” suggest the presence of a third party, a “they” to which the women are unknowingly subservient. Though the women “dream of speaking,” of recovering their autonomy and power, their efforts remain just that: a dream (180). Thus while men escape into death, women are seemingly denied any and all hope of relief from guilt, grief, and burial. They are trapped in a vicious cycle of loss and destruction, perpetually left behind as scarred, solitary survivors.

To suggest that women are merely passive victims of burial in Ward’s memoir, however, would be to do their individual experiences and inherent power a terrible injustice. Just as Ward chooses to honor the dead with dedicated obituaries, the women who surrounded, loved, and defined those young men merit equal reverence and depth of analysis. In fact, in the final pages of *Men We Reaped*, Ward herself subverts previous notions of female helplessness by asserting that women can reclaim their agency: “I thought being unwanted and abandoned and persecuted was the legacy of the poor southern Black woman,” Ward writes. “But...I see how all the burdens [my mother] bore, the burdens of her history and identity..., enabled her to manifest her greatest

gifts” (250). This conversion of burdens to gifts functions like electricity, marking and catalyzing an awakening in Ward’s memoir, the sudden, revolutionary realization that passivity is a state of being rather than a fixed identity. The burdens Ward’s mother bore “enabled” her rather than disabling her, fueled her rather than extinguishing her (250). Building on that electric charge, Ward employs parallel sentence structure like a drumbeat, mounting toward a powerful war cry: “My mother had the courage...my mother had the strength...My mother had the resilience” (250). Her diction is purposefully active, pairing “courage,” “strength,” and “resilience” with phrases like “breaking point” and “find a way” to emphasize her mother’s relentless struggle and unwillingness to surrender (250). So while “we who still live do what we must” in a world corrupted by poverty, death, and racism, Ward views the act of survival as one of defiance rather than submission (250). “This is how human beings sleep and wake and fight and survive,” she writes, the lack of punctuation allowing the sentence to race forward unencumbered, a syntactical representation of the freedom women have claimed (251).

The culmination of this momentum arrives in the last paragraph of the memoir, when Ward uplifts storytelling as a primary path to agency. Ward writes that her mother’s legacy has enabled her “to look at this history of loss, this future where I will surely lose more, and write a narrative that remembers, write a narrative that says: *Hello. We are here. Listen*” (251). This narrative impulse rests on the assumption that if women do not tell their stories, their identities will be effectively lost upon their deaths—a final erasure, and the ultimate burial of autonomy and individuality. Therefore the most intimately necessary manifestation of women’s agency is found in storytelling, in the reclaiming and retelling of histories, struggles, and experiences. *Men We Reaped* itself is a testament to storytelling’s activating power: as an author, Ward is able to highlight, grieve, and examine the injustices her community has endured by claiming her story and publishing it, sharing it with a broader audience. Her storytelling is, of course, a memorial act. It “remembers” the lives of those men who died too young, who had their futures stripped out from under their feet (251). It honors their memory and is haunted by their ghosts. But the implications of *Men We Reaped* stretch far beyond the memorial: the book says, “*Hello. We are here. Listen*” (251). It declares the presence of those left behind, a collective, grief-stricken “we”; it takes up space, planting itself in the “here”; it demands attention without apology, urging the audience to engage, to listen (251). From a formal point of view, then, Ward’s memoir is a refusal to be buried, finding agency, autonomy, and recognition through storytelling.

That power is not limited to Ward, however: while she is one representative of the female collective, the larger feminine “we” also finds agency in choosing to “pass on” the stories of the women who came before them (251). “This is how a mother teaches her daughter to have courage,

to have strength, to be resilient, to open her eyes to what is, and to make something of it,” Ward writes (251). Her forcefully repetitive sentence structure suggests the creation of a new imperative for the left behind, a manifesto rooted in inherited narrative transferred from mother to daughter, sister to sister, friend to friend. In sharing both their own stories and the stories of the men they have lost, the women of Ward’s community are not only able to preserve their individual identities, but are also able to ensure that the next generation of women will not suffer burial, that they will “have,” “open,” and “make” in increasingly active ways (251).

