

## **Salvage the Girl: One Girl's Journey to Motherhood**

By Kara Niles

Jesmyn Ward's *Salvage the Bones* has, in recent years, enjoyed critical success with its moving story, historical roots, and its critiques on poverty, racism, and feminism. It is the story of a 15 year old African American girl, Esch, in the deep south only 12 days before Hurricane Katrina strikes in 2005. Esch quickly discovers she's pregnant, and her entire world turns upside-down. The novel is filled with complex family dynamics, as she and her brothers try to look after their alcoholic father and her brother Skeetah struggles between making his family a priority over his beloved dog, China. With all of the complex issues Ward touches on in the novel, Esch's story remains in the spotlight. Esch is a particularly interesting protagonist, struggling with being a woman, being African American, and being pregnant in the impoverished deep south. *Salvage the Bones* is very much a coming of age novel for Esch, focusing on her development as she learns what it is to be a woman, and more importantly, a mother. Her journey gives the novel purpose and drive as tension builds, coinciding with the building tension of Hurricane Katrina. Ward presents Esch's coming of age through Esch's eyes, and readers, no matter where they're from, can connect with her on a deeper level and hear the voice of one teenage girl giving voice to a silenced community of people.

Esch has grown up without a mother, raised by her single father alongside her three brothers, Randall, Skeetah, and Junior. She is often surrounded by men,

including her brother's friends Manny, Big Henry, and Marquise. Esch has been thrown into a world of dogfighting and basketball in the male dominated south. Her family barely has anything, and the children struggle to take care of each other. Skeetah's beloved pitbull, China, gives birth as the teenagers watch. Soon after, Esch discovers that she's pregnant and she begins to wonder, perhaps for the first time, what it's going to be like to be a mother and whether or not she can truly fulfill her duties. She is surrounded by role models, whether those role models are negative or positive. She looks to others to see what it means to be a woman and to be a mother, and we begin to see the start of her journey into becoming a woman and a mother, herself.

When Esch begins searching for role models of womanhood and motherhood, she remembers her mother, who has long passed. Although Mama is not physically present in the novel, she is brought to life through the memories of her children and her husband. Whether she's there in person, or not, Mama is with Esch throughout the entirety of the story. Even in the first page of the novel, as China gives birth to her puppies, Esch is reminded of Mama. "What China is doing is nothing like what Mama did when she had my youngest brother, Junior. Mama gave birth in the house she bore all of us in, here in the gap in the woods..." (Ward 1). As Daddy prepares for the hurricane Esch remembers back to the hurricane she and her brothers once endured, when Mama was still alive. She had fought with Randall and Mama had pulled them apart while Daddy laughed "She can hold her own. Told you she was going to be a little scrappy scrawny thing-built just like you" (Ward 6). When Randall

helps her with her bleeding hand she remembers back to how nurturing Mama was, and how she had told Esch to apply pressure to her wounds, just like Randall was telling her. Mama was a strong woman, who wasn't afraid to do what she needed to do, and wasn't afraid to stick up for herself. Esch remembers a day on the bay when Mama caught a baby shark, "Daddy tried to take the pole from her and she wouldn't let him" (Ward 85). Mama caught the shark by herself, celebrated her victory, and prepared it to eat for her family. Mama is portrayed as an extremely independent woman for the world she lived in. Mama was also kind, and nurturing, and a woman worth loving and remembering. When Esch takes care of Daddy she sees all his mementos of Mama, and how loved she was as a woman and as a wife: "He hasn't changed a thing here since Mama died: there are small glass candleholders with tall peach candles wedged into them, and two small bunches of fake flowers in squat vases that look like cups that Mama placed at both ends of the dresser" (Ward 134). When Esch remembers Mama throughout the novel, she remembers both her fierceness and her loving nature. When Esch thinks of Mama, she sees a woman who was a wife, beloved by her husband, a strong woman, and a nurturing mother who did what was best for her children. A mother's influence is very important to a child, an article from the New York Times claim. The article comments on children raised by a single father saying that "If a son or daughter who loses a mother never receives adequate substitute mothering, the loss can do long term damage to his or her self esteem, ability to relate to others, overall feelings of security and ability to trust others". This would certainly have a negative effect on Esch, our main protagonist. Perhaps, since Esch has lived for so long without her mother, she looks

to her memories of Mama because she wants her advice so much. To Esch, a mother and a woman have to be all of the qualities that Mama had. She must stick up for herself and do what she wants, while still being the same kind soul that she already is, someone that's worthy of all the love Mama received. She must be nurturing to her baby, but she must also protect herself. Mama is the perfect example of what a woman and a mother should be, and Ward knew this when she decided to write Mama into Esch's memories. However, Esch finds other women that she looks to in the novel as an example of womanhood and motherhood, and not all of them end up being positive role models. One of these is Medea, from the story of Jason and the Argonauts.

