

## **Are You Feeling It Now, Mr. Claude?**

### **A Psychoanalytic Look At Daddy, His Humanity, and How He Knows Best**

By Logan Paul Mclaskey

Daddy is a human character and should be regarded as such in the context of this novel. It may seem like a weird task to deal with, think about, and analyze the characters within *Salvage the Bones* as humans, but they are most definitely human characters regardless of whether or not they are inside of a fictional account of a *very* real event. Jesmyn Ward, the author of *Salvage the Bones*, has done a very good job at making these characters human—giving them human traits and making them do human things—which makes analyzing the characters as people very easy. Arguably the most notable character in the novel *is* the children's father, Daddy, or Claude Baptiste. Throughout the novel Daddy makes some very interesting decisions and it a part of some even more interesting situations. Daddy, throughout the rest of this essay, and in the novel itself, should be thought of a human being. He has human traits and throughout this essay we will be taking a look at Daddy as a human person because thinking of him as a human person makes his situations, his decisions, his traits, and his character much more real and easily analyzed.

Males, especially fathers, throughout human history have been given the mission of providing for their families; they have been given the 'bread-winner' title and the ever-oppressing task of being 'masculine'. Masculinity seems to be a very relative term, but a singular definition has been forced upon the human society, and those males that do not fall inside this genus of masculinity are deemed 'less than a man'. This stereotype is has been and still is being pressed upon the male population, especially the black population, throughout the country. These

stereotypes can cause a lot of mental strain, especially when the added effects of poverty, fear, anxiety, and loss of a loved one do not make the mental strain and pressure any lighter. These pressures arguably cause many of Daddy's personal problems, most notably his drunken aggression towards his kids, especially Skeetah. A *very* note-worthy moment in *Salvage the Bones* is in the fifth chapter on pages 104-5,

'Bullshit!' Daddy yells. 'Everything I do for y'all and y'all don't appreciate shit!' He raises his arms again, as if he has stirred more bugs to motion. He reaches to grab Skeetah's arm, to pull him to standing and then shove him, probably. This is what he does when he wants to manhandle, humiliate; he pulls one of us toward him, shakes, and then shoves us hard backward so that we fall in the dirt. So that we sprawl like toddlers learning to walk: dirt on our faces and our hands, faces wet with crying or mucus, ashamed.

After this intense moment between Skeetah and Daddy, China starts to get defensive and as she does this Daddy threatens her and he 'wishes she would' (106). This fight seems to be very much skewed more towards Skeetah and the rest of the kids; to get the readers to sympathize for the kids and not for Daddy, but there is a line that Daddy says on page 106, "'I'm trying to save us,'""; this line is immensely important to Daddy's character because it shows his humanity. Of course he has come home drunk after trying to find dump truck parts at the salvage yard, but his drunkenness has shown the human that lies underneath this overly masculine man. This line is important because he could not save his wife, the one woman he loved over all others, but he will not fail to save his children. This argument between he and Skeetah seems to be incited because of Daddy's intoxication, but it truly started because that is what he feels deep inside. Daddy does

not feel appreciated for what he has done for his family and he just wants his kids to realize that what he is doing is important because Daddy is trying to keep them safe and keep them alive.

In a study done by Baron K. Rogers, Heather A. Sperry, and Ronald F. Levant in the *Psychology of Men & Masculinity* academic journal, they took a very specific look at African American men and what those men think makes a man *a man*. In the study the authors looked at eleven African American men from the Midwest and in the article it is important to note that,

. . . when considering masculinities for African American men, one also has to take into account not only the White Western masculine norms, but also racial oppression and its effects on African American Men . . . [African American] men must contend with an unending series of threats to their masculinity resulting from racial oppression (Rogers, Sperry, and Levant, 416).

Out of the eleven men that were surveyed and asked the question, “what does it mean to be an African American man” six of the eleven participants said, “oppression, stereotypes, or systemic barriers” as something that shaped them as men and made them who they are today. Though a casual reader of *Salvage the Bones* would most likely not think about or consider this, but as said earlier in this essay, Claude Baptiste is a human being and one could very easily attribute his, and his families poverty, to racial oppression and systemic barriers, which are defined the Rogers’, Sperry’s, and Levant’s article as “experiences where the participants reported feeling that barriers were set in place that made it more difficult for them as African American men to succeed.” Now, as *many* people know Mississippi was a southern state during the Civil War, in fact it was the second state to secede from the Union, and because of the Civil War and the negative culture it created, racial oppression and racism is still *very* alive and well in the United States, especially the southern states; where this racist culture is still accepted. Though racial

oppression and systemic barriers are seen as a few of the many things that have made these eleven African Americans men, they are very negative things and it makes them men because they have fought all of their lives to overcome that oppression and racism. Regardless of whether Daddy has overcome these cultural barriers he is still oppressed and most definitely mentally destroyed because of that oppression. The racism and the barriers that are put up by a contemporary society, and a society ruled by the majority, and which the majority race is *white*, creates a negative environment for a man, especially an African American man, to grow and strengthen his masculinity. This detriment to Daddy's masculinity creates a negative atmosphere for his children to grow up in as well, and when a man like Daddy can not help make this atmosphere positive and helpful in any way, his children suffer and therefore he suffers and is filled with guilt. This white-dominated society has oppressed those of color for hundreds of years and is still oppressing those of color in states like Mississippi, Missouri, Illinois, Kentucky, and many other southern states. Even in normal speech it is common for someone talking about a state to categorize it as a 'northern' or 'southern' state *because* of the culture that still thrives in those specific states.

