

I'm a Big Girl Now: Esch's Journey to Womanhood

By Claire Schmidt

“Make them know,” is a common phrase used throughout Jesmyn Ward’s novel, *Salvage the Bones*. The saying is found for many different reasons throughout the book, whether it be Skeetah whispering it to his pet dog named China, or Esch attempting to find the courage in her life to face her fears. Esch is a poverty stricken teenager girl just trying to find her way in a male dominated world. While she is trying to figure out life on her own, she unexpectedly discovers she is pregnant and now needs to care for both herself and her unborn child. On top of that, she is the only female around except for her brother’s dog. Within Esch’s predominately male, African American world, she attempts to find her own way of becoming a woman based on the feminist ways of her mother and China (the dog). Esch manages to make her journey to womanhood by overcoming obstacles that are unknown to the average girl.

A coming of age story is known as a story where the protagonist transitions from their childhood into adulthood. Esch is a fifteen year old African American girl who has been caring for her brothers and father since her mother died. Esch’s mother died while giving birth to her youngest brother, Junior. After her mother died, her father became an alcoholic and it was the job of the children to step up to take care of each other and the house: “Salvage the bones is at its heart the story of four motherless children trying to protect their home and one another against unimaginable disruption (“Jesmyn Ward”). While the family has to take care of themselves, they also have to deal with all of the racism in their specific area. One of the biggest underrated themes in the story is the race of the main characters. Esch’s family is an African American family living in poverty in the rural south of Mississippi. While the family is very isolated from

the town, they still endure racism. While using Lois Tyson's book, *Using Critical Theory*, readers of the novel see many different forms of racism pop up.

One theme of racism found in the novel revolves around Esch and her brother Randall. These two siblings especially suffer from double consciousness, which is a person being conflicted because they are one race living in a different racially dominated world (Tyson 213). While racism is not a huge theme in the book, the readers can still see the characters are living in it. Esch experiences the confusion while riding the bus in the morning: "We are picked up at six thirty AM and for the next hour we rode up and out of the black Bois that we knew and into the white Bois that we didn't" (Ward 70). Esch explains that she often did homework on the bus because the drive was so long. She goes on to observe, "And all the kids we picked up were white... I wonder if they have their own Skeetahs and Eschs crawling around the edges of their fields," (Ward 71). Esch is conflicted because, while she is proud of her family, she cannot help but wonder what it must be like for the privileged kids she sees at school. Esch lives in a racially divided community; however, she feels like she is the only one feeling this racism. Little does she know, her oldest brother, Randall, is also a victim of racism.

Randall is a basketball player who has worked very hard for the opportunities he has been given. When Randall is playing basketball, he is up against these privileged teenagers who have not had to work as hard as he has in order to get to the place he is at now. Most of the times when Esch describes Randall, she talks about how he is holding a basketball, or he's at least practicing. Randall knows the only way he can be successful in life, it to get a basketball scholarship so he can make it big someday. His family does not have the money to support this dream, so it is all up to Randall. The readers can deduce that he (along with his sister) wishes he would have been born white in order to be subject to more and better opportunities. While

Randall seems to be very confident in his scholarship chances, his family and friends ruin his opportunity when they disrupt a basketball game by getting into a fight. It would be times like that when Randall probably wished he was white.

Internalized racism is the belief that one race wishes they were of the predominate race; in this case, the African Americans wishing they were white (Tyson 212). Whether or not Ward intended internalized racism to be a part of the story, it is there subconsciously for both Randall and Esch. Randall merely wishes he was white so that he did not have to battle stereotypes in order to become a great basketball player. Esch's internalized racism, on the other hand, is a little harder to spot. Within the first few pages of the novel, China has puppies that Esch and her brother Skeetah begin to take care of. Their hope is to raise the puppies and then sell them for good money. One of the first puppies that is birthed is black and white. Esch thinks the puppy is beautiful and it quickly becomes her favorite, "I want him, because he comes out of China chanting and singing like the New Orleans Indians," (Ward 12). When Skeetah makes a comment about wishing the puppy was all black, Esch rapidly says that she would keep the puppy because it is perfect. While this is a very minute detail, this part says something to the readers about Esch wishing she had a white puppy. A key step in the process of Esch becoming a woman, is to accept herself for what she is. The problem with this is that she does not have any females in her life telling her where to go.

