

Woman warrior: an  
exploration on  
invincibility in the life  
of jesmyn ward



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Jesmyn Ward's autobiography, *Men We Reaped*, tells of Ward's life as it relates to five men that she knew, all of whom died atrociously and unfairly. Throughout her memoir, Ward uses several methods to differentiate herself from her community. While many of the characters in the autobiography are devastated by the effects of drugs, Ward remains relatively unaffected, representing her overall disengagement with the racism that the other characters in the novel must face. Additionally, while most of the characters are depicted as helpless victims of a broken system, Ward's self portrayal is one of valor and invincibility, further differentiating her from her community. Finally, while most of the people in Ward's life are subjected to a hard life full of drug abuse, poverty, and seemingly inevitable death, Ward is able to escape this cycle of poverty and become educated, wealthy, and successful. In her memoir, *Men We Reaped*, although Ward often portends that the specter of systemic racism present in the novel has equally affected her and others in her community, the overwhelming portrayal of Ward as invincible or immune towards the many societal constraints that burden other African Americans resolutely invalidates this claim.

Ward uses drugs to symbolize the specter of white oppression and control in black lives, as the excessive use of these drugs is a byproduct of an urban poverty born out of centuries of white neglect and disenfranchisement of African Americans. In the novel, this pervasive racism as symbolized through drugs kills not only black male bodies, but all black hope and joy. The first death to occur is that of Roger, one of Ward's childhood friends. She recalls that during the time immediately before his death, Roger often "talked about change, about returning to California," but at the same time he began

to “ use more,” and “ medicated with drugs and alcohol” (32). Although Roger had hope for his future, the pervasion of drugs, again a symbol for systemic white racism and the subsequent proliferation of African American urban poverty, kills Roger and renders his dream of a better life impossible. Additionally, the idea that Roger needs to “ medicate” his desire for a better life equates Roger’s hope with an illness, illustrating how this racism has annihilated any possibility of black hope to the point where it is perverted into something sick. Not only does the drug trade cause the death of many black lives, the overwhelming specter of racism similarly annihilates the black man’s hope or chances of removing himself from the devastating cycle of poverty. Ronald, another one of Ward’s friends, battled addiction towards the end of his life and was also involved in the drug trade. In a conversation with his girlfriend, he said to her that “ it’s like my mama pushing me into the streets” (172), demonstrating the hopelessness that black men feel and the inevitability of the endless cycle of involvement with drugs and death. Ward’s brother, Joshua, found himself in a similar situation of desperation towards the end of his life. Ward recalls when she met with him one night and he admitted that he was “ selling crack,” (210) because “ he needs money” and Ward “ couldn’t dispute him” (211) illustrating the unfortunate necessity to participate in trade due to the reality of urban poverty for many African Americans. Later, Ward notes that she “ saw her father” in Joshua, again indicating the inevitable cycle of disenfranchised black men (220). In Ward’s memoir, the long term effects of racism as symbolized through drug use and abuse in African American communities permeates all aspects of black lives and renders hope an unfortunate impossibility.

While Ward describes the enormous extent to which many men in her life have been ruined by using or selling drugs, her life was barely impacted by her drug use, illustrating how Ward's life remains relatively unburdened by systemic racism. In reference to the excessive drugs, alcohol, and partying mentioned in this memoir, New York Times critic Dwight Garner notes, "this at times somber book is also shot through with life, with a sense of rural community and what it felt like to be adolescent and footloose on hot Mississippi nights, all the beer cans and weed and loud music and easy sex and rolled-down car windows" (Through Five Men's Lives, A Memoirist Illuminates Her Own). Garner's romanticized depiction of these "hot Mississippi nights" does not accurately represent the experience of the majority of the characters in the book, who are disenfranchised victims of a broken system whose involvement with drugs is often out of necessity than desire. However, Gardner's critique does enlighten the reader on the carefree manner in which Ward was able to engage in these activities, as her experience did involve "beer cans and weed and loud music and easy sex and rolled-down car windows" with very few of the consequences. In the summer of 2004, Ward describes an occasion in which her and her friends were drinking excessively. She called the drinking "insane and ecstatic," and recalls that "for this moment we are young and alive" (30). Ward's depiction of this night as one of "ecstasy" in contrast to the devastation that the same drugs have had on fellow African Americans illustrates how removed she is from the experiences that her loved ones are having. Furthermore, while Ward feels "young and alive" while doing drugs, these same drugs will literally kill several characters in the memoir, again demonstrating the stark contrast between the experience of Ward and her

