

## Esch: Giving Voice to Silent Suffering

By Mikayla Mendenhall

Jesmyn Ward has written a compelling novel titled *Salvage the Bones* that captures the audience from the first paragraph. In this work Ward sought out to write about the hardships that have affected the area she calls home. Poverty is no stranger in rural Mississippi, and Ward's readers are pulled through an eye-opening experience about life in the South. Ward does so in subtle, yet jarring ways. The characters do not come right out and say they are poor. Rather, they describe their lives just as anyone would; particularly children. The story is told by fifteen year old Esch, the only girl among her family and friends. Through this lens the reader is about to learn about the culture of the area, the devastation of Hurricane Katrina, and the struggling education system. While no specific name is given, poverty is truly the main character of this novel. Without her, no other events are set in motion.

Within the first few pages of the novel poverty is present. Esch describes the home birth situation, and even without stating so, the reader understands that this is not by choice or to be trendy. Several lines, found spanning from page one to two, describe the level of poverty the family is so accustomed to, without ever stating their dire situation. To a reader who has no preconceived notions about the novel, the story may seem to take place with a family of share croppers in the 1930s for a few pages. This is the primitive way of life that they have accepted, and either did not see a reason to change or, more likely, did not have the means to alter the status quo.

Mama gave birth in the house she bore all of us in, here in this gap in the woods her father cleared and built on that we now call the Pit. Me, the only girl and the youngest at eight, was of no help, although Daddy said she told him she didn't need any help. Daddy said that Randall, Skeetah and me came fast, that Mama had all of us in her bed, under her own bare burning bulb, so when it was time for Junior, she thought she could do the same.

In this passage three large clues are given. The first is the question of whether or not Esch, an eight year old, will be needed to help during the delivery due to the understandable absence of a midwife. The second clue is that all of the children had been born in the same bed. The third and final context clue is the mention of the “bare burning bulb.” This family is too impoverished to afford coverings for their lighting fixtures.

From this image the reader can clearly tell that this family is destitute. Esch’s experiences are not uncommon in the South. Heather O’Connell at the University of Michigan has explored the theme of lingering implications of slavery. In her article “The Impact of Slavery on Racial Inequality in Poverty in the Contemporary U.S. South” she states, “Although racial minorities have faced more favorable legal conditions since the 1960s, differences in social and economic success by race continue. It is critical that we understand the sources of racial inequality in the United States given direct efforts to ameliorate such disparities.” Essentially, legislation was passed that gave the impression race was no longer an issue. With no perceived issue, no solution is seen as necessary. This creates a circular problem for impoverished African Americans. Society either sees no issue due to their own privileged stance, or believes that these underprivileged people have earned their economic standing.

Donald Tomaskovic-Devey and Vincent Roscigno have also explored the treatment of African Americans in the South. In their article “Uneven Development and Local Inequality in the U.S. South,” the researchers state:

Building on a legacy of racism, poverty, and one-party rule, this region [the South] of the United States has sustained a truly remarkable pace of economic growth over the last 30 years. Despite such growth, it continues to be the case that some of the poorest places in the industrialized world can be found within the borders of this region.

Tomaskovic-Devey and Roscigno make an excellent point of highlighting the fact that America is a first world nation with incredible technology, and yet devastating levels of poverty exist. On page 60 of *Salvage the Bones*, Skeetah is forced to choose between possibly losing all of the puppies to parvo, or the family going without kitchen flooring.

“You giving China a floor?” (Esch asks Skeetah). . . “No, Esch.” Skeetah slices at the underside of the next tile with one of Daddy’s rusty box cutters. “I’m saving them puppies. China’s strong and old enough to where the parvo won’t kill her.” He yanked. “They’re money.”

Skeetah chose to protect the item that held monetary value. The puppies. Worn out kitchen flooring could not have been resold for much, but it did have the power to possibly keep the young, weak dogs alive to be sold later. Aside from Skeetah’s concern about money is the fact that he doctored China, his pitbull, through pregnancy and the birthing process. He had succeeded at keeping most of them alive, and potentially felt as if he were in a position somewhat similar to Daddy. Both Skeetah and Daddy had taken on the dominant male role of protector of the family. Skeetah had started a family with China, and was doing his best to care for her and the new puppies to prevent their loss. With the death of his mother still looming over the family, loss of life surrounding childbearing is a touchy subject.

