

A Boy and His Dog:

An Analysis on Skeetah's Relationship with China and Esch in Salvage the Bones

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There is no better relationship than that of a boy and his dog, or so the saying goes. There is a reason that dogs are called "man's best friend". This is especially true for Skeetah and his dog China in Salvage the Bones by Jesmyn Ward. It is made very clear in the book that Skeetah's top priority is China. He cares for her more than anyone else and treats her as well as he possibly can, given the fact that he was born into a poor family in a poverty-stricken area. However, while Skeetah gives the majority of his affection to his beloved dog, she is not the only one that Skeetah cares for. Throughout the book, Skeetah is fiercely loyal to his younger sister, Esch. Besides China, Esch is the most prominent woman in his life. He has a strong protective instinct towards her and a deep love for his sister. While he clearly cares for the other members of his family, it is obvious that he cares mostly for Esch through the way that he talks to her and the way that he treats her, something that I believe to be a result of their mother passing away. Before their mother passed away, Esch and Skeetah were the children that felt the closest connection to Mama. Throughout the book, there are memories that Skeetah and China share that they experience with their mother together. This makes Mama the other prominent female figure in Skeetah's life. Although she has passed away, Mama still plays an important role in the reasons why Skeetah treats China and Esch so well. Salvage the Bones shows how Skeetah's relationship with China is a direct repercussion of his

feelings towards the other women in his life, Esch and Mama. Through Skeetah and his relationships with the various women in his life, readers are shown that all people are a product of experience. When his mother passed away, Skeetah's life was dramatically impacted and changed forever, causing him to lean on the other two important females in his life: Esch and China.

Skeetah cares for China the in the best ways he possibly can, given the fact that he is living in an impoverished area of Mississippi. This can be seen at many points in the book, but especially through what Skeetah chooses to feed China. In the book, it states that Skeetah spends a lot of his limited amount of money on the most expensive dog food for China. In the book, Esch says, "There are only a dozen or so different kinds of dog food, and I know that Skeetah already knows what he wants. He always gets the same kind: the most expensive" (Ward 28). While this may not seem like a large gesture to the average person, it is monumental to this family specifically. They do not have a lot of money to begin with, so when Skeetah uses almost all of his money to buy expensive dog food, it shows precisely how much he cares for his dog. Additionally, Skeetah feeds China table food that he could have eaten himself. When Daddy once bought a generic brand of dog food for China, it made her sick. While Skeetah was working at the Catholic Church mowing the lawn and pulling weeds in order to make enough money to feed her the expensive brand, he fed China food from the table. In the text, it says, "After that, she ate table scraps Skeet sneaked out of the house for a month" (Ward 28). This shows how Skeetah puts China's needs before his own. Skeetah makes it very clear that China is his top priority. When Big Henry gives Skeetah a hard time about the type of food

that he purchases for his dog, Skeetah ignores him. He says, "China like what she like," and "That's 'cause some people understand that between a man and a dog is a relationship...Equal" (Ward 29). The day after China's puppies are born, Skeetah decides to build a kennel for them out of some wood. When Esch asks what he is doing, he explains that he is building a kennel, even though it is quite early after the birth of the puppies. When Esch questions him, Skeetah says, "They're going to live, and they're going to be big. I can't have them running free all the time. They might get hit" (Ward 21). This shows how Skeetah not only cares for China, but also her puppies. Skeetah has experienced great loss in just the short sixteen years that he has been alive. When the puppies are born, he is shown life, not death. He cares so much for China and her puppies because he is scared of loss and has already experienced so much of it in his lifetime.

Skeetah makes many sacrifices for his dog throughout the duration of the novel. In one incidence, when one of China's puppies becomes ill with parvovirus, he places it in a bucket to die. This shows how much Skeetah truly loves and cares for China because although he could have made a lot of money from selling the puppy, he does not want to risk China becoming sick. He breaks the puppy's neck so that it cannot infect China. Additionally, Skeetah protects China like she is his own child; the way Mama protected him and his siblings when they were young. When Daddy shoves Skeetah and accuses him of stealing him wood, China becomes aggressive towards Daddy. Skeetah tells her to "hold," knowing that if China were to attack Daddy, he would hurt China back. When she attacks, Daddy says, "I wish she would, I wish she would...I'd take her upcountry and shoot her."

