

## Mr. Claude, Nice of You to Join Us

By Austin Jesse

“And I get up because it is the only thing I can do.”

— Jesmyn Ward, *Salvage the Bones*<sup>1</sup>

Warning, this paper may contain spoilers from the book! Daddy is one of the most interesting characters in the book *Salvage the Bones* by Jesmyn Ward. While he is one of the most interesting characters, little is known about him. The reason for this is because the story is told through the eyes of Esch, his 15 year old pregnant daughter. From her eyes, Daddy just kind of pops in and out, either telling them to help with the work preparing for the coming hurricane, or telling them to allow Junior, Esch’s younger brother, to do something. Through Esch’s eyes, we know that Mama died giving birth to Junior, this had to have a traumatic influence on Daddy. We also know Daddy drinks a lot, and is sometime violent. Since we only get Esch’s side of the story, we do not really know why, but it can be assumed from psychology, as well as assuming what may have caused him to turn out the way he did. Daddy is not only an alcoholic, he is also depressed, and disabled. Many reasons for the causes of this will be discussed, as well as why Daddy should be viewed as a person, and not just a character, if you can do this, you will begin to understand Daddy.

The quote at the beginning in order to allow you a little time to think about it, to me it applies to Daddy, even though it was said by Esch. Think about how you would be, if the only person you loved, your wife, and the mother of your four children was one day gone. It would be life changing. Now on top of all this add being poor, and being considered disabled and unable to work. And on top of all of this add being African American in rural Mississippi and you get a pretty good picture of who Daddy is. He

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<sup>1</sup> Jesmyn Ward Quotes. Goodreads.com [https://www.goodreads.com/author/quotes/1676417.Jesmyn\\_Ward](https://www.goodreads.com/author/quotes/1676417.Jesmyn_Ward)“(Accessed 12-06-15).

has every right to be depressed and beaten down, but he has children to think about. So he gets up every day, because it is literally the only thing he can do. In almost every scene that we see Daddy he is preoccupied with getting the house prepared for the coming Hurricane (Katrina). To me, it seems like this is a way for Daddy to take his mind off of life. If he can stay preoccupied, and keep his mind on the hurricane, he does not have to think about Mama or even the wellbeing of his children. He can go about life, like nothing is wrong, and somewhat just stay in his own little world, and not have to worry about the problems of life.

“I shouldn’t have pushed you...I’m sorry...How long has it been? Make sure everything is ok. So nothing goes wrong.”<sup>2</sup> This is where Daddy truly becomes a three dimensional character, he acts like he cares, and if we assume he is a three dimensional character at the end of the story, we have to also assume he is one at the beginning of the story. When Mama dies, Daddy is lost, he is a shell of his former self, with children he does not really know how to raise. “For men, establishing an intimate relationship and attaining proficiency in domestic roles emerge as the primary problem areas during the adjustment period.”<sup>3</sup> Daddy does not have a real relationship with his children. When reading the book the first impression you get of Daddy, is that he is a drunk, violent dead-beat dad. However he is much more than this if he is read as a human character, just like you or myself, you will see that he is human, and he is internally struggling with his own demons. According to Tyson, “Fear of Intimacy is the unwarranted but unshakeable and overpowering feeling that emotional closeness will seriously damage or destroy us and that we must, therefore, protect ourselves by remaining at an emotional distance from others.”<sup>4</sup> Daddy does not want to get close to his family for fear that something will happen to them, and he losses them like he did Mama. Towards the end of the story we can see Daddy starting to

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<sup>2</sup> Ward, Jesmyn. *Salvage the Bones*. New York: Bloomsbury, 2011. Print. P. 247.

<sup>3</sup> Clark, Phillip, Siviski, Robert, and Weiner, Ruth. “Coping Strategies of Widowers in the First Year.” Minneapolis: National Council of Family Relations, 1986. 425-430. Print. p.425.

<sup>4</sup> Tyson, Lois. *Using Critical Theory: How to Read and Write About Literature*. New York: Routledge, 2011. Print. p.85

care about his children more. When Skeetah tries to leave the house to go find China, Daddy acts concerned and tells him the storm is not over yet and he should be careful. From the beginning of the book you can see that daddy holds Junior, the one who Mama died to birth, above all the others. He pops up during the period where China is giving birth to tell his other children to let Junior see what is happening, because he is old enough to know. Throughout the book, he also has Junior helping him with things around the house to teach him to be good with his hands. This is something you can assume from the reading, which he has not taught his other children how to do. You can assume this, because they are never helping him. Even in the situation, where he calls Esch and Junior to help him, he lets Esch fall back asleep while Junior gets up to go help Daddy get the house ready for the hurricane. The fact is that throughout the book Daddy really does care about his children, which is why he is getting the house ready for the hurricane, to protect them. However he also feels that he can't get too close to them, for fear of losing them. The last person he got too close to, Mama ended up dying and leaving him. He feels that if he gets close to someone, something will happen and they will leave him, and this would tear him apart, so he just keeps his distance.