Once again, this family’s circumstances are not entirely fictitious. Struggles with childbearing are more common for African Americans than Caucasians, and being poor adds another layer to the existing issue. Tanya Naghawatte and Robert Goldenberg published a collaborative essay titled “Poverty, Maternal Health, and Adverse Pregnancy Outcomes.” In this article the authors make several valid points that can easily be applied to *Salvage the Bones*. “In the United States, because black race and poverty often coexist, distinguishing between their effects on pregnancy outcome can be difficult. Nevertheless, it is clear that in the United States, black women are three times more likely to die in pregnancy than are white women.” (Poverty) This statistic is the combination of lack of prenatal care,

limited access to services, poor health and malnutrition, and pre-existing medical conditions.

Naghawatte and Goldenberg further expand on these hurdles:

Barriers to receiving prenatal care for lower SES [socioeconomic status] women may include inability to pay for otherwise available services, as well as failure to seek services because of prior negative experiences (receiving culturally inappropriate and unsatisfying services, reproach and sanctions for poor health habits), lack of transportations, and depression. (Poverty)

The problems presented by such barriers are made to be even more severe for younger African American females. Due to low social standing often paired with low socioeconomic standing, young African American females do not often have much support, if any. Esch is only fifteen years old when she finds out she is pregnant, and the father is only seventeen. Several days pass between her initial discovery and the sinking realization that she is actually pregnant. It was not just a bad dream, and it is certainly not going away. Over the course of these few days Esch has encounters with Manny, the one she presumes to be the father. Esch realizes that Manny wants no part of a relationship with her, let alone taking on the task of raising a child. Manny is self-absorbed and only concerned with whatever, or whomever, pleases him. Time and again proving himself to be utterly useless, Esch slowly begins to mature and accept the fact that Manny will not be involved with her any longer. Sadly Esch is forced to think long and hard about her situation while also weighing her options. On pages 102 and 103 the reader sees Esch sort through what she has, or does not have, to choose from:

Who would bring me? Daddy, who sometimes I think forgets that I am a girl? Big Henry, one of the few of our friends who has a car? Manny? Teeth-in-the-dark Manny? *If I took care of it, he would never know, I think, never know, and then maybe it would give him time. Time to what? I push. Be different. Love me.* These are my options, and they narrow to none.

After she acknowledges that she has no options, the story progresses onward, leaving Esch and her possibilities dangling for now. What can be found as immensely interesting is that Esch talks through her options for the future, but not that the pregnancy could have been prevented. Perhaps this is because the thought of preventing pregnancy from happening had never crossed Esch's mind. This could be attributed to a naïve and childish mindset, but there is the flipside that she is mature enough to think of the implications now. Esch is not alone in this gray area that has many theories and much speculation from the general public. In the article "Internal Poverty and Teen Pregnancy," four authors, Tamera Young, Sue Martin, Michael Young, and Ling Ting tackle a topic that sadly often meets its stereotype. When digging into why teen pregnancy is more common among those who are economically disadvantaged, the authors had this to say:

According to the model, disadvantaged youths do not perceive themselves as having positive life options and therefore do not plan for their future and do not avoid barriers to that future such as early out-of-wedlock childbearing. If disadvantaged youths do not perceive that doors are open to them, it is perhaps difficult for them to see teen pregnancy as closing any doors.

This is perfectly exemplified in Esch. She gains attention from boys by sleeping with anyone who shows interest in her. Her behavior started at twelve years old and none of her family seemed to notice or attempt to stop this. Daddy is too wrapped up in his own grief to notice that his daughter is getting herself into the position that killed her mother. Esch seems to think that sleeping with any boy that has the slightest interest in her is normal. "The girly heart that, before Manny, I'd let boys have because they wanted it, and not because I wanted to give it. I'd let boys have it because for a moment, I was Psyche or Eurydice or Daphne. I was beloved." (16) She seems to carelessly give herself away, but then she also understands the level of importance given to having someone exclusively. She believes she is in

love with a boy who is not exclusively with her, and will not even kiss her, but has no problem doing everything else. She is an uneducated fifteen year old girl, and her story is not uncommon.

Further on in the chapter Esch goes on to describe her first sexual encounter at age twelve: “And then he started touching me, and it felt good, and then it didn’t, but then it did again. And it was easier to let him keep on touching me than ask him to stop, easier to let him inside than to push him away, easier than hearing him ask me, ‘Why not?’ It was easier to keep quiet and take it than to give him an answer.” (23) Esch was raped because she was not educated about sex and the implications such an act holds. No one stopped to tell her that she mattered and did not owe those boys anything. Anything she learned about sex came from school because her drunk father certainly was not going to sit her down and have “the talk.” Such a lack of education because of poverty, for both boys and girls, is what landed Esch in the spot she is in.