A society that is ruled by a white majority is *not* a positive and growing environment for someone of Daddy's color, and especially his economic status. One could very easily assume that Daddy has been living in the Pit all of his life. The assumption that the Baptiste family would move to an impoverished area like that is fairly ridiculous, and Claude Baptiste and his family living there previously would explain how the relationship between Mama and he ever happened. It can be very easily inferred that *because* of Daddy's race, economic status, place of birth, and family history are reasons that have led to his oppression. Daddy's poverty is something that has led to his oppression just as much as the color of his skin has led to his

oppression. Nothing is ever revealed about Daddy's childhood because of the forced perspective that the reader must see the novel and its characters through, but, as said above, and it can be assumed that Daddy has lived in the Pit all of his life. This poor economic status has led to a poor mental state and poor family life. In a study done by Laura E. Montgomery, John L. Kiely, and Gregory Pappas it is said that "higher rates of mortality, morbidity, and disability are known to be associated with lower income, less education, lower occupational level, racial or ethnic minority status, and other social class variables" (1401). Though Daddy's children *do* go to school, and are educated, Daddy does *not* have a job, and has not had one for a few years because of his accident. This lack of cash flow throughout the Baptiste household yields to poor health because they "ate Top Ramen every day: soupy, added hot dogs, drained the juice so it was spicy pasta; dry, it tasted like crackers" (Ward, 6). As many times as college students joke about eating Ramen everyday because of its cheapness and its easiness to make, it is *not* something healthy enough to sustain a human, especially ones that are growing; this type of diet would lead to malnourishment. This impoverished life is not only stressful on Esch and her siblings, but on Daddy as well. As a father he is supposed to provide for his family and because of his poverty level, his lack of work, and his race it is almost impossible for him to do that successfully; which very easily, and obviously, leads to mental distress and strain. In Kevin Fiscella's commentary on "Ethnicity, Poverty, Health, and the American Dream" he discusses a statistic early on in the article, which is, "Currently, one out of every two black children grow up in poverty compared to one out of six white children" (361). Poverty has kept Daddy and his family landlocked in the Pit and they will most likely stay there for the rest of their lives. It can definitely be assumed that the two older boys of the family, Randall and Skeetah, are using their respective "hobbies" as a way out of the Pit; Randall's is basketball, and Skeetah's is

dogfighting. Regardless of their poverty level the Baptiste children are not dumb; they know that the area they live in will always be badly stricken with poverty as it is now. In a study done by Kayla Fontenot, Joachim Singlemann, Tim Slack, Carlos Siordia, Dudley L. Poston Jr., and Rogelio Saenz they analyzed the two poorest regions in the United states; the Texas Borderland and the lower Mississippi Delta area. In this study's introduction it is said that,

The Texas Borderland and the Lower Mississippi Delta—the two reegions with the highest and most persistent poverty in the nation—experienced, on average, a decline in poverty of approximately five percentage points between 1990 and 2000. Despite these improvements, however, these two regions continue to face disproportionately high poverty rates compared to the rest of the United States. In 2000, family poverty was twice the national average (9.2%) in the Delta (18.4%) and higher still in the Borderland (22.3%) (Fontenot & Singlemann; et al.)

Taking into consideration the forced perspective of Esch's eyes and point of view makes reading this novel difficult at times; especially when taking on the challenge of psychoanalyzing a character such as Daddy. On the surface of the novel there is rarely anything revealed about Daddy's character, personality, or general emotions. He is on a mission and regardless of what his children are up to he plans to accomplish this mission without fault. Daddy cares about his children because that is all that he has left. It seems that each character has their sort of niche, for lack of a better term; Skeetah has China, Randall has basketball, Esch has her child, Junior has Mama, and Daddy has his kids. An almost boot camp style of living has a lot to do with Daddy's masculinity and how he is perceived by his children. On page three of the novel a dialogue exchange happens between Esch and Daddy as Esch is trying to censor the birthing of China's pups from Junior. As Esch puts her leg up as a barrier in front of Junior to cover his line of sight

