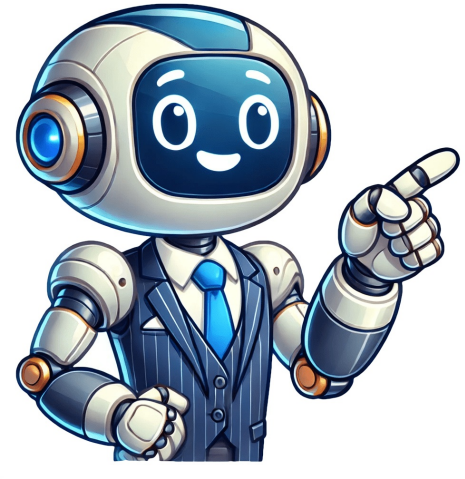


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Jesmyn Ward's novel, *Sing, Unburied Sing*, is set in the fictional town of Bois Sauvage, near the Mississippi River delta, and "...stinks like possums or armadillos smashed half flat on the road, rotting in asphalt and heat. [...] It is the smell of death" (Ward 6). The novel reveals how past trauma and racism continue to affect families across generations, shown through Jojo's journey from childhood to understanding as he encounters both the living and the dead. The protagonists, Jojo, a thirteen-year-old boy from a mixed-race family, and his little sister Kayla, live with their maternal grandparents. Their grandmother, Mam, is dying of cancer, and their grandfather, Pop, is afflicted by memories of his past, a past tied to the Parchman prison that the children and their mother set out to visit. Jojo's father, Michael, is serving a three-year sentence at this prison, soon to be released. Leonie, the children are hardly there, and a drug-addicted mother wants to take her children on a road trip up to Parchman prison to visit her husband. The novel's title, "Sing, Unburied, Sing," directly connects to its core themes of voice and memory. The word "Sing" appears as both a command and comfort, reflecting how characters use singing throughout the story - from Kayla's healing songs to the old prison work songs at Parchman. "Unburied" refers not just to the physical ghosts that appear but to the unresolved traumas and memories that refuse to stay buried in the past. This title sets up the novel's exploration of how the past demands to be heard, remembered, and confronted. Save your time!We can take care of your essay Proper editing and formatting Free revision, title page, and bibliography Flexible prices and money-back guarantee Place an order During this trip across the state, Jojo learns things about himself and the unjust, racist, and violent world from which his family has tried to hide him. As Richie puts it, "When I was thirteen, I knew much more than him. I knew that metal shackles could grow into the skin. I knew that leather could split flesh like butter. I knew that hunger could hurt, could scoop me hollow as a gourd..." (Ward 185). Throughout the novel, this theme is present, Jojo has no comprehension of the true world, but the ghosts of the past do. Sing, Unburied Sing shows that suffering and injustice can never simply be confined to the past. They haunt the present and should never be forgotten or dismissed as irrelevant. Family Relationships In the opening scene of the novel, it is Jojo's thirteenth birthday. Pop asks for his help outside, and Jojo says, "I follow Pop out the house, try to keep my back straight, my shoulders even as a hanger, that's how Pop walks. I try to look like this is normal and boring so Pop will think I've earned these thirteen years. Pop will know I'm ready to pull what needs to be pulled, separate innards from muscle and organs from cavities. I want Pop to know I can get bloody" (Ward 1). With an absent father figure and a mostly absent and drug-addicted mother, Jojo has built a strong relationship with his grandparents, calling them Mam and Pop instead of by their first names, as he does with his mother. Jojo looks up to Pop and wants to show him that he is ready to be a real man, that he can look death in the face and not flinch. The stark contrast between Jojo's relationships with his grandparents and his mother reveals the complex nature of family trauma. While Mom and Dad provide stability through daily rituals and instruction—Dad shows Jojo how to care for animals, and Mom teaches him about herbs—Leonie's presence is marked by absence and unreliability. Her drug use isn't just an addiction; it's also her way of seeing Given's/Given's ghost: "When I'm high, it's like I'm climbing up to him" (Ward 153). This desperate attempt to connect with her dead brother further distances her from her living children. When Leonie tries to be maternal, her efforts often backfire, like when she makes Jojo throw up by forcing him to eat before the car ride, showing how even her attempts at care become forms of harm. The way Jojo calls his grandparents "Mam" and "Pop" while referring to his mother as "Leonie" speaks volumes about who truly serves as his parents. Pop knows that Jojo does not have the stomach for it, so he says that he thinks he heard Kayla cry out in the house. Jojo goes back and finds that Pop must've misheard, for Kayla was sound asleep. He swats a fly off Kayla's knee and remembers how Leonie used to tell him, "...flies eat shit" (Ward 7). Jojo thinks back to that time with a sort of fondness but also contempt. He says, "That was when there was more good than bad when she'd push me on the swing Pop hung from one of the pecan trees in the front yard, or when she'd sit next to me on the sofa and watch TV with me, rubbing my head. Before, she was more good than here. Before, she started snorting crushed pills. Before all the little mean things she told me gathered and gathered and lodged like grit in a skinned knee. Back then, I still called Michael Pop. That was when he lived with us before he moved back in with Big Joseph. Before the police took him away three years ago, before Kayla was born" (Ward 7). Jojo is old enough to recall such memories of the good times with his mother and father, and while he remembers the good with some fondness, he also can recall all the fighting between Michael and Leonie. He recalls the day Michael left. Jojo was still too young to understand the complexity of the situation, "How, at that moment, [he] didn't matter" (Ward 10-11). Michael comes from a white and racist family. However, Michael himself is not racist, even having Jojo's name, Joseph, tattooed on him. Jojo doesn't understand why Big Joseph doesn't acknowledge him, failing to understand the generational legacy of systemic racism, failing to understand that for years, Michael's family has held racist views. While Big Joseph may not be physically violent, his racist cruelty still drives the family apart, pulling Michael away from his children. Racial Identity and Legacy Further along in the novel, we begin to see how Jojo and Kayla are perceived as black, rather than biracial, within Michael's family and within the public eye. This is a result of the