Skeetah then tells Daddy, “No” (Ward 106). Another incidence of this is when Skeetah steals money directly from Daddy. In the book, Esch says, “On a few of Daddy’s drunk nights when he’s down at the Oaks nodding off to the blues, I’ve seen Skeet walking out of Daddy’s room with his hands balled into stealing fists in his pockets I keep expecting Daddy to wake up one morning to find some of his money missing” (Ward 29). This shows exactly what Skeetah sacrifices for China. He knows that he could be caught by his father and get into a lot of trouble, but he steals the money anyway in order to buy China the expensive dog food that she likes.

In addition to taking such good care of China, Skeetah also looks after Esch. Throughout the entirety of the book, Esch is the person that Skeetah pals around with the most. He looks out for her and is her closest friend throughout the book. Similarly to how Skeetah cares so deeply for China, he also cares very strongly for his younger sister. Esch is easily the sibling that Skeetah feels the most connected to because they shared a very special relationship with their mother before she passed away. When Hurricane Katrina is preparing to strike, Skeetah and Esch have a conversation about their mother. At one point during the conversation, Skeetah asks Esch, “Do you remember the last thing she said to you?” to which Esch replies, “No, I don’t remember.” Skeetah then says, “ I do, She told us she loved us when she got into the ruck. And then she told us to be good. To look after each other” (Ward 221-222). This shows how special Skeetah’s relationship with Esch is. Throughout the duration of the book, Skeetah does not have any of these deeper conversations with his brothers. This is something that is unique and special to his relationship with Esch. They are able to talk and share about their experiences with Mama before she

died. Skeetah sees Mama in Esch, which is why he feels that he can share these stories and memories with her. At one point, Skeetah even says that Esch looks like Mama. He says, "You look like her. You know that?" When Esch, denies the idea, Skeetah says, "You do. You not as big as her, but in the face. Something about your lips and eyes. The older you get the more you do" (Ward 222).

Kristin Y. Mack's study of siblings and their relationships after the death of a parent does a good job of explaining why Skeetah may be so close to Esch in comparison to his other siblings. In Mack's findings from her study, she says, "In addition, adults who experienced maternal death during childhood have less sibling contact than adults who experienced paternal death, but there are not differences between these two groups in terms of closeness" (Mack 131). Since these children experienced maternal death, the study says that they should have less sibling contact, which is true for Randall and Junior with Skeetah, but not for Esch. Since Esch reminds Skeetah so much of his mother, he feels a natural attraction towards her. Additionally, Skeetah imitates his mother's actions towards Esch, since she is the only person he feels comfortable putting his walls down around. In the text, Esch says, "When we were younger and Mama had to get us up in the morning for school, she would touch us on our backs..." (Ward 114). To Randall, Skeetah, Esch, and Junior, this has become a sign of comfort, something that reminds them of their mother. Coincidentally, this is what Skeetah does when Esch is throwing up. She says, "I can feel Skeetah watching me. When he touches my back with the puppy-free hand, I know this is how he touches China" (Ward 26). This sentence holds a lot of meaning since China is so vitally important to Skeetah. Esch also does this to

Skeetah after he loses China in the water. Esch says, "I scooted past Daddy, whose eyes were closed as he mumbled against his maimed hand and his good hand, which were folded like he was praying, past Randall, who still held Junior, who still had his hands over his eyes, to Skeetah. He crouched where the attic's roof was mostly gone, near the front of the long, low half room, and leaned out the gaping absence. He looked like he wanted to jump. I touched him in the middle of his shoulder blades" (Ward 237). This is how Esch comforts Skeetah in his time of need because she knows that this is what he used to do with Mama. Caroline Hewson's study of people and the loss of pets explains that people deal with the loss of a pet in ways that are very much similar to losing a person of importance in their life. She says, "Research, self-reports, and expert opinion all indicate that the psychological impact of a pet's death is often comparable to that of human death, and is made harder by societal censure of expressions of grief for animals" (Hewson 7). To Skeetah, losing China reminds him very much of the feeling of losing Mama. The loss of China in the water forces Skeetah to feel that type of pain again.

Additionally, in J. Szymanowska's research study of children dealing with loneliness after the death of a parent, she explains that a huge part of a child coping with the death of a parent is talking about it and discussing it. In her conclusion, she says, "Talking with children about death and remembering a deceased parent with them are integral parts of the mourning process. Before children can accept their loss, they feel a great need for talking and having the company of other family members in experiencing their pain" (Szymanowska 118). This is a huge part of the reason that Skeetah feels so connected to Esch. They are the two that talked

together about Mama after she died. Syzmanowska goes further, saying that children who have dealt with or are dealing with the loss of a parent often look for informal social support. She says, "To cope..., the children and their families usually used informal social support (parents, grandparents, siblings, or friends) (Szymanowska 118). When Mama dies, Skeetah needed another female figure in his life to talk to and lean on. Obviously this was Esch, his sister.