Esch's racism towards her own race can be quite surprising because of the strong female figures that are currently or who were once in her life. One figure of feminism whom Esch looks up to, but is no longer in her life, is her mother. As stated earlier, Esch's mother died while giving birth to her youngest brother. Esch was eight years old when her mother died, but her mother was such a positive role model to her that Esch continues to live up to her within the

novel. Esch faces a lot of patriarchy within her life, mainly because the boys are outside working and Junior is too little to help cook yet. Esch also becomes the main caretaker of Junior. While Randall plays with Junior quite a bit, Esch is in charge of making sure he is all washed up and has eaten. Because Esch and Junior share a room, she probably even tucks him in at night. Skeetah and her father do not really help out with Junior at all. Early in the novel, Junior is following Skeetah around and when Junior asks where he is going, Skeetah responds “None of your business,” (Ward 42). The way in which this is implied makes it seem that Skeetah has said this on more than one occasion throughout his life. Skeetah thinks that he is a grown up and therefore does not want his little brother following him around and copying him. Readers could infer that her father does not help out with Junior because Junior makes him think of his late wife.

It is odd that Esch faces so much patriarchy because her mother, from what readers can gather from the subtext, was a very anti-patriarchal woman. She was not afraid to help out anywhere she was needed, whether it be helping her husband around the house or killing her own food to prepare for the family. Skeetah tells Esch a story about their mama making a chicken dinner for special occasions within the family. Skeetah reminisces, “Next thing you know, she’d grab one, take it behind the house to that big old oak tree stump Daddy’d dragged out of the woods, and stand over it real still while the bird was beating its wings so fast they’d blur,” (Ward 51). Esch’s mother was both motherly and a warrior—able to stand up for her children when they needed it.

The other female role model in Esch’s life is her brother’s dog, China. China, like Esch’s mother, is also a warrior. One of the biggest debates between the characters within the story is whether or not China can still fight now that she has puppies. Before China had puppies, she was

a fighter who was put in competitions in order to make her fight other dogs. She was fierce, violent, and also a winner. Randall and Skeetah have a couple arguments throughout the novel wondering whether they should risk putting China back into the fighting scene or if they should just let her “retire.” The problem is that China has the chance to win them money if she does end up fighting. China had just had a couple of puppies when the next dog fight rolls around. But the best part is that even though she is now a mother, China still wins against the other dog. Nothing can stop her from getting what he wants: “She [China] is fire. China flings her head back into the air as if eating oxygen, gaining strength, and burns back down to Kilo and takes his neck in her teeth,” (Ward 175). While China is not always the most positive role model in Esch’s life, she teaches Esch a valuable lesson of never backing down. This lesson can be taken in a good or bad way, but luckily, Esch takes this in a positive way and eventually approaches Manny, the father of her unborn baby. Esch tells him that she is going to keep the baby but she also tells him that she does not want him to be around the baby. This is a big step for Esch to take—she has been infatuated with Manny for the whole novel, but after the hurricane, she realizes that the world does not revolve around him. This is not what Manny wants to hear from Esch, but she has decided that he no longer gets a say in her life.

Both of these female characters are also mothers—this means they have something worth fighting for. They are fighting for the protection of their children but Esch’s mother also fought to show that she was strong. When her mother was having Junior and it was not going well, her mother powered through until she was out of the view of her children and then she showed her weakness. Esch, however, has always pictured her mother as the strong woman she is and strives to be just like her.

If Esch has such respect for her mother, why does she still have this racism towards African Americans? One important thing that is just part of their community in the book is that Esch is from a poverty stricken African American area. When looking at the above information, readers see that it takes Esch an hour on the school bus in order to get to school. The white people, however, already live in town and they are close to everything. If Esch's family was white, would her mother have survived? If they lived in the white neighborhood it would have put them closer to the middle of town, which was probably where the hospital was located.

