

# Bastard out of carolina

Literature



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

One must consider a little history on Dorothy Allison in order to see how the directions that she takes the novel add up. When she was 24, Allison lived in a lesbian-feminist collective. The women there gave her the confidence she needed and the ability to see the value in her own writing (Amazon. com). During this time, she also found someone who seemed normal, yet she had experienced the same "incest" (Megan 74). This discovery removed some of her separation that she believed her abuse created between her and the world (Amazon 74).

Allison actually was born a "bastard" (Amazon 78), and her life was further complicated through dealing with her "brutal" step-father (Amazon 76). When she began writing, her goal as a writer, especially in *Bastard Out of Carolina* centers on having "compassion" and no "rage" (Megan 75). Allison hoped to further her goal in this book by making Bone appear to be able to survive through making others take ownership in the wrongs that have been dealt to her (Megan 73). Through Bone, Allison could comprehend how her childhood could have been better, so she would not raise her child in the same manner (Megan 75).

In writing *Bastard*, she also learned how to turn a poem into a novel, a valuable skill for one who usually begins writing poetry (Megan 72). Which creates themes present in the novel and in order to truly get an appreciation of *Bastard Out of Carolina*, by Dorothy Allison, one must take a close look at the main concepts: Abuse, Fire, Legitimacy, Social Class, Hands, and Identity; to see how they all play a role in the overall tone and personification of the book. One of the main concepts in *Bastard Out Of*

Carolina is abuse. Bone's life serves as an example of the widespread effects that abuse can have on an individual.

A major result of the abuse reveals itself through Bone's confusion of the true meaning of love. Her mother and the rest of the Boatwright's show Bone a much different facet of love compared to Daddy Glen's ideas. Daddy Glen constantly reminds Bone of how much he loves them all; however, she can't understand why his love is manifested so strangely. She longs for the love of this "father figure". Although, even his methods of abuse cloud her thinking, leaving her incapable of deciphering between pleasure and pain, especially shown in her masturbation.

Her mother chooses to ignore the abuse because she knows she will have to decide between her husband and daughter. Anney's distance causes Bone to endure this evil on her own. Initially, Bone cannot share her experience because Anney was dealing with enough of her own problems with the miscarriage. As time passed, she lost further faith with her mother's trust of Daddy Glen's distorted versions of the truth, she has no one to reaffirm how special she is, so she starts thinking things like "I was evil" (Allison 110). She even believes that she shares in the blame for her abuse, for she shows an apologetic attitude others (Allison 116).

Through her feeling of isolation, she learns to depend on herself, especially on her imagination. She imagines herself with strength enough to fight back against Daddy Glen with "hands... a match for his" (Allison 109). She also visualizes other people watching the struggle that she endures. She writes, "Yet it was only in my fantasies with people watching me that I was able to

defy Daddy Glen... in them I was very special. ... There was no heroism possible in the real beatings. There was just being beaten until I was covered with snot and misery. " (Allison 113)

Such thinking allows Bone to survive and provides assurance to the reader that she will endure. Fire is also a central theme displayed throughout the novel. Anger reappears throughout *Bastard Out of Carolina* in many forms and in many characters. The frequent references to fire are significant in symbolizing this intensity. Basically, the fire is rage consuming things around the characters. It plays a prominent role in three major examples: the masturbation scenes, the death of Shannon Pearl, and the destruction of the courthouse. In all three cases, the characters, Bone, Shannon, and Anney, respectively, are filled with fury.

Bone is an extremely disturbed and wrathful child who obviously has reason to be. She begins to masturbate at a young age to fantasies that consist of "struggling to get free while fire burned hotter and closer" (Allison 63). The fire symbolizes her anger toward Daddy Glen. She tries to free herself of him and her anger. Similar to Bone, Shannon Pearl is, too, an angry child. She has been born as an albino and is incessantly teased by almost every person that she meets. A deep wrath grows for all of those who ever hurt her. Shannon dies at a remarkably young age when she burns to death.