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peers. Similarly in the summer of 2003 after Ward had lost three friends, she was drinking heavily and notes that there was an “ illusion that our youth might save us, that there was someone somewhere who would have mercy on us” (64). Ward’s use of the word “ we” indicates that she includes herself in of this group who needs saving when in reality Ward’s drug and alcohol use did not deter her in any way and is in no need of the “ mercy” she writes about, while others in this group certainly are. Later that night, Ward equates this euphoric drug-induced high to happiness, noting, “ this is what it means to be spared” (64). Ward’s use of the word “ spared” here indicates that she has recognized her differences from others in the group. Ward has been “ spared” because while all others in this group must face the consequences of their drug use and many will die from it, she will not. This false sense of unity is mirrored when Ward notes later in the novel that “ the same pressures were weighing on us all. My entire community suffered from a lack of trust: we didn’t trust society to provide the basics of a good education, safety, access to good jobs, fairness in the justice system” (169). While Ward again uses the word “ we” and includes herself in this “ community,” she has no reason to mistrust a society as she has been rewarded with a “ good job” and “ good education” while others in her community never will have these things. Ward’s immunity to both drugs and the devastating effects it has on the African American community is illustrated once more when Ward and her sister, Nerissa, visit Demon’s house after he dies. Ward recalls that this was the place where “ we had parked and drank and gotten high” but “ now there was a sign that said ‘ caution’” (80). Despite this, “ Nerissa smoked” but Ward did not (80). The image of the “ caution” sign beautifully illustrates the difference between <https://assignbuster.com/woman-warrior-an-exploration-on-invincibility-in-the-life-of-jesmyn-ward/>

Ward and her African American community; while Nerissa smokes, Ward executes caution by avoiding the drugs that so devastated many of the other characters in the book, again differentiating Ward and demonstrating her exemption from the consequences of racism. Ward's immunity to the effects of drugs that so devastated the rest of her community is indicative of Ward's larger disengagement with the horrific effects of systemic racism.

Ward's invincibility in the face of racism or other factors that could similarly deter her is shown not only in her seeming immunity towards drugs, but also in the depiction of her as a fighter in contrast to the helpless portrayal of all other African Americans in the novel. In describing her own birth, Ward emphasizes how strong she was, noting that although she was born prematurely and it was thought she would die, " I lived, silent and tenacious in my incubator, my body riddled with multiple tubes" (43). Additionally, Ward focuses on the " abundance of scars" (42) that she earned, the physical signs of a warrior. This image of Ward as resilient or invincible continues throughout her memoir. As a child, Ward was once attacked by a pitbull and she recalls that after she " punched him with my fists, left and right, over and over again," " he was off me, running away with his back curved" (58). Ward's defeat of this animal once again portrays her as a fighter while the additional detail of the dog's " curved back" depicts this beast who dared to test her as cowardly and vulnerable. Aside from her physical resilience, Ward is also given responsibilities that similarly make her feel important or invulnerable. As an older sister, Ward was often tasked with taking care of her younger brother, Joshua. She recalls one night when her parents were fighting and she comforted Joshua, noting, " he was shaking,

and I was shaking, but I would not cry," (61) again demonstrating her emotional strength. Ward's resilience is often contrasted with the unfortunate vulnerability of her fellow African Americans. She recalls an instance in her childhood while playing with her brother Joshua and friend Aldon how "their heads seemed too big for their shoulders" and "they depended on me" (63). This is in stark contrast with how Ward portrays herself as a child: scrappy, strong, and self-sufficient. These opposing comparisons continue as the characters progress into adulthood, as Ward uses terms such as "foolish" and "hopeless" to define her male counterparts while continuing to portray herself as strong (208). Throughout her memoir, Ward portrays herself as immune to the circumstances that affect the rest of the poor African American community that she is associated with.

