

Overcoming sexual wrongdoing: blindness v. salvage the bones



Oscar Wilde once said that “ Everything in the world is about sex except sex. Sex is about power.” In both *Blindness* by Jose Saramago and in *Salvage the Bones* by Jesmyn Ward, sex is used by the men in the story as a means to exert power over the women. In *Salvage the Bones*, the reader follows Esch, a 15-year-old girl who has undying yet unrequited love for the boy who impregnated her, Manny. To Manny, Esch is just a toy that he can throw away when he is finished. Although the circumstances may be different in *Blindness*, the group of hoodlums in the story use the mass rape of the women as a means to become the most powerful group in the asylum, and thus control their only life source, food. What is most notable about these two novels, however, is not the atrocities committed by the men, but the way in which the women respond to the outrageous sexual wrongdoings done unto them. In both *Blindness* and *Salvage the Bones* there are male characters who take advantage of the women so as to exert power over them. However, in both stories there also comes a point when the women have had enough, and look inward to find a way to stop the inhumane way in which they are being treated, resulting in lasting changes for their characters.

In the case of *Salvage the Bones*, Esch’s complicated relationship with Manny reaches its limit in the bathroom at Randall’s basketball game, when finally she takes herself back from him. For the entirety of the novel, Esch describes Manny as “ light” and “ beautiful,” highlighting her intense love for him. She is so infatuated with him that it is as if he owns her, her thoughts, and her body, and he is unafraid to take full advantage. Although Manny has a girlfriend, he continuously turns to Esch for sexual favors, but never so

much as kisses her in return. He refuses any sort of relationship with Esch that is more than physical, even though what she longs for most is his love. The turning point in Esch and Manny's relationship is when Manny comes into the bathroom after Esch, seeking sex at Randall's basketball game. Rather than being submissive as she usually is and letting Manny have his way with her, she takes more control. She begins their encounter by narrating, " He unzips his pants, and I grab his dick hard enough to hurt. I want it to hurt" (Ward, 145). Although she continues to have sex with him, she is intent on being seen this time, saying, " He will look at me. He snorts, puts his head down into my shoulder. I pull hard, and my hands slide along his face. I grab again. He will look at me" (Ward, 146). When he finally looks at her for the first time while they are having sex, she describes him very differently than she had in the past, no longer describing his sun-like features, but by saying "...and his eyes are so black they are all black, and they are a night without stars" (Ward, 146). This scene ends horribly for Esch, with Manny throwing her on the floor after figuring out that she is pregnant; however, after this moment of exerting power of her own, Esch's attitude towards Manny is changed.

In the rest of the novel after the bathroom scene, there is change in the way that Esch interacts with Manny. In a notable scene, Esch begins to attack Manny: " I am slapping him, over and over, my hands a flurry, a black blur. His face is hot and stinging as boiling water. ' Hey! Hey!' Manny yells. He blocks what he can with his elbows and forearms, but still I snake through. I slap so hard my hands hurt" (Ward, 203), and she then exclaims, " I love you!" (Ward, 203) but quickly amends her statement, screaming, " I loved

you!” (Ward, 203). In this moment, Esch admits that she is no longer in love with Manny. Despite bearing his child, she comes to the realization that she no longer needs, or even wants, him in her life. The bathroom scene is the breaking point for Esch. It is the moment that allows her to declare that her love for Manny is over, thus freeing herself from his abusive tendencies, and taking herself back from him.

There are clear situational differences between *Salvage the Bones* and *Blindness*; however, the doctor's wife has a moment that recalls Esch's, in which she takes responsibility for ending her abuse. Although the doctor's wife has no personal feelings towards her abusers, as Esch has for Manny, she is similarly objectified by them. The doctor's wife and Esch are no more than objects of pleasure and power to their abusers. After her own ward's mass rape, the doctor's wife heard the hoodlums' call for more women. The feeling of terror of the new women is described by the narrator as such: “What terrified them was not so much the rape, but the orgy, the shame, the anticipation of the terrible night ahead, fifteen women sprawled on the beds and on the floor, the men going from one to the other snorting like pigs...” (Saramago, 187). This very thought of intense shame is similar to Esch's feelings towards Manny when he discarded her on the bathroom floor in the gym. Shame, in part, also motivated the doctor's wife to put an end to the horrors that came along with the hoodlums' reign. After the killing the hoodlums' leader with a pair of scissors, she and the doctor talk: “What happened, the doctor asked, they said a man was killed, Yes I killed him, Why, Someone had to do it, and there was no one else, And now, Now we're free, they know what awaits them if they ever try to abuse us again”

(Saramago, 193). It is clear that, like Esch, the doctor's wife had reached her breaking point, and was not willing to take the abuse any longer. As a result, she takes action to save herself, and the rest of the women in the asylum, freeing them from future shame and abuse.

Like Esch, the doctor's wife experienced a positive change after standing up to her abusers. Soon after killing the leader of the hoodlums, the doctor's wife announces, "...and don't bother asking me how I know who they are, the answer is simple, I can see" (Saramago, 210). From this moment on, the doctor's wife's role changes in the novel. She no longer hides her sight in fear of becoming a slave to those around her, but uses it to help others. She becomes a fearless guide, as she leads the blind out of the asylum, and helps her group to survive until the white blindness is over. In the moment in which the doctor's wife stands up to take herself, and her humanity, back from her abusers, she becomes a more confident character. Both Esch and the doctor's wife are willing to face their fears in the aftermath of their abuse, the doctor's wife in exposing her sightedness to the asylum, and Esch in letting go of her love for Manny.

In both novels, female characters are subjected to terrible sexual wrongdoings by the men around them, but their resilience is remarkable. After excessive abuse, both women are able to stand up to their abusers and take their humanity back. Although in different forms, there is a singular moment for both the doctor's wife and Esch that convinces them that they must assert themselves in order to change their circumstances. Neither Esch nor the doctor's wife is superhuman, or has any powers that exceed those of everyday person, making their stories even the more inspiring. Strong <https://assignbuster.com/overcoming-sexual-wrongdoing-blindness-v-salvage-the-bones/>

female characters are all too scarce in novels, but what is even more scarce is finding stories that are unafraid to confront horrors of sexual abuse, and explore the difficulties of overcoming it. Saramago and Ward are both were unafraid to explore this uncharted terrain, as well as unafraid to create strong female characters that are able to overcome their terrible circumstances.