But even as Ward uplifts the activating power of storytelling, doubts regarding its efficacy and reliability as a solution begin to seep through. In the memoir’s final sentences, Ward confesses that she is sometimes suffocated by the burden of remembrance and longs to escape from it. “It is not easy. I continue. Sometimes I am tireless. And sometimes I am weary,” she writes (251). Her clipped, unvaried sentence structure recalls the language of Ronald’s chapter earlier in the memoir, language which physicalized a slow descent into burial. This connection to death is further developed when Ward writes that in moments of weariness, she imagines meeting her brother, Joshua, who was killed in a car accident. “After the moment I die...,” she writes, “A dull blue ’85 Cutlass will cut the horizon...and then my brother will swing the passenger door wide...He will know that I have been waiting...He will say: *Come. Come take a ride with me*” (251). Once again a car acts as a vehicle for escapism, and the active language of previous paragraphs correspondingly disappears. Ward retreats instead into a self-imposed burial, an idyllic fantasy of death where she is released from suffering and grief. Her brother will not know that she has been fighting, living, or writing—he will know that she has been “waiting” (251). This undercurrent of passivity not only suggests that it is impossible to fight against the inevitability of burial, but that Ward might not even wish to combat it. In fact, she concludes the memoir by accepting her brother’s invitation of escape, saying, “I will, brother. I’m here” (251). One is therefore prompted to question the efficacy and reliability of storytelling as a path to agency: perhaps it is only a fruitless distraction from reality; perhaps it is just a coping mechanism; or worse still, perhaps it is simply another form of burial, crushing women beneath the burden of remembrance, the burden of record keeping, the burden of representation.

But although Ward is tempted by escape, it is worthwhile to note that she conjures her brother, whole and beautiful in some unknowable afterlife, within the narrative context of her memoir. The creative act of writing grants her access to his ghost in a way that few other mediums could. Perhaps storytelling, then, also equips women with the agency to reclaim their dead; perhaps it enables them to reunite with the young men they have lost, even if it is only for a fleeting moment of imagination.

### *Author Commentary*

Cassandra James

Drafting this paper, I battled a constant tide of self-doubt: I had taken on too much, I had too few pages to work with, and how on earth was I going to squeeze my ideas on burial, entrapment, *and* storytelling into the same paper? A breakthrough finally arrived during Zoom office hours, when Professor Rainof encouraged me to rely on the text itself. What was happening on the sentence level—on the word level—in the passages I had chosen, and how did themes of burial, entrapment, and storytelling develop or change from one passage to another?

I grabbed my highlighter and dissected both passages as carefully as I could. I took notes on trends (and subversions) of voice, tone, and diction; I organized a chart of similarities and differences between the two sections. Then, after re-reading the heartbreaking epigraph of the memoir, I discovered my thesis. That return to and reliance on the text allowed me to back into my argument, building toward a more complete, cohesive, and streamlined thesis.

Similarly, I wanted my essay to reflect that dynamic and investigative process of close-reading. Thus each body paragraph tests the limits of my own argument, prodding at its edges, questioning not only the function of storytelling in Ward's memoir, but also the efficacy of that function: does storytelling truly allow women to claim agency? Is it merely a coping mechanism? Can it be both? While the paper doesn't definitively answer those questions—it's final sentence, after all, begins with the word "perhaps"—it endeavors to consider as many counter arguments as possible. It emphasizes rather than hides contradictions; it highlights discrepancies and interrogates anomalies. Simply put, the paper attempts to guide the reader through the same analytical exploration I pursued, delving into one small slice of Ward's life-changing memoir.

Ultimately, writing "Women We Buried" allowed me to overthrow my inner perfectionist. It forced me to approach—and re-approach—texts with an open mind; it pushed me to explore; it challenged me to investigate an argument from several different angles, balancing various elements of a multi-layered thesis. So, I am most proud of the paper's ambitious flexibility: its introduction, its conclusion, and its willingness to ask questions, even when the "right" answer remains elusive.



