

The absence of a
mother in salvage the
bones



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Jesmyn Ward's *Salvage the Bones* depicts the Batiste family, a poor, black family in southern Mississippi living in a crater in the earth called "The Pit." Plagued with an invading red tint—similar to that of hell—and disarranged structure, The Pit is reflective of the Batiste family's life: dysfunctional and deplorable. The mother of the family is not physically present, yet the father of the family, though physically present, offers no parental guidance to the children. In any case, the family's true issue is the absence of a mother figure. Throughout the novel Ward takes a psychological approach to present symbols for the different types of mothers in the world. In her novel *Salvage the Bones*, Jesmyn Ward offers insight on the negative effects an absent mother places on families.

Ward utilizes different characters and animals in her novel to demonstrate that without a mother, family relationships are tarnished and, ultimately, ruined. A study conducted by Qingbo Xu, a doctor of gender studies at The University of Helsinki found that children with an absent mother "s[a]nk into [a] nonchalant and avoidant state [due to] anxiety, terror, rage, or desolation due to their mothers' disappearance (Xu 150)." Xu also claims that motherhood is not a natural instinct. He claims that, although a woman's body undergoes many physical changes during pregnancy, these "do not automatically induce motherly devotion and nurturing behaviours (Xu 157)." First, she employs the sole daughter of the Batiste family, fifteen year old pregnant Esch, to symbolize mothers who are unsure of how exactly to be a proper mother. Without the guidance and advice from a mother, Esch must attempt to understand motherhood on her own through observing the characteristics of mother figures around her. Then she must make a decision

as to whether or not these characteristics are feasible for her own child with no example of which are best to choose. Likewise, new mothers observe, read books, and research on how to properly take care of their first child. China, the Batiste's dog, is another example of the aggressive type of mother. This type of mother, though protective and caring toward her children, is quick to anger and disciplines harshly. This type of mother is exemplified when mothers are stressed or sick and their children bother them. The mother gets angry and aggressive toward the child, although they do still care for and love the child. However, without this type of mother, children do not experience both a disciplinarian and a comforter in a parental figure.

The chickens on the Batiste farm are yet another symbol for motherhood. These represent the over-protective mother. The chickens attempt to hide their eggs, to keep them from the outside elements. However, Esch and her family still find them and cook them up when they feel like it no matter how well the chickens have hidden them. This is representative of the mother who attempt to shield their children from the harmful and/or dangerous situations in life. No matter how hard they try, they cannot tuck their children away from the experiences of life. This symbolizes the sense of duty in mothers to protect their children at all times. Without this type of mother, children are deprived of the true parental guidance needed to become a successful and productive adult. Hurricane Katrina is another object that represents the concept of motherhood. The hurricane is described as a nasty monster and “snake that has come to eat and play” (Ward 227). But, in the end, the storm ended up being the very thing that brought the Batiste family

together, the thing that forced them to align with each other as a family as they should have been doing in their time of trial. This is symbolic of the mothers that are seen as mean or unfit in the eyes of their children and families. Ward, with this instance, argues that all mothers, no matter the type, possess a characteristic that is unity. Without a mother in the home, families fall apart, as exemplified by the Batiste children's expedited maturity and their attitudes towards their father. Ward insists that a mother acts as a liaison of family affairs. Her job is to keep the family in one piece and mediate disagreements, either with love, care, and tender affection or with aggression, violence, and stern discipline.

Throughout the novel, Ward presents readers with evidence that mothers must be physically present in order to have any real effect on children.

Throughout the novel, Esch recollects memories of her mother whenever she needs advice or has a problem she does not know how to solve. However, no matter how much she remembers how beautiful and strong her mother once was, she cannot attain these characteristics without the aid of her mother's presence and influence. This comes to fruition early in the novel when we learn that Esch "does not consider herself pretty (Locke 16)." Although she resembles her mother closely, Esch has a low self-image because she lacks the influence of a confident woman in her life. It is for this reason that Esch allows the boys in The Pit to have sex with her against her own wishes.

Because all those close to her are males, Esch was robbed of the opportunity to learn about womanhood and lessons on how to possess self-confidence and to respect herself as a woman. She began having sexual intercourse at the young age of twelve, but Locke suggests, "Who was there for her to

learn about sex and its consequences...? (Locke 16).” Her mother being there for a section of her life is, according to Locke, not an acceptable amount of mothering to produce a knowledgeable, competent woman. Esch’s memories of her mother were simply not enough to sufficiently instruct her on how to be a woman. Also