Esch looks to Mama to find the perfect mother figure and the perfect woman, but she also looks to someone very unexpected, as well. Esch recalls reading the story of Jason and the Argonauts in her English class. In the story, Jason and Medea run away together to escape Medea's father. Jason and Medea kill Medea's brother to slow down the king, and ride off into the sunset together. Where most stories have their happy ending, this story does not. Years later Jason falls for another woman, leaving Medea heartbroken. She murders the children she has with Jason, as well as his new woman, and leaves him forever. When Esch discovers that she is pregnant and begins wondering what motherhood really is, she stumbles upon this unhappy story to find a role model of womanhood. According to Joseph Noshpitz, in his book *The Journey of Child Development: Selected Paper of Joseph D. Noshpitz*, he states that fictional characters can largely influence young girls'

views of themselves and of all womankind saying “their dilemmas are often related to problems that arise from conflicting versions of female gender roles that they must navigate...girls are often asked to be both assertive and demure, successful but modest, independent but socially related.” This would indicate that Medea already begins to be strong influence on Esch, maybe as much as her mother, if not more. She begins to connect her own life to that of Medea: “When Medea falls in love with Jason, it grabs me by the throat. I can see her...She has magic, could bend the natural to the unnatural. But even with all her power, Jason bends her like a young pine in a hard wind; he makes her double in two. I know her” (Ward 38). Esch sees herself as Medea, the helplessly in love heroine, and she begins to see Manny as Jason. He is her love, the father of her unborn child, and she begins to dream of a life with Manny as Medea does. “I tried to read this morning, but I stopped in the quest for the Golden Fleece, distracted again by Medea, who can only think of Jason...I could not concentrate. My stomach was its own animal, and thought of Manny kept surfacing like swimmers in my brain...I will go to Skeetah like Medea went to her brother when they fled on their great adventure with the Argonauts” (Ward 109). To Esch, her brother Skeetah is like the brother of Medea, and she and Manny are Medea and Jason. This further complicates her view of love, however, when she realizes what Medea does to her own brother in order to be with Jason. “I read it over and over again. It is like she is under the covers with me, both of us sweating to water. To get away from her, from the smell of Manny still on me...” (Ward 154). At the dogfight she connects the Argonauts to all of the boys, like Rico. Esch sees Medea and her story almost paralleling her own, until she discovers what

Medea does to her own children to get revenge on Jason. Esch realizes that she could never be like Medea, and Manny could never be Jason. A good mother could never fathom such a thing. Her mother surely wouldn't have. Perhaps Medea isn't as strong as Esch originally thought when it comes to being a woman, a mother, and a lover. By the end of the novel, Esch realizes that Medea is not the woman or the mother she originally thought. Esch has better role models for what it means to be a woman and a mother. One of these, she finds right in her own home.

Esch also looks to another unexpected source to find the true meaning of motherhood, her brother Skeetah's white pitbull: China. From the first line of the novel Esch has her focus on China, watching her every move, using her as a role model for womanhood and motherhood as her story progresses. She sees how China's hard work, loyalty, and love has won the love of Skeetah, noting that "Skeetah ignores Junior because he is focused on China like a man focuses on a woman when he feels that she is his, which China is" (Ward 3). When one of China's puppies gets parvo and she refuses to feed it, Esch begins to question whether China is a positive role model of motherhood, after all. How could China neglect one of her own children when it's hurt or sick? How could this be China's natural instinct? She sees the toll it takes on China, "Her eyelids droop, and suddenly she looks tired. Her breasts are all swollen, and the puppies pull at them. She is a weary goddess. she is mother so many times over" (Ward 40). In chapter six, China kills the red puppy she gave birth to as everyone panics and Esch watches, horrified. "China is bloody-mouthed and bright-eyed as Medea. If she could speak, this is what I would