Research says that a positive emphasis on things such as personal resources, the family systems internal resources, social support, and financial health, are beneficial to the coping process.<sup>5</sup> When you think of Daddy none of this comes to mind. He is a poor African-American from rural Mississippi, and has been his entire life. He very clearly does not have financial health. He also is unemployed, as well as disabled. "Poverty has far-reaching negative consequences for quality of life. The poor are more likely than others to be exposed to stressful life events, such as unemployment, crime victimizations and illness... Besides being stressful in their own right, these experiences are likely to lower people's self-

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<sup>5</sup> Clark, Phillip, Siviski, Robert, and Weiner, Ruth. "Coping Strategies of Widowers in the First Year." Minneapolis: National Council of Family Relations, 1986. 425-430. Print.) p. 426

esteem and diminish their sense of control over life.”<sup>6</sup> His house, can be considered more of a shack than a house. “Papa Joseph helped Daddy build our house before he died, but once he and Mother Lizbeth were gone, we took couch by chair by picture by dish until there was nothing left.”<sup>7</sup> Their house has become a conglomeration of their house, and the other house, because Daddy could not afford to replace things. The reason we do not get the harsh criticism of their living style, is because the book is told by Esch, who at the age of 15, the only thing she has ever known was the Pit. It is not like they ever lived a glamorous life, and then got thrown on the Pit, it is where they have lived their entire lives, and is all she has ever known. In reading the first few chapters of the book, you get the feeling that the scene is set in the late 1800’s or early 1900’s, but in fact it is set in present day, 2011, it is just the level of poverty that makes it seem like it is set in the past.

Since the story is told by Esch, we get some details but not others. One is that Daddy drank before Mama died. “Daddy would fish off a sinking pier, and sometimes on a ledge on one of the supporting pilings under the bridge with some of his friends, and most of the time, at the end of the day, he’d be left with an empty cooler of beer and one or two croakers bleating in the icy water.”<sup>8</sup> Daddy is clearly an alcoholic, which adds to the depth in his character. The story also states that Daddy at one point was in accident while driving his truck, Esch says it was due to drinking. “Daddy had wrecked his truck her once, when he was drunk. When he came homes after the police let him out, he cursed for a good two hours about Dead Man’s Curve.”<sup>9</sup> This would also explain actions later in the story. One being that his work truck is broken, and later in the story he was attempting to fix his truck which is broken down. He also tries to talk Big Henry into getting him alcohol. “Daddy is grinning a beer out of Big Henry, who can buy beer at the gas station on the interstate because he’s so tall and solid, his face so square

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<sup>6</sup> Amato, Paul and Zuo, Jiping. “Rural Poverty, Urban Poverty, and Psychological Well-Being.” Midwest Sociological Society, 1992. P. 229-240. Print. p.229.

<sup>7</sup> Ward. p.258.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid. p.85

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. p.31

and serious, that he looks like he's over twenty-one."<sup>10</sup> The reason he would not have a job driving anymore, is because if you get caught drunk driving you get your license revoked, and depending on how many times he had been caught, according to Mississippi law, he could have potentially had it revoked for 5+ years.<sup>11</sup> So if he did not have his license, he could not buy alcohol, so he gets someone else to do it for him. This would also explain why he does not have a job. It may not be that he is "disabled," since this is what Esch says, and may very well be what she has been told. However the evidence points to the fact that Daddy does not have a license, and even if he does, who is going to hire a person to drive professionally, who has a drinking problem and has already caused an accident while drunk driving? Most jobs that involve driving, will dismiss you for too many speeding tickets let alone a record for driving under the influence. "A prevailing view on alcoholism is that it has depressant effects on earnings, income, and wages..."<sup>12</sup> Something the book points out is that Daddy, had potential to be a mean drunk even before Mama died. The violence was not necessarily something that came from the death of Mama, rather she just took the happy parts of him when she left. "Daddy'd call us out at the end of the day, more drunk than mad, the sunset turning through the sky behind us like a top."<sup>13</sup>

In *Salvage the Bones*, We have to look at Daddy as a human character, just as we do Esch and Skeetah in order to explain some of his thoughts and actions. He is a poor Black man in rural Mississippi, who is poor and out of work, and on top of all of that has lost the love of his life. He has to be one of the most marginalized characters there is. "North and South are usually paired as sites of opposed Character traits, with the North symbolizing industry and equality, progress and rationality, and the South

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid. p.26

<sup>11</sup> Stim, Rich. Mississippi Dui Laws, Penalties, and Fines. [Drivinglaws.org. http://dui.drivinglaws.org/miss.php](http://dui.drivinglaws.org/miss.php). (Accessed 12-07-15).