*Editor Commentary*

Isabella Khan

The first thing you are likely to notice when you read Cassy's piece is her use of language. In academic writing, so often characterized by a clinical style meant to convey a chain of reasoning without straying into the realm of imprecision, it is rare to find an essay with both a lyrical style and a well-constructed argument. Cassy's paper is remarkable in that it has both these qualities. Her clear, unhurried style is a perfect complement to the essay's central **thesis**. She writes, "the most intimately necessary manifestation of women's agency is found in storytelling, in the reclaiming and retelling of histories, struggles, and experiences"; and indeed, Cassy's own lyrical prose leads the reader smoothly through these themes of grief and catharsis, paying tribute to the resilience of the women about whom she writes.

Viewed through the usual lens of the various lexicon terms, Cassy's essay is of course also a success. From a **structural** standpoint, she begins her paragraphs with clear topic sentences which both lead into the ideas discussed in the paragraph itself, and also serve as effective transitions from one set of ideas to the next. Bridging the gap between **structure** and **analysis**, she incorporates quotations smoothly without sacrificing her own voice. Switching easily between well-framed quotations and explanations, Cassy points out **key words** and phrases which justify her interpretation of a section.

Most powerful of all is Cassy's never-stated yet ever-present **motive**. Throughout her essay, she demonstrates how we can marry the scholarly and personal **motive** without compromising the integrity of the essay. It will be clear to anyone who reads her essay, how deeply she cares about her subject material. From the first sentences -- "home is defined as both refuge and tomb. In spite of tragedy, one is unable to leave it; because of tragedy, one is bound to stay, to remember and memorialize the loss" -- Cassy taps into this sense of yearning mixed with grief; the fear of remembering too fully, and yet also the fear of forgetfulness, for in forgetting, we feel that we are failing to do justice to someone -- or something -- that was once unmentionably important. We could phrase this as a question -- how do we reconcile the passive despair of grief with the crushing, unavoidable activity of living? -- but of course she does not. She does not need to -- it runs through every part of the essay.

By her clear yet evocative language, Cassy walks the fine line between the tragic and the morbid. With deft grace, she guides us through the twists and turns of Jesmyn Ward's *The Men*



*we Reaped*, convincing even those of us who have not read the memoir of the quality and direction of the storytelling therein. Indeed, by analyzing a text so intensely personal in its descriptions and in the texture of character it constructs, she is able to bridge the gap between a more **scholarly motive**, and the range of visceral emotions conveyed in the memoir itself. By the end of her essay, she is therefore able to claim the rare prize of a "so what" idea that actually sticks: "Perhaps storytelling, . . . equips women with the agency to reclaim their dead" she writes; "perhaps it enables them to reunite with the young men they have lost, even if it is only for a fleeting moment of imagination." In this essay, it is not only Ward's powers of storytelling which have been shown to such great effect, but Cassy's own, swaying us to her side, and convincing us, even in the face of tremendous darkness and loss, of the transformative power of the written word.

**Works Cited**

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**Bios**

**Cassandra James, '23** is an English concentrator pursuing certificates in Creative Writing, Theater, and Music Theater. On campus, she is the co-founder of Saturnia Arts, acts, sings, and writes for several theater productions, leads worship at Christian Union Nova, writes for The Princeton Tory, and runs the online side of The Nassau Literary Review. Above all else, she is a storyteller, forever obsessed with the way that stories heal, inspire, and unite people from all walks of life. She wrote this paper as a sophomore.

**Isabella Khan, '21** is a mathematics concentrator with a certificate in Chinese language and culture. She has been a Writing Center fellow and an editor of *Tortoise* since her sophomore year, and also plays violin in the Princeton University Orchestra, runs, and reads about British history in her spare time (which currently does not exist). She is nearly finished with her senior thesis on Heegaard Floer homology, and will be attending graduate school at Princeton in the fall. She is Editor-in-Chief of *Tortoise*, and wrote this commentary as a senior.