to China, Daddy tells Esch “‘Let him see.’ . . . ‘He old enough to know about that’” (Ward, 3); *that* meaning birth. I would argue that Daddy is comfortable with letting Junior see this graphic scene because 1—Daddy believes that Junior *is* old enough to know about giving birth (because it is apart of the “birds-and-the-bees” conversation), and 2—Daddy feels guilt for what has happened to his wife, and the children’s mother; and maybe he feels apathetic about the situation. He feels that he has already failed his children because of the fact that they no longer have a mother to help raise them. I don’t necessarily think that Daddy feels much personal guilt for his wife’s death because he tried his hardest to get her help, but he feels as though he has failed his children, especially Junior, and that he must make up for it by becoming this overly masculine father in order to be a role model for his sons, and possibly his daughter as well. It is not until late in the novel, when Daddy’s fingers get amputated by the tractor, that Junior shows *real* interest with his mother. Though she isn’t around he still tries hard to have a sort of relationship with her by taking Daddy’s wedding ring off of his separated finger. The reason that he takes so much interest into this ring and his mother is because everyone has seemingly kept Junior in the dark about everything; they have not told him about Mama. When we take into account the area in which the family lives one can assume that that family has been poverty stricken down to the roots of its birth and the start of its existence; that is why Daddy clings so tightly onto the “house” that they all call home. Poverty has confined them to where they are geographically and because of this geographical restriction their chances of surviving the hurricane are very low. Evidently they live through the storm, but the aftermath of hurricane Katrina has left the area in which they live in an almost post-apocalyptic, dystopian ruin that will take *years* to rebuild. President Barack Obama had stated in his speech this past October in remembrance of the ten-year anniversary of hurricane Katrina,

It's been 10 years since Katrina hit, devastating communities in Louisiana and Mississippi, across the Gulf Coast . . . Thousands of people saw their homes destroyed, livelihoods wiped out, hopes and dreams shattered . . . Those who stayed and lived through that epic struggle still feel the trauma sometimes of what happened. As one woman from Gentilly recently wrote me, 'A deep part of the whole story is the grief.' So there's grief then and there's still some grief in our hearts (Obama, 322).

Daddy, and especially his children, have been *strongly* affected by the loss of Mama. Not only has the death of his wife and the mother of his children completely changed Mr. Claude as a human and a father, it has also made him cling to everything that he has left, whether that be the shack that he and his children call home, the Pit, the pictures of him and his wife, and especially his kids. Daddy tries extremely hard to hold onto the simple amount of the objects that he has left, whether these objects be physical, emotional, or psychological. Daddy knows that poverty is keeping him and his family where they are, regardless of whether hurricane Katrina leaves them a home to come back to or not. And because of this knowledge Daddy is psychologically compromised. He has already been through an outstanding amount of psychological damage with the loss of his wife and the mother of his children, but also the racial oppression that he has experienced all of his life has not helped his case whatsoever. Daddy is constantly struggling throughout this novel and though it may be hard to empathize with him because of the peculiarity of his situation, there must be sympathy given to him because of *he is human*.

Taking into account everything that has been discussed throughout this essay Daddy's humanity can not be questioned. Human being experience the slightest psychological trauma from not even been through events like Hurricane Katrina, or even Hurricane Camille, which both were category five hurricanes. Casual readers of the novel must realize that Daddy and the



Baptiste family *are* human beings and their evacuation was not even an option to be considered when rumors of a tropical storm were swirling. What would they come back to find if they had evacuated? Though regardless of their evacuation Katrina completely wiped their home and everything they had ever known off the face of the planet, they were there to help rebuild their home and themselves. Poverty and racial oppression has kept Daddy and his family where they are in Mississippi and *that* is why evacuation was never an option. They were left on their own to survive because of society and the fucked-up racial and prejudicial norms it holds so dear to its heart. Daddy did what he thought was best *because* of his past experiences and the past pain he had felt from the loss of his wife. He did what any father would have done because he is human and acts accordingly.

## Works Cited

- Fiscella, Kevin, MD. "Ethnicity, Poverty, Health, and the American Dream." *Families, Systems & Health* 14.3 (1996): 361-63. *Academic Search Complete [EBSCO]*. Web. 15 Dec. 2015.
- Fontenot, Kayla, Joachim Singlemann, Tim Slack, Carlos Siordia, Dudley L. Poston, Jr., and Rogelio Saenz. "Understanding Falling Poverty in the Poorest Places: An Examination of the Experience of the Texas Borderland and Lower Mississippi Delta, 1990-2000." *Journal of Poverty* 14 (2010): 216-36. *Academic Search Complete [EBSCO]*. Web. 15 Dec. 2015.
- Montgomery, Laura E., MA, John L. Kiely, PhD, and Gregory Pappas, MD, PhD. "The Effects of Poverty, Race, and Family Structure on US Children's Health: Data from the NHIS, 1978 through 1980 and 1989 through 1991." *American Journal of Public Health* 86.10 (1996): 1401-405. *PsycARTICLES [EBSCO]*. Web. 15 Dec. 2015.
- Rogers, Baron K., Heather A. Sperry, and Ronald F. Levant. "Masculinities Among African American Men: An Intersectional Perspective." *Psychology of Men and Masculinity* 16.4 (2015): 416-25. *PsycINFO [EBSCO]*. Web. 15 Dec. 2015.
- Obama, Barack. "10 Years After Katrina, The Work Is Not Done Yet." *Academic Search Complete*. McMurray Inc., Oct. 2015. Web. 15 Dec. 2015.
- Ward, Jesmyn. New York: Bloomsbury, 2011. Print.