<sup>12</sup> Mullahay, John and Sindelar, Jody. "Alcoholism, Work, and Income Journal of Labor Economics" Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993. p. 494-520. Print. p.495.

<sup>13</sup> Ward. p. 85

“backwardness,” poverty, racism, and inequality.”<sup>14</sup> “We dump our garbage in a shallow ditch next to the pit, and we burn it.”<sup>15</sup> This shows there level of poverty, they couldn’t even afford garbage disposal! A mere few dollars a month. “We ate Top Ramen every day: soupy, added hot dogs, drained the juice so it was spicy pasta; dry, it tasted like crackers.”<sup>16</sup> This is literally the cheapest meal you can buy at around twenty cents a package. Could you imagine what it must be like to not be able to provide things for your family? Daddy has so many factors playing against him with no one to really rely on its no wonder he is depressed.

“The part of the personality which controls social action, perception, judgement, etc.. is influenced by the social context of one’s upbringing is a basic premise of the sociology of knowledge and of all theories of culture and personality.”<sup>17</sup> While we get nothing from Esch on Daddy’s childhood, we can assume he was born in rural Mississippi, since it doesn’t say otherwise, and we know Mama was raised on the Pit. So he had to have been relatively close, in order to meet her. If we assume Daddy was raised in rural Mississippi, it is safe to assume that he was also poor. We can assume this because every African American we see in the story, is poor. Alcoholism runs in families, and children of alcoholics are four times more likely than other children to become alcoholics themselves.”<sup>18</sup> While Daddy’s parents may not have been alcoholics, the statistics state that more than likely they were. Which means Daddy is just doing what he knows how to do. Most people lead by example, or in other words do what they know how to do, and in this case if Daddy was neglected as a child, why would he not neglect his children. It is what he would consider normal behavior, since it would have been what he saw while he

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<sup>14</sup> Hayden, Bridget. “The Hand of God: Capitalism, Inequality, and Moral Geographies in Mississippi after Hurricane Katrina” Washington D.C.: George Washington University, 2010. p. 177-203. Print. p.180.

<sup>15</sup> Ward. p.15

<sup>16</sup> Ibid. p.6

<sup>17</sup> Brodber, Erna and Wagner, Nathaniel. “The Black Family, Poverty, and Family Planning: Anthropological Impressions.” Minneapolis: National Council of Family Relations, 1970. p. 168-172. Print. p. 167.

<sup>18</sup> Children of Alcoholics. Aacap.org. [https://www.aacap.org/AACAP/Families\\_and\\_Youth/Facts\\_for\\_Families/FFF-Guide/Children-Of-Alcoholics-017.aspx](https://www.aacap.org/AACAP/Families_and_Youth/Facts_for_Families/FFF-Guide/Children-Of-Alcoholics-017.aspx) (Accessed 12-10-15).

was growing up. "The psychological impact of being raised by a parent who is suffering from alcohol abuse is the fact that most children of alcoholics have experienced some form of neglect or abuse."<sup>19</sup> His balancing factor was Mama, she was not raised by alcoholics, because every memory Esch has of her grandparents and mother they never drink. This would mean that while Mama was alive, Daddy somewhat followed by her example, however when she was gone he had to revert to the only way of parenting he knew, which would have been the way his parents raised him. While Daddy does love and care about his children, he is neglectful. He has no clue his 15 year old daughter is having sex. He leaves a teenager to take care of a child. He does not really cook, and does not do the laundry. All he does is work on the house, and get it ready for the impending hurricanes, other than that the children more or less have to fend for themselves. After all how much nutrition do children get by eating Top Ramen every single day?

Daddy could have been written in a multitude of ways, being a somewhat secondary character, however, he is written as a three dimensional person. Yes, that is right, person. If you view him as a person instead of as a character it is much easier to understand him. Put yourself in his shoes, you lose the love of your life while in child birth, with your fourth child. You are an alcoholic, who now has four children to take care of. You are disabled from work, and may even have no license. You are also poor, African American, and live in rural Mississippi. Your life would not be all that happy either, and we can't condemn Daddy for having fallen into a depression, with the weight of the world sitting on his shoulders. Once you view Daddy as more than just another character in the story, you truly start to feel for him, because if you view him as a character, you may just think he is an alcoholic, deadbeat father, who is violent towards his children. However with the evidence shown this is not the case, that would be taking everything at face value, or in other words judging a book by its cover.

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

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