ask her: *Is this what motherhood is?*" (Ward 130). Esch wonders if this ferocity and independence is healthy for a mother like China, like her. Esch quickly changes her mind when Skeetah enters China in a dogfight, despite his brother Randall being against the idea. Randall argues "She's a mother!" and Skeetah defends her saying "And [Kilo]'s a father...and what fucking difference does it make?" (Ward 169). China is strong, a fighter, even though she's a mother. Skeetah explains to Esch and the boys that being a mother makes her an even better fighter, she has something to fight FOR. Esch suddenly realizes that China is strong, and beautiful...the model example of how strong and independent a mother can be. Being a mother doesn't have to stop Esch from being a fighter or from standing up for herself. Esch finds a positive role model in China. She intends to do what China did, and "make them know" (Ward 171). Esch will prove to China that she is a mother to look up to..."China will bark and call me sister. In the star-suffocated sky, there is a great waiting silence. She will know that I am a mother" (Ward 258). She will stand up to Manny, take responsibility for her own life, and become a mother who is also a fighter.

Although Esch has found many female examples of what it is to be a woman, Esch, like many women in our society, also looks to **men** to define what it is to be a woman and a mother. Sometimes the men in the novel have very skewed views of womanhood, and other times, they encourage Esch and women like her to be themselves and embrace their power as women. Big Henry, a friend of the boys is one of her more positive influences. She recalls a time when she went to the beach

with Big Henry: “When we were little, Big Henry used to let me ride on his back in the deep part of the pit, the part that was lined with oyster shells. He used to carry me so my feet wouldn’t get cut, even though his feet were as bare as mine” (Ward 26). Big Henry is always kind to Esch and treats her like a lady when the other boys don’t, but there’s just one problem: Big Henry is always so kind she doesn’t even realize that he’s being chivalrous towards her. Unfortunately there are the boys who don’t treat her with the respect she deserves. One of these boys is Manny, a long-time friend of her brothers and the father of her unborn child. Manny calls Esch a ‘slut’ and pushed her around, never treating her with respect. She begins to think perhaps this is the way women are treated, especially when she sees Manny with his new girlfriend Shaliyah. His only reaction to Esch finding out she’s pregnant is exclaiming “Fuck!” and leaving her crying in a bathroom stall. Later, when Esch confronts him about it he makes it clear that he couldn’t care less about Esch having his baby: “I ain’t got nothing here. Nothing” (Ward 203). Esch stays mostly in the background, secondary to the men, even though she’s the main protagonist. This takes a toll on Esch. She begins to feel that this is the norm and she’s secondary to the men in her life, completely oblivious to the way Big Henry treats her. Fortunately, Esch finally finds the power in being a woman just before the hurricane strikes and her brothers stick up for her and protect her. Randall confronts Manny about how he’s been disrespecting Esch saying he might be like blood to Manny, but “[He]’s the only one...What about Esch and Skeet?” (Ward 202). It’s only after this conversation takes place that Esch confronts Manny and starts a physical fight with him. She finally goes from “I love you” to “I loved you” and we can see that she’s finally



realizing her power as a woman and as a mother-to-be, “I am on him like China” (Ward 203).

By the end of the novel, Esch tells her family she’s pregnant and she has taken a huge step towards learning what it is to be a woman and a mother. She may not fully understand what being a woman or a mother is all about, but she has taken a tremendous leap since the start of *Salvage the Bones*. She learned from Mama to be nurturing while being independent, she learned from Medea that a woman can’t sacrifice everything for the man she loves, she learned from China to be fierce, and she learned from the men in her life that a woman should be treated with respect and a man who treats her otherwise isn’t worth her time. Readers can go on a coming of age journey with Esch as she travels down the winding road that leads her to womanhood and motherhood as we explore different positive and negative influences throughout *Salvage the Bones*.

Jesmyn Ward throws us in *Salvage the Bones* to experience Esch’s coming of age because no matter where we come from, a majority of us can connect with Esch in some way or another. Whether you’re a young mother, a teenage girl, an African American, a southerner, or you’re impoverished. Lois Tyson, in her book *Using Critical Theory* calls this reader response theory. Reader Response occurs when a reader connects with a character, setting, or event. This helps Ward’s audience connect with the real people in *Salvage the Bones*: the silenced people of the American South, like Esch, her family, and like Ward. In an interview on *Salvage the*

*Bones* she said “That storm silenced me for two and a half years...I realized we were survivors, and that was worth writing about.” By interweaving her characters and her readers, perhaps her readers will stand up and do something for this silenced group of people. Perhaps they will no longer be ‘minorities’ or people who have their rights and their dignity slowly stripped away by our society. Perhaps we will be more inclined to do something...if we all became Esch.

(3047 words)

## Works Cited

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