

## **Brothers and Sister: An Analysis of the Influences on Esch in *Salvage the Bones***

By Madeline Delano

As humans we adapt to our surroundings in an attempt to blend in with everyone else. We develop accents depending on where we live and act according to the people with whom we surround ourselves. Jesmyn Ward's 2011 novel, *Salvage the Bones*, follows the story of Esch, a 15-year-old girl with three brothers and a preoccupied father in rural Mississippi. Her mother has passed away so she has been left to uphold the womanly duties of their household, lacking a woman role model. She has been the only girl surrounded by her male family and their male friends for 8 years, since her mother's passing. The lack of women in her life has shaped her character and the attitude she holds towards certain topics such as sex and relationships. Esch is left searching for what it means to be a woman and a mother, alone.

In an interview with *The Rumpus*, Ward describes the narration of her novel, "*Salvage* is told from Esch's point of view, and of course she is a young woman, but much of her gaze is on the young men in her life because she's surrounded by them" (Jones, np). Esch's brothers are the men surrounding her and they each have a large effect on her personality. They have their own focuses in their lives leaving Esch to observe. To begin, Randall, her eldest brother, is so focused on his basketball career and taking care of Junior that he is hardly there to notice that Esch has fallen in love with Manny and become pregnant. He only tries to protect her from Manny after Esch had learned to defend herself by telling Manny she is pregnant. Manny's response, "I ain't got nothing here. Nothing" sets Esch off in a rage and she is on him like China (203). In this moment,

Esch is finally acting the way she has wanted to act throughout the whole book. She shows Manny that she can be strong and fierce even though she is pregnant. Randall is oblivious to all of this until Skeetah points it out and declares, “She’s pregnant” (234). The following day, the reader finally learns Randall’s reaction to Esch’s pregnancy. He asks Esch if it was Manny that got her pregnant and Esch confirms. As they walk past him Randall whispers, “I’m going to beat the shit out of him” and to his surprise Esch replies, “No, Randall. You don’t need to. I already did” (244). Randall was not there during her time of crisis, forcing Esch to learn to deal with her problems alone. However, after the hurricane hit, Randall finally becomes the older brother that Esch has wanted him to be. He is finally someone who notices what she has been through and feels protective over her. The hurricane brought them closer together and revealed the strong bond that Randall and Esch have developed.

Her next older brother, Skeetah, has China and is very busy taking care of her puppies and preparing her for the next fight. However, even though he is constantly caring for China he does find time to spend with Esch and notice that she is pregnant. He knows that Manny is the father and sees the way that he treats her and this is why Skeetah picks a fight with Manny at Randall’s basketball game. Manny’s cousin, Rico, starts to antagonize Skeetah about China’s puppies. Between them tensions begin to rise and Manny interjects, “Everybody just chill out, it ain’t even got to be like that” (150). Hearing Manny try to calm him down makes Skeetah even angrier so he replies, “Fuck you” (150). After this the fight breaks out, however, it is clear that the fight is not about the puppies. The subtext of the situation all points to Skeetah being angry at Manny about how he treats Esch. He cannot come out and say this because he does not want Esch to

know that he is aware of her pregnancy. But, unlike her other brothers he makes the effort to protect her. He takes care of her without her even knowing that is what he is doing. This reveals the strong relationship she has with Skeetah; she does not need to tell him what she is worried about, he already knows.

Finally, her younger brother Junior is too young and busy with Randall to notice that Esch is going through a change in her life. Junior would not know that Esch is pregnant because he is so young and would not know what that looks like, but considering they live together one might expect Junior to notice that something has changed with her, but he does not pay enough attention to her to see what has changed. He looks to her as a motherly figure, even though she does not see herself as one yet. He is so young that he cannot realize the signs that she is showing to hint at her pregnancy, only Skeetah notices because she spends most of her time with him. The reader does not even receive a reaction from Junior about her being pregnant because he does not know what it would mean for her future.

Throughout the story, it is hard to tell the way Daddy views Esch because he is hardly spoken about and hardly speaks himself. He is weak in many ways; he is a weak father figure and a weak presence in the novel. As Ward says in an interview with Bomb Magazine, "I didn't set out to make him a weak character; he walked on the page, and he was one, mostly, until he began surprising me, in small ways, with his strength" (Keith). It is clear in the moments he is mentioned that he is having trouble deciding how to raise a daughter on his own. He does not wake her up to do work like the boys have to do and he relies on her to take care of cooking and cleaning for the household. As a single father

to three boys and one girl, Daddy puts much more responsibility on his sons and does not know how to do the same with Esch.

