

## **Us vs. Them: A Look at Marxist Theory through *Salvage the Bones***

By Emily Nielsen

The American Dream; that is what people in this “great” country strive for. The chance to become better than they already are, to slowly but surely make their way up to that 1% and live comfortably with their families supported and healthy. Unfortunately, that isn’t how The United States of America actually works. Unless you win the lottery, create a brand new social media network, or come from old money, there is little chance that you will one day earn enough of a salary to buy a yacht big enough to be a second home. In Jesmyn Ward’s novel *Salvage the Bones* we see the impact of the other side of enormous wealth, poverty.

Although not the main point in the story her characters react to the situation the way they do because of their material status. They do not leave their home when Hurricane Katrina hits because that is all they have. The boys Skeetah and Randall focus on their individual chances to rise from their social status. The main character of the story, Esch deals with teen pregnancy because she has no other alternative. Through this story, we can explain the socioeconomic rules of rural southern Kansas in the year 2005. In doing so, we want to answer two main questions: “What oppressive socioeconomic ideologies influence the characters’ behavior and “does the literary work combat those ideologies by clearly illustrating the damage they do.” (Tyson. 111)

Classism is the belief that a person is worth what their monetary value is, the more money one has the more intelligence, more superiority, and a higher importance than those like Esch’s family who live in poverty in rural Kansas. Although we are never outright told that they have no money, it is shown how the family’s home is described.

“The Pit” they call it, because of Papa Joseph, their grandfather, let men dig out a section of land for the clay. That was, until the hole filled with water and Papa Joseph was afraid of it swallowing the rest of the land so he stopped selling. The rest of the yard is littered with unused rusting cars, along with other junk like a rusted-over cow bath. Esch’s oldest brother Randall has a homemade basketball net he had stolen. The food they eat, all canned or Top Ramen, one of the cheapest and least nutritious meals out there as most college students know, yet they eat it everyday.

Another way that the family’s poverty is brought about is how they react to Katrina. While the rich white neighbors with the cows and big farm leave early on in the warnings, they do not leave until the storm destroys the house. Why? Because they have nowhere else to go, they cannot pay for rooms in a hotel, and they do not have any other living family. They do not even have a working car to take them anywhere because Big Henry usually provides them with the car and drives them to and from town. We as a society, see the division of social status as “us and them.” That way, when the situation, such as poverty worsens society “could inhabit a safe and collective point of view from which to regard the dire conditions” (Humburg. 4). It never is someone’s fault; it is never anyone’s job to fix it, except for the individuals and families who live through it, that is the real American Dream.

Their poverty level thus throws the family into the mindset of not being important enough to be noticed and we see them trying to combat that. Throughout the book, the characters are trying to “find themselves”. This story is about the coming of age, and we mostly see it through the main character Esch’s eyes. While she narrates the story, we journey with her in the beginning of her coming of age as she starts to figure

out where and what she wants to be in her lifetime. In the first couple of chapters, we are surprised to find out about her promiscuity with the boys who hang out around The Pit. “The girly heart that, before Manny, I’d let boys have it because they wanted it, and not because I wanted to give it”(Ward. 15) she does this because in that moment she is not skinny, gangly, awkward, Esch, but rather she is the embodiment of her heroines, Psyche, Eurydice or Daphne. She has no other female role model after her mother died giving birth to the youngest child Junior, so no one, other than her drunk father or her two teenage brothers, was there to educate her about sex or other attributes and roles that come with being a woman. Because of this, she becomes pregnant at the age of sixteen. According to the article, *Impregnating Images: Visions of race, sex and citizenship in California’s teen pregnancy prevention campaigns* it is explained that many cultural and critical theorists concluded that teenage pregnancy is a phenomenon constructed socially within the United States. The article states that these theorists assume that the child is unwanted and that it ultimately leads to poverty. This is a very popular point of view, unfortunately, and it is a very negative view as well. “The ‘epidemic’ of teen pregnancy provided a convenient, albeit inaccurate, explanation and possible solution for the transformations that were occurring in the US...”(Tapia. 7). This mindset, unfortunately, has not wavered, and the truth is shown within in the story. Because of their financial state, Esch doesn’t have the money or the means to get legally get rid of the baby.