Again it is important for the readers to remember that Ward did not dream up these scenarios. Girls, much like Esch, exist throughout the United States and do not receive adequate information due to a gap of understanding and communication between the parents and the school system. One organization, called Peer Health Exchange, is seeking to change this lack of proper education by going to area high schools and giving presentations. On the “about us” page of their website, the group provides a mission statement saying: “Peer Health Exchange’s mission is to give teenagers the knowledge and skills they need to make healthy decisions. We do this by training college students to teach a comprehensive health curriculum in public high schools that lack health education.” PHE began in 1999 as a supplement to a school district which was suffering from low funding and insufficient staff. The classes were taught by several Yale undergraduate students, setting the model for the current program which relies on college students. This minimal gap in age between teacher and student allows for reduced embarrassment, and causes students to think critically about what they are being told by

someone in their peer group. PHE is currently located in six major U.S. cities: New York City, Boston, Chicago, Los Angeles, the San Francisco Bay Area, and Washington, DC. Over 100,000 high school students have been reached through this program, and it continues to grow.

Had Esch been offered a class through this, or a similar program, she would have been more educated and would have faced better odds of not getting pregnant. Her pregnancy will likely hold her in the same level of poverty for years to come. This means Esch will likely have to drop out of school to take up a job in order to barely provide for her child, if she survives childbirth. Here again readers can find the circular problem that exists for impoverished African Americans in the South. Unfortunately, this marginalized group is often ignored, and American efforts to combat poverty are directed to third-world countries. This creates a circular problem by showing Americans helping poor people in other countries and largely ignoring their own, creating the idea that cases of extreme poverty do not exist and therefore, poverty in America is not real and does not need a solution. Repetition of this cycle continues and these situations are made worse by the natural disasters that frequent the area – hurricanes.

August of 2005 brought one of the most devastating catastrophes that the Gulf Coast had seen at that point in time. Thousands were displaced from their homes. The Superdome was filled with families sleeping on cots and looking for assistance. Media coverage showed looting in a bad light. However, what was not shown was the poverty that existed even before Katrina hit. As Ward shows in this novel, Katrina did not create poverty in the area; the storm magnified what already existed. Race and class were somewhat coincidental in their overlap. Poverty is the reason many hurricane victims were living in low lying areas, making them more susceptible to flooding. Being poor has trapped these individuals into a cycle. Many individuals did not have homeowners insurance due to cost. This, just like living in a low lying area, ended up costing them more in the long run. In an article published in the

*Journal of Community & Applied Social Psychology* the authors challenge typical thoughts and feelings about natural disasters and probability saying, "Contrary to the notion that 'acts of God' do not discriminate between rich and poor, natural disasters often amplify unfavorable outcomes associated with poverty and social disparity." (Voorhees) This concept of misfortune setting an individual up for further misfortune with little chance of escape is heartbreaking. Even sadder is the fact that these events are reality in a first world country in the modern age.

Taken in as a whole, this information can be overwhelming to the reader. On the surface level it is easy to see that problems exist for the characters, and also for those whom these fictitious beings are inspired by. Real world problems exist, and they are alive within the borders of this country. Inferior prenatal care, disadvantageous sexual education, and poverty in general are only half of the problems presented in the novel. Too many problems exist for each citizen to tackle them all, but what can be achieved is an attitude of caring. Americans have a problem with accepting their own blemishes. Do-good groups receive praise for going across national borders to help "those poor people over there." Because certainly one of the wealthiest nations in the world cannot have poor people; at least not people poor enough to rip up their kitchen floor to save some puppies. There are shelters for people, correct? However there is not enough room to house each individual in need of assistance, nor should this type of help be seen as a solution. Better education and hope for something more must be attainable for children like Esch in order to reduce the amount impoverished people.

This ideal situation is still far from reality due to the way that school districts are funded. Property taxes are the main form of funding for schools; therefore, poorer communities have less than desirable school buildings, and often inexperienced teachers. In order to actually impose change primary funding would have to come from another avenue. A new initiative to support schools is an incredibly daunting task that would take years to implement, but is not out of the question for certain areas. Not



every school district will be able to rise to a respectable level. Poverty is a necessary component to a normal economy. Not every problem can be fixed and not all poverty can be eliminated. However, this does not mean all hope is lost. Americans need to recognize the South as being just as much a part of the United States as any other region. By doing so, citizens will recognize the suffering in this area and aim to change these situations. A divided nation that ignores its own wounds while trying to bandage those of another will suffer.

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