The poverty of Esch's family, while not exclusively mentioned in the book, is an overarching theme to the novel. "Those [communities] with the most severe poverty are found in historically poor areas of the Southeast, including the Mississippi Delta and Appalachia, as well as on Native American lands" ("USDA ERS..."), this just happens to be where Esch is from. Throughout the novel, Ward never says that Esch's family is poor; readers conclude they are poor when hearing about the states of their materials and the reasons why the family will not evacuate. When Esch becomes pregnant, she kind of becomes a stereotype of the South. In an article written by Naomi Farber, a professor at the University of South Carolina, she states, "Births to teens in rural counties are now almost thirty percent higher than in urban or suburban communities," (Farber). Because Esch is sleeping with people in the poverty stricken area of Bois, readers can assume they are not using any type of contraception merely because it would be too expensive. This can be deduced because at the beginning of the story, Esch steals a pregnancy test from the store: "I put my hands in my pockets, and the pregnancy test I ripped out of the box and tucked into the wandered away from Skeetah on a trip to the bathroom scratches my side," (Ward 30). Because of Esch's financial situation, she cannot be expected to be able to afford any kind of birth control, but this is not why Esch is just having sex whenever she can.

Farber talks many times throughout her articles about how family life is tied to teenage pregnancy. Psychologically, Esch is around boys all of the time. She does not see sex as intimate because she has had it so many times, with many different boys; she is in the mindset that sex is purely physical (that is, until she has sex with Manny). “Many of the most frequently-named reasons for having unprotected intercourse such as not planning to have sex or allowing it to ‘just happen’ reflect some teens’ reluctance to take conscious responsibility for their sexual activity,” (Farber); many times for Esch, she was just pulled away from her brothers or from the group they were in in order to go have sex with one of the boys. Unless, the boys were carrying condoms, they probably did not have any protection because most of the times they were outside, in a bathroom, or in a vehicle just to name a few.

Farber also discusses the family element of teen pregnancy: “when the intense developmental pressures combine with weak direction from parents and other close adults, teenagers are left...to find their own way to adulthood,” (Farber). After Esch’s mother passed away, her father became very passive. He began to drink a lot and worked more around the house than he did on his relationship with his children. Because her father was not very present in Esch’s life, her way of becoming an adult was to have sex. Unfortunately, she did not take into consideration that it could leave her with a child.

Esch’s coming of age story is very unique compared to others in the literary world. Esch “breaks the mold of the typical teenage female protagonist. Esch isn’t plucky or tomboyish. She’s squat, sulky and sexual,” (Sehgal). Ward has written a very specific character within Esch; she wants to encourage girls to be strong and to stand up for themselves. Ward has stated that she wanted to write this book for the forgotten, the silent, and the lost, all of which can be found within Esch. Girls should look up to Esch because she knows how to be her own person and not

listen to what other people think about her—a trait that is very important for girls to have now a days.

The beginning of the novel shows Esch as a girl who goes to school and takes care of her family on a regular basis. She is used as a toy that is passed around her brother's friends who come to the house. There are a couple different points within the story where it can be argued when Esch "officially" comes of age. The first is when she realizes she is in love with Manny because she stops sleeping with the other boys who come around; she yearns for Manny and believes that he could be the one for her. This point is still pretty early on in the story because Esch automatically knows her baby's father is Manny because she has not been with any other man since she has realized these feelings for Manny. Another point in the story is when she finds out she is pregnant. For a girl who is only fifteen, that would be a big surprise. She knows she has to change her lifestyle, but she also knows she cannot tell her family because she does not know if she wants to keep the baby and she is worried about what their reaction might be.

The most logical part of the story to be claimed as Esch's coming of age moment is when she finally agrees with herself to keep the baby and to forget about Manny. The whole story she has been waiting for him to look at her, and when he finally does at the end, she realizes that he is not for her. She now understands that being a grown up means that sometime you have to walk away from things you love because they are toxic to you and your well-being. She cannot help loving Manny, but she can help to make sure that her baby's life will be a good one with not having the father in the picture. At the end of the novel, Esch gets her father's approval and knows her mother will be with her for the rest of this journey.

Through various events surrounding not only Esch's life, but the rest of her family's life, she becomes an adult. Gone are her child ways of hoping life will be better than it actually is.

She knows now that her number one focus has to be on making her child's life as good as it can possibly be given the circumstances. Esch is a great role model to girls around the world because by the end of the novel she knows what she wants and while she might not know how to get it, she is confident it will all work out.

Word Count: 3052

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