The support that Skeetah receives from Esch is a direct reflection of the love their mother showed them. This is the type of love that Skeetah shows Esch: familial love. The best example of this is near the end of the novel when Hurricane Katrina strikes. At one point, as the family tries to reach safety, Esch and China are both stuck in the water, being pulled away and drowning. In the text, Esch says, "I feel a real hand, a human hand, cold and hard as barbed wire on my leg, pulling me back, and then I am being pushed up and out of the water, held by Skeet, who is barely treading, barely keeping me and him afloat. China is a white head, spinning away in the relentless water, barking, and Skeetah is looking from her to me, screaming, *Hurry up! Hurry up!* at Randall, who is breaking what is left of the glass and wood of the window with his hands, his shoulders, his elbows, and diving through, while Junior clings to him close as a shell, and Skeetah is pushing me through the window with his hand a leash loop wrapped too tightly around my arm, his other hand treading, and he is calling, *China, come China...*" (Ward 235). In this part of the book, Skeetah chooses to save Esch over saving China. Earlier in the book, Skeetah has a memory of Mama telling the kids to look after one another. In this moment, that is exactly what Skeetah is doing. Skeetah is looking after his younger sister as he

watches his beloved dog drift away. This shows exactly how much Skeetah cares for Esch, and how much he loved his mother. When Mama told Skeetah to look after his siblings, it stuck with him. His relationship with Mama is something that he only shared with her and Esch, making it so special and important to him.

In contrast to his close relationship with his mother before she passed away, Skeetah does not have a close relationship with his father. Throughout the entirety of the book, Daddy is mean to Skeetah and threatens China. For example, when Daddy accuses Skeetah of stealing the woods that Daddy has been using to board up the house during the hurricane, he becomes extremely aggressive. He shoves Skeetah and says that he should shoot China and kill her. Daddy also becomes very angry with Skeetah tries to bring China and the puppies inside to save them. When Randall tells Daddy that Skeetah is bringing all of the dogs inside and Daddy says no, Skeetah says, "No, I'm not leaving them out there." He continues, "If they go out in the shed, I go in the shed...and if Randall try to stop me, we going to fight. All of us" (Ward 212). This is why Skeetah feels a much stronger connection to his mother. That being said, Daddy is under a lot of stress that can be easily over looked since he is not necessarily a main character in the novel. Having to deal with the death of his wife, providing for four children, preparing for a terrible hurricane, and dealing with the poverty level that they live with stresses Daddy so much that he continually drinks. In Sooyeon Kim and Gene H. Brody's study of African Americans living in single-parent households, they say, "Poverty is the greatest problem facing single African Americans and their children (Edelman, 1985; McLoyd, 1998), particularly for those who live in the rural South. Poverty rates in rural Georgia, South Carolina,

Ala- bama, Mississippi, and Louisiana are among the highest in the nation (Dalaker, 2001).” (Kim and Brody 305). While Daddy is under much stress, this is something that Skeetah does not fully understand quite yet. As a sixteen-year-old boy, Skeetah just blames his father for what he does wrong rather than seeing the big picture, which is why he cares more for his mother. Additionally, Skeetah has always been closer to his mother; so losing her was a particularly hard loss for him.

Skeetah is very deeply affected by something that happened to him at a young age: the loss of his mother. This is a psychological issue that Skeetah deals with in his everyday life. To put it in terms of literary theory, psychological theory is when something happens in the childhood of a person and it has effects that last throughout the rest of their life. This theory applies directly to Skeetah. The loss of his mother impacts many parts of his life. The death of Skeetah’s mother has made him much closer to Esch. It has also influenced his extreme care of China. In all, it has affected his relationships with his family, particularly the women in his family. Since Skeetah was so close to his mother, when she passed away, he became closer to the other two females that he deemed as most important: Esch and China. Through this experience, Skeetah has forever been changed.

Everything that Skeetah has had to deal with in his life helps in making him who he is. He is quite literally a product of his experiences, as is everyone else. Through the difficult loss of his mother at such an early age, Skeetah has learned hurt, but also love. The pain of losing his mother and his beloved pit-bull, dealing with his drunken father, living in the poverty-stricken area of Bois Sauvage, and surviving a category five hurricane have aided in making him who he is. These

terrible things that have happened to him in his life have taught him how to feel loss, pain, and heartache. In contrast, his love for China, Mama, and Esch have taught him how to love and care for someone else. Without any of the good and bad experiences that Skeetah has had, he would not be the character that all people come to love and empathize with at the end of the novel.

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