When it comes to Esch's sexuality, Daddy makes no effort educate her on the topic. This is not uncommon according to author of *Family Coordinator* Helen A. Mendes. In her chapter entitled *Single Fathers* she says, "Fathers over forty tended to be reluctant to discuss sexuality and sexual mores with their daughters. These men felt that such information should be given to their daughters by women, not themselves" (Mendes, 443). Esch never had anyone talk to her about her sexuality and so when she was old enough to start exploring she did not know how to be safe. With that being said, one might think that Daddy would know that Esch has become sexually active and he might even be aware that she has become pregnant. This can be assumed because, "Fathers who had daughters appeared to be more aware of their daughters' sexuality than of their sons', or than fathers who only had sons" (Mendes, 443). Daddy may have chosen to ignore the signs he saw in Esch because he is too engulfed in his grieving over Mama.

In addition, Daddy's reaction to Esch being pregnant was very negative at first. He was holding her so she would not fall from the tree during the hurricane, but when Skeetah revealed that she was pregnant, "Daddy's face shuts, and he pushes" (Ward, 234). He was in such shock from the news that he pushed her into the water. He immediately regrets this, but the reader does not know that until after the storm has passed when Esch and Daddy talk about the pregnancy alone. In this scene, the reader finally sees Daddy putting an effort to be a parent for Esch when he says, "I'm sorry" and asks, "How long has it been?" (247). Daddy hardly speaks directly to Esch about anything other than caring for the house or Junior. By the end of the novel, Daddy's

character has finally developed into a man ready to be there for his children after grieving for his wife for so long. His loss made him weak, but the hurricane and Esch's pregnancy has made him want to be a strong father for his children.

As a result, when one looks at Esch's view on sex and relationships compared to the men around her, these views are very similar. She has slept with many of her brother's friends and she does not know what a real relationship should look like. The men around her also think of sex as a casual activity with nothing more attached. According to Edward S. Herold and Dawn-arie Mewhinney conductors of a study regarding men and women's sexual interactions, "The women had as many sexual partners as the men, but were less likely to anticipate having casual sex and reported less enjoyment and more guilt about casual sex than did the men" (Harold and Mewhinney). Esch did not feel any shame of her sexual encounters until she slept with Manny. She started to think of sex as something meaningful because she was doing it with someone she cared about, this is the start of her character development from a girl to a woman. She wants to be seen by Manny and ultimately wants him to love her like she loves him, but she does not know what it means for someone to care about her romantically.

In the same way, Esch's first time was when she was very young as she was only 12, and it did not happen because she wanted it to, it happened because, "it was easier to let him keep on touching me than ask him to stop..." (23). She did not ask to have sex with Marquise, but she did not know how to explain why she did not want to at the time. She let Marquise and the boys after him do what they wanted because it made her feel like someone was paying attention to her, she felt noticed. This is how the boys around her saw Esch from then on. She wants the boys to see her as a strong and independent

person, like the way she sees them, but she does not know how to change how they see her besides to act like them. She truly begins to change, however, when she looks to China and Medea as role models.

Some of the key components to understanding Esch as a character are the aspects of her that were not originally going to be there as Ward says in an interview with the *National Book Foundation*, “I didn’t know that Esch would be pregnant, that she would use classic Greek myths to understand her place in the world, that she would use China in the same way” (Johnston). When Esch realizes she is pregnant, she needs to look to someone for guidance in how to behave and become a strong mother. Because she does not have any mother figures she looks to China. She observes China as a mother and a fighter. Esch wants to be considered fierce or savage like China, but she wants to be looked at this way because she is a woman and more importantly a mother-to-be.

