

When vulnerability meets art

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Kehinde Wiley is a New York City-based portrait painter who is known for creating distinct, thought-provoking images of African Americans. One of his works, *Femme piquee par un serpent* (2008), showcases a man laying down with flowers falling around him.

We can compare his painting to Jesmyn Ward's novel *Salvage the Bones*: readers will notice that both creators highlight the theme of vulnerability in all genders. From both works, readers will see different subjects with their weak sides regardless of who they are. Men throughout the novel show their vulnerability. On page 179, Ward writes, " He moans and holds his bad hand." In chapter 9, we learn that Daddy wakes up sick. He took the pills for his injury with alcohol, so now he's throwing up.

Wincing through the pain of his injury, he tries to help his children prepare for Katrina's landfall: "' The hurricane,' Daddy says. ' You tell us what to do,' Randall says, and then asks me to get Daddy two pieces of bread for his stomach..." (181). This shows that even though Daddy wants to gird for the upcoming hurricane, his physical pain hinders him from doing so. In this scene, Daddy is not acting superior in the family anymore, but rather, his children are doing the chores for him. This is only one example of how a strong man shows his vulnerable side. Vulnerability is also evident in *Femme piquee par un serpent* (2008).

In art, uprightness represents superiority. On the contrary, the subject in Wiley's painting is in a reclining position; this suggests impotence and powerlessness. What makes the art interesting is that the subject is a man; men are perceived to be vigorous and robust, but the subject's recumbent

position is speaking otherwise. The subject's supine position demonstrates that men, despite society's expectations of them, can be vulnerable and defenseless. This is one way of how we see vulnerability in Wiley's painting. As we juxtapose themes between Ward's novel and Wiley's painting, both works highlight the theme of people giving up their strong front to surrender to their vulnerability.

Throughout the novel, we learn that Skeetah loves his dog, China, more than anything else; he is willing to risk his life for her well-being: "...Skeetah bends down to China, feels her from neck to jaw, caresses her face like he would kiss her..." (96). When the hurricane flood took China away, it is as if Skeetah lost a limb; without her, he is hollow: "I could hold him together, but he jerked so hard it felt like he was trying to shake himself apart..

. shudder into nothing" (238). In the same manner, the man in Wiley's painting seems to have surrendered from his masculinity. It is as if he is tired of putting up a masculine facade; he is allowing himself to rest from it by laying down, looking vulnerable. These observations demonstrate how strong people still have their weak sides. Regardless of how much they can endure, they eventually give in to rest.

This is one more way of how both creators develop the theme of vulnerability in all genders. From our analysis, we learn how Wiley and Ward develop the theme of genderless weakness in their works. Relevant in today's time by how we see society shame people who don't follow gender norms—for example, men who cry are looked down and even called gay—both creators advocate breaking social expectations in the society. Through their artworks,

they are embracing a bold stand; they are communicating to their audience on the importance of an open mind to the differences around us.