“The girls say that if you’re pregnant and you take a months worth of birth control pills, it will make your period come on. Say if you drink bleach, you get sick, and it will make what will become the baby come out. Say if you hit yourself on the metal edge of a car

and it hits you low enough to call bruises, it could bring a miscarriage” (Ward. 101).

In the perfect world, where every person has that chance for the American Dream of rising above their predetermined societal role, Esch would be able to have an abortion if she wanted to, or if she has the baby, it would be just as easy for her as it is for any other teenager to make something of herself. Instead, she tries to find home remedies that might fix the problem, and although she never tries any of those strategies, she still has to think about them.

This is all happening while she is trying to figure out where she needs to be in the world. Manny, her first love is be something she strives for but can never obtain because he doesn't see her. Throughout the novel, she is still trying to connect to the world outside herself. Esch is trying to find her voice and her place; she is trying to become someone who can make it. We see this when she compares herself to the Greek goddesses, and even to China once she realizes that she has a life growing inside of her. This may come with the birth of her child, he or she might become Esch's whole world and we see the beginnings of that at the end of the book. “Make them know. I am on him like China”(Ward 202) Whether it is because she finally realized how much Manny did not care for her or their child, or because she was testing her own strength against the one person who hurt her the most in that moment she stands up for herself, in that moment she attempts to break through the title she was given at birth, and in a way she does because she stands up to her oppressor, Manny and wins.

While Esch is trying to find her place in the world, Skeetah has found his and is now trying to make it happen. China and the dogfights and puppies are his paydays with

her beautiful coat and knack for winning fights with a terrifying ferocity that rivals even bigger dogs than her. Her puppies as well are a ticket out of the slum as Skeetah had said many times in the story that each puppy will sell for a lot of money, so keeping them alive long enough to sell them is his first priority. “He is happy to have another puppy; if it lives, he can get maybe \$200 for it, even if it is a runt” (Ward. 18). Four puppies sold at that price would make a profit of \$800, giving Skeetah enough money to do whatever he pleases. He knows that if he inputs the time and energy needed he could become a dog breeder for the other fighters, which is a very lucrative illegal business. Unfortunately, this also brings out what was touched upon earlier that most of what society deems important is directly linked to how much it costs. This is referred to as capitalism, where everyone and everything can be given a price tag.

That price tag can then determine the social status of that individual. Along with the money comes the greed that propels Skeetah to forget everything except for his needs and China’s. Skeetah takes the family’s money that was supposed to provide provisions that wouldn’t have to be cooked for the storm for the family during the storm. Instead buys two bags of expensive dog food and for the family he bought cans of peas and Top Ramen, both of which are not able to be eaten really without being cooked. His main goal for the shopping trip was to feed China, his source of profit and his pride the most expensive dog food he could find. He is an example of the detrimental aspect of finding one’s own path, the people they hurt along the way. His family in a way comes second to China; nothing else matters but her and her wellbeing because she is Skeetah’s income. A prime example of this is when Hurricane Katrina is hours away from striking their home,

“I’m bringing her for the storm’ Skeetah doesn’t look up.

‘Fuck no,’ Randall says

...

Randall’s face shatters then, and all that’s left is an open window.

‘I’m telling Daddy’

‘Fucking tell him then.’” (Ward. 261)

Skeetah’s every move is in order to protect China and her puppies. His one goal is to try to protect them from everything, the dirt of the shed floor, the elements. With the \$800 dollars that he could acquire after selling them, Skeetah’s world could have expanded miles beyond the lacking and timeworn Pit.

We also see Randall giving himself a price tag, something that he can sell in order to better his status. His worth is in his talent as a basketball player. Randall is trying to sell himself and his talent in basketball to the highest bidding college. They obviously cannot pay for tuition, they can’t afford to leave until their house is destroyed in the Hurricane, and every athlete knows that in order to get the scholarships that they must play to excellence, they must show that their gift is worth the investment. Randall’s ultimate goal is very similar to Skeetah’s he is hoping that his talent draws enough money to give him a place to go to college, to also escape the pit. Education and talent are a deadly and useable source for power in society, and Randall plans to use that. By going to college on a full ride not only would he leave the pit, but he would also gain opportunities that would otherwise be out of reach. With the education he would receive he could have the skills to have a job that would pay him enough to propel him from the ranks of poverty. So he is constantly working with his talent, whenever he can he is practicing on the stolen basketball hoop. He takes his games seriously and wants to go to camps in

order to be scouted and picked up by a university. His siblings support his drive, going to games and helping him and through all of this he is also trying to take care of his family.