Ward continues to indicate both her emotional and physical distance from the effects of racism throughout her memoir. At a crawfish boil, Ward demonstrates her ignorance of the issues that plague the rest of her African American community when she describes the book she is writing to some of her friends about black boys in a poor, urban community similar to their own. She admits that she "couldn't figure out how to love her characters less" and wants to "protect them from death and drug addiction" (69). Ward wants to "love" and "protect" these fictional characters from the reality that African Americans face because she herself has not personally experienced this reality, again demonstrating her removal from the systemic racism that African Americans face. Ward's removal from the plight that the average African American must face is again indicated in the very format

and plot of the memoir - while *Men We Reaped* claims to be an autobiography, Ward spends more time discussing the lives of the five men she reaps than her own, as their lives are more relevant in the landscape of the impact of systemic racism on African Americans than hers is. Furthermore, although Ward often depicts the other characters in the book as well as others in her town as her "community," she was also able to "become a part of my private school's community" as she spent time "as a cheerleader and in the drama club, served in the student government, and briefly revived the student literary magazine" (206). Ward's use of the word "community" to describe both her African American friends and family and the white people at her school illustrates that she is able to straddle both worlds in a way that most of her African American peers never could. Ward is not only emotionally removed or disconnected from the reality of many African Americans, but is also often physically distant as well. Ward studied to receive her MFA from 2003-2005, meaning she was not physically present during approximately half of the time the story takes place. Ward's particular circumstance, specifically her gender and later economic status allow her to achieve a sort of freedom that the rest of the people in her life could never achieve. As a woman, she is not dragged into the inevitable cycle of drugs and death that many of her male counterparts are forced to participate in. Similarly, as a relatively educated and academically driven young girl who attended a private, mostly white school, Ward was able to achieve academic and professional success which enabled her to break out of the cycle of poverty that many of the other characters have not escaped.



It would be incredibly unfair to suggest that Ward was completely unaffected by systemic racism because of the way that her life turned out. She lost her brother and numerous friends, and these are clearly unimaginable tragedies. Ward's stories of the senseless deaths of young African American males due to gun violence or drug abuse are especially important today as they mirror the sentiments of the Black Lives Matter movement, which promotes equality among all races in specific reference to police brutality against blacks. Ward echoes these convictions as she notes that "this grief, for all its awful weight, insists that (my brother) matters" (243). In this sense, Ward, as well as most in the African American community, have suffered horrifically at the hand of systemic racism and oppression. However, the fact remains that Ward's singular life remains rather untouched by the specter of racism and white control and the only events that changed in Ward's life were peripheral tragedies rather than personal ones. Critic Neely Tucker notes that if readers are looking for the story of "Black girl from poverty-stricken, small-town Mississippi gets a break... Triumph over adversity, all by age 34, huzzah, huzzah," then "this is not that book" (Jesmyn Ward's "Men We Reaped," a Grim but Beautiful Memoir). However, Ward's story does remarkably exemplify this trope. While her memoir definitely encapsulates the horrors of systemic racism on a primarily African American community, Ward, who went to private school, who was relatively unaffected by drugs, who went to college and became wealthy and successful, does not exemplify this community. In her memoir, *Men We Reaped*, Ward's story is overshadowed by those of the men she writes about as her tale does not represent the struggles faced by her African American community.