legacy of the "one-drop rule." This rule was a form of racial categorization developed under slavery, which stated that having just one black ancestor was all that was needed to be considered black. Slaveholders developed this rule in order to enslave the descendants of parents of different races. Big Joseph holds this ideology, and it is evident when Leonie, Michael, Jojo, and Kayla show up at their house once Michael is released from prison. Big Joseph says, "Hell, they half of her. All bad blood. Fuck the skin" (Ward 207). He doesn't care that the children are lighter skinned due to his son's lineage; his blind racist mind doesn't see that; it only sees black children of black women with whom his son has made the mistake of having relations. The novel explores racial identity through everyday moments that reveal deeper systemic issues. When Michael's white cellmate treats Jojo with unexpected kindness, it highlights how rare such cross-racial interactions are in their community. Meanwhile, the prison system itself embodies institutional racism - Parchman's evolution from a plantation to a prison shows how systems of racial control adapt rather than disappear. Even Michael'sof Jojo's njojo'sars the weight of race because even though it was meant to be a gesture of love, it also marks his son like property on his skin, thereby unwittingly repeating the historical practice of marking enslaved people. The details show that racism does not work only through manifest violence but through subtle and insistent patterns in every one of the characters' lives. Ward's use of sensory details connects personal experiences to historical trauma. When Jojo des' ribes how "the little mean things" from Leonie "lodged like grit in a skinned knee" (Ward 7), it shows how small wounds accumulate into lasting pain - much like how daily instances of racism build into systemic oppression. This pattern appears "ain when Pop describes "Parchman: "Worst come after death" (Ward 72). His words refer not just to ghosts but to how the prison's legacy continues to haunt contemporary society. The novel draws clear parallels between historical Parchman, where Pop and Richie suffered, and the modern prison where Michael is held, suggesting that while the surface has changed, the underlying structures of racial oppression remain intact. These connections challenge readers to consider how past injustices continue to shape present-day institutions and relationships. Throughout the entire novel, the past shines through into the present in many ways. The stories Pop tells Jojo about his time at Parchman are presented through fragments. Through these stories, Pop passes on his traumatic past to Jojo, along with someJojo'se pain. This contributes to Jojo's identity and helps his transition from an innocent child at the beginning to Mam'sult to the end of the novel. Mam's role as a spiritual healer bridges the physical and supernatural worlds in the novel. She uses traditional remedies passed down through generations, "brewing up teas from leaves and roots" (Ward 30), showing how African American healing traditions have survived despite attempts to erase them. Her connection to both medicine and spirits makes her a crucial link between the living and the dead. Even as cancer weakens her physical body, her spiritual power grows stronger: "She sees everything now. She knows things she ain't known before" (Ward 139). Through Mam, Ward shows how spiritual healing practices serve not just to cure bodies but to maintain connections with ancestry and tradition. When Kayla later inherits this gift for spiritual communication, it shows how these powers, like trauma, pass through generations - but as a source of strength rather than pain. Supernatural Elements and Ghosts The spiritual journey in the novel intensifies when Jojo encounters Richie's ghost during their trip to Parchman. Like the smell of death that opens the novel, supernatural elements emerge through physical sensations. Jojo first senses Richie as "a shiver in the dark" (Ward 130). The ghost boy appears young, confused, and lost, much like Jojo himself, telling stories about Parchman that echo Pop's memories but add new layers of pain. Through Richie, Jojo experiences how the prison's brutal past bleeds into its present. "I know how the hot makes you feel slow, like everything's melting," Richie tells Jojo, "Like your bones gone soft in the sun" (Ward 131). These ghostly encounters show how the afterlife isn't separate from the living world - instead, it's as close as the Mississippi heat, as real as the road to Parchman. The fact that ghosts do not only haunt sites from which they inhabit, but it has also been evident and clear that Jojo and the family's eyes follow the shadows of things that have not yet been given resolution. So when Richie goes on a journey with Jojo and his family back home, he brings not just his own story but the weight of history, which became the bridge between death and suffering in the past, to meddle with the present. These ghostly figures serve as powerful symbols throughout the novel. Given's ghost, who appears to Leonie when she's high, represents not just her personal grief but the broader violence against Black lives. When Leonie sees Given, "He's wearing the same clothes he died in" (Ward 50), forcing her to relive her trauma repeatedly. Meanwhile, Richie's ghost embodies the unresolved injustices of Parchman's history. When he says, "I don't know what I am" (Ward 189), he speaks for all those trapped between life and death, justice and injustice. Together, these spirits reveal how historical trauma haunts both places and people. Their presence makes visible the racism affecting his grandchildren. However, their presence also shows that confronting the past and its injustices can lead to understanding and growth, just as Jojo finally understands Leonie's struggles: "Sometimes, late at night, [...] I think I understand Leonie. I think I know something about what she feels during a car journey north, mirroring the historical path many Black Americans took to escape Southern oppression. The way Mam uses traditional healing practices while dying and how Kayla inherits this spiritual power to sing to the ghosts draws from African American spiritual beliefs about death and ancestors. 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