Esch begins the novel as a quiet observer and she lets Manny take advantage of her for this. As she learns to be fierce like China she begins to stand up for herself and ultimately is able to defend herself when Manny tries to make her feel worthless and small. When Manny asks, “You think they don’t know you a slut” he is clearly trying to make her feel bad about what she has done but with two words Esch spits fire at him and makes him flee; she says, “You are” (204). Esch has realized that promiscuous sex is not just something she is guilty of, but Manny as well. Esch has the last words against Manny and from this encounter she knows that he is the worthless one and she is strong. She goes from viewing her impending motherhood as something that would make her weak to the reason she is strong. Skeetah believes that China is stronger since she had her puppies. Esch hears this and knows she can be stronger through her pregnancy as well.

During the fight between Kilo and China, Skeetah repeatedly tells China, “Make them know” (171). He wants her to prove to everyone that being a mother has made her stronger and she is going to make them know that she is fierce and relentless. When Esch hears this she takes it as if Skeetah is telling her the same. She needs to make Manny know that she is strong and will prove it. She does this when she confronts him and tells him, “I’m pregnant” (202) and after he begins to deny it the same words echo in her head, “Make them know” and she is on him like China (203). This moment is Esch becoming everything she has wanted to be from observing China. She is strong, fierce, and relentless. She has finally made Manny know that he will not treat her badly anymore.

In addition to looking to China as a mother figure, Esch looks to Medea, the Greek figure from a school assignment. She sees Medea very differently than many other people who have read her story. She admires Medea for her strength and the way she stands up for herself. In the beginning of the novel, Esch considered speaking up herself, but did not and as time passed she considered what Medea would do in the same position and eventually began to act the same way. Esch admires Medea because she is a mother, but she takes care of her own needs and is vengeful against the man who hurt her. Esch sees herself in Medea constantly throughout the novel and she sees Jason in Manny. She feels abandoned by Manny in the same way Medea is abandoned by Jason. She compares her love for Manny to Medea’s love for Jason, “I imagine this is the way Medea felt about Jason when she fell in love, when she knew him; that she looked at him and felt a fire eating up through her rib cage, turning her blood to boil, evaporating hotly out of every inch of her skin” (57). Esch is very deeply in love with Manny and projects her love for him through Medea because Medea demands the attention of the man she loves

and that is what Esch wants to be able to do. Esch learns from Medea throughout the novel and by the fight between Kilo and China she is able to take on Medea's confidence in the presence of Manny, "I imagine myself tall as Medea, wearing purple and green robes, bones and gold for jewelry" (170). She walks passed him as he watches and she ignores him. He has hurt her repeatedly by the fight and she is starting to realize that she does not need him because she is strong on her own. From the fight Esch builds the confidence to ignore Manny and after that she builds the confidence to confront him. This confrontation, as previously stated, is Esch's turning point and she is being the person she wants to be, she is strong and independent as she stands up for herself; she is Medea in this moment, "This is Medea wielding the knife. This is Medea cutting. I rake my fingernails across his face, leave pink scratches that turn red, fill with blood" (204). Drawing Manny's blood was very important to Esch. She can see the effect she had on him on his face when she has done this. She sends him running like Medea sent Jason. Esch has become a savage woman and mother and she was able to do it without the influence of her brothers or father. By looking to Medea she has inherited her strength and proven that she is not one to back down.

Likewise, from all of this, it is very clear that Esch has become what she wanted from the beginning of the novel. Her brothers respect her for defending herself and her father wishes to take care of her, as she becomes a mother. She views sex as something more than a way to receive male attention because she has experienced one of the consequences of it. In addition, she has grown to understand the stigma and the differences between men and women having promiscuous sex. She points this difference out to Manny when he calls her a slut and she corrects him by saying that he is the one



that should be considered a slut. This line shows Esch's maturity in seeing that what Manny has done, having sex with Esch while in a relationship, is much worse than Esch having slept with more than a few boys. From there, Esch only continues to grow. She starts taking on the personalities of China and Medea. She is a fighter and a mother. She is fierce like China and not willing to back down like Medea. She is also everything she used to be, she is nurturing like Mama and observant like she has always been. Esch has kept all of the qualities that have helped her be a strong person internally and attained many new traits that have made her a strong character on the outside. She made them know that she was capable of more than anyone thought. Her family learned that she does not need them to protect her and Manny knows that she does not need him to be a strong mother. Esch begins the novel unseen, invisible, but by the end she demands attention. She has come of age just as she wished. If Esch can become the person she wanted to under her circumstances, poverty, pregnancy, and natural disasters, anyone can do the same in any given circumstance.

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