The fire that consumed her was the very fire of anger that was burning inside of her. Fire also destroyed the town courthouse in the novel. The courthouse held all of the town's files and records. Anney continuously went there to try to change the label on Bone's birth certificate that read "illegitimate". Time

after time, Anney was denied her requests to change the certificate. As she keeps failing, she gets angrier and hateful of the court. Soon after, the courthouse burns down to the ground by a mysterious fire. Anney's wrath was represented by fire, just as in the two prior cases.

Another important theme throughout the novel is the use of hands. Dorothy Allison uses the image of hands to show the power Daddy Glen holds over Bone and her family. They physically represent the abuse Bone suffers. From the beginning, Bone is wary of his hands, she notices " the restless way the fingers would flex and curl while he watched her" (Allison 62). These hands eventually became her tormentors as he physically and sexually abused her. At times, Bone separated his hands and the abuse they caused from Daddy Glen: " those hands moved before he could think" (Allison 70).

Her dreams were full of images of his hands, not him. She felt that his hands " were always reaching for me" and that " they would suddenly catch {her}" (Allison 105). Her concentration on and fear of Daddy Glen's hands led her to do exercises with her own hands so that they would be as strong as Daddy Glen's (Allison 109). Her hands never proved to be a match for his though. Instead, his hands, a part of the body that normally unites and heals people, symbolize how Daddy Glen tears apart Bone's family and nearly destroys her.

Another underlying theme in Bastard Out of Carolina is legitimacy. Upon Bone's conception, she begins a continuous battle to gain some sort of legitimacy. The word " bastard" in the title refers to Bone, and it becomes taboo in Anney's house. Anney fights to remove the illegitimate stamp from

the birth certificate of her daughter, but her efforts are fruitless. That stamped word seems to be the "Scarlet Letter" upon Anney and her child, for her society does not want her soon to forget the blackness of her deeds.

During her childhood, Bone senses her incompleteness without having had a true father to care for her. She envies Reese for the father she knows loved her. Bone believes that "Reese could choose something different for herself and be someone else altogether" (Allison 59). She has the freedom to embrace the life of the Boatwright's or abandon it with the thoughts of adopting the familial characteristics of her unknown other half (Allison 59). This emptiness created by her lack of a true father and magnified by the abuse motivates Bone to find something to fill the void.

She finds some fulfillment in religion, her friendship with Shannon Pearl, and even through serving her aunts, although, those things do not seem to completely fill her. Some resolution comes in the form of tangible legitimacy that is found on the blank birth certificate that Anney leaves for her. Even if the laws had not loosened, Bone's life seems to be quite legitimized through her extensive suffering. Anyone who has lived through such a difficult childhood should at least be given the assurance of being complete. Yet another aspect of the novel is portrayed through the concept of social class.

When addressing class in *Bastard Out of Carolina*, the first words that come to one's mind are "white trash". This novel portrays rural Southern white trash without glossing over the ugliness of poverty. Although poverty denies the characters of much that is taken for granted by many Americans, beneath their filth, Allison's poor whites burn with a genuine humanity that

portrays the Boatwright family as dirty, poor and uneducated drunks, although this stereotypical image, the genuine, loving, and caring humanity of white trash is revealed.

Identity is also an aspect that is displayed in the novel. Throughout the novel, Bone struggles with her own identity. The role she is forced to play by the people surrounding her includes a protective sister, an abused and frightened child, and a daughter fighting to win the affections of her mother. The last proves to be her most defining, it is the desire to experience her mother's love that fuels her thought and actions. Bone keeps silent about Daddy Glen's furious beatings and threats.

The sorrow and loneliness that she faces during this time determines whom her mother shows Bone that she cannot depend on anyone. They will leave her for another, even one who has caused more anguish than possibly tolerable. Bone decides, somewhat consciously, to become like her Aunt Raylene-strong and independent of others. She survives, as she has already survived the worst, in order to become a young woman without ties, dependence, or a strong sense of family.

Her identity is based on her inner strength and the desire for survival that helps her to stand up to the man who tries to destroy her. In conclusion, we saw how in writing *Bastard*, she also learned how to turn a poem into a novel, which created themes present in the novel and in order to have truly gotten an appreciation of *Bastard Out of Carolina*, by Dorothy Allison, one must have taken a close look at the main concepts: Abuse, Fire, Legitimacy,

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