The difference between the two boys is how important the outside elements of their goals reflect how they view their family. With Skeetah, nothing is more important than China, he feeds her the best dog food, goes toe to toes with his father on more than one occasion to protect his dog and treats her with more respect than he sometimes shows his family. His drive towards a better life in some cases seems like it will not pause in order to help his family. On the other side with Randall, he understands that while basketball is important, the family needs his help too. After Daddy's accident Randall becomes the one to take the family and prepare them for the hurricane under Daddy's instruction. This also isn't the first time Randall has had to take the load of raising and taking care of his siblings. When his mother died it fell on him and eventually Esch to take care of Junior and the household. They did the laundry and cooked as their father spiraled into depression and drinking. This mindset and responsibility most likely came from the fact that he is the oldest and by being so it has been ingrained into his personality and being that he is responsible for his siblings when his father cannot be, or he is old enough to realize that there has to be a balance between goals and responsibility. That they cannot take over a life because there is more than just a social status that he must protect and nurture.

What the Claude family goes through isn't an isolated case either; Jesmyn Ward writes this novel to show that Hurricane Katrina did not just affect New Orleans or the state of Mississippi. That poverty isn't something that is uncommon. Esch's family lives in rural Kansas, and when the Hurricane hit no one came to their rescue. There was

no television coverage telling the story of people like their family who lost everything. Ward lived through Hurricane Katrina, in poverty, in a little town of Mississippi. Her father fought pit bulls, her mother cleaned the house of a white lawyer who lived on the beach. She lost her brother to a drunk middle-aged white driver who only was charged with leaving the scene of the accident rather than manslaughter. (Johnston) Jesymn Ward and her family fought through many of the experiences that she writes about in *Salvage the Bones*. In one of her many interviews, she talks about her experience with Hurricane Katrina, “At one point we had to swim up to higher ground. I was barefoot and wearing shorts and a skimpy t-shirt that I had slept in.” (Gay) Her experience mirrored that of the Claude family, “my grandmother’s house, where we were staying, flooded... The storm surge came up through the bayou, and the bayou itself is just disgusting. The storm surge is pushing god knows what all the way from the Gulf, up through the bayou and into DeLisle, so we were gross.” (Gay) She is one of the thousands who lived through Katrina but never was able to share her story with the world because of her social class.

Yet, she is also an example of how her story combats the ideology that no one can escape his or her social status because she did. Her mother’s employer paid for Ward to attend a private Episcopalian school where it was expected that when she graduate that she would further her education in college. Her teachers and counselors made sure that she and her classmates took all of the needed tests and were well on track to achieve the goal of a collegiate career. This doesn’t happen with everybody living in poverty. Most only have a high school diploma with no funds to even think about furthering their education. When her brother died she realized how short life was and started to make something out



of it. She now is the professor of creative writing at the University of South Alabama; she broke free and has given a voice to those who helped her achieve that goal.

Jesymn Ward shows us that the American Dream is never impossible, but it is difficult to obtain. Especially when one's social status is below middle class like this family is. The idea that any of them will ever make it out is up to them, and up to society to let them. The poverty level of the Claude family is in no way the center motivation of the story, but her characters react in their situation the way they do because of their material status. We are with them as they fight against what society deems them to be. We watch as Esch tries to find her place without a female role model to depend on. As she becomes aware of the fact that she needs to make the world know who she is and what she needs. Skeetah trying to escape with China, while simultaneously leaving his family behind to pursue his goal, ultimately showing that greed and the motivation to have power too strong to stay behind for the sake of his father and siblings. Finally, Randall trying to escape their home with a basketball scholarship, his entire life being dependent on how well he can play. Every character's entire purpose is about bettering their own lives, to rise above what they were given at birth. The important question of, "does the literary work combat those ideologies by clearly illustrating the damage they do." (Tyson. 111) is clearly answered as we see their entire lives ripped apart by one storm. The family has no way of being rescued so they rescue themselves. They were taught like everyone else, the more money one has, the more important they become to society, and in that mindset, they clearly illustrate the damage that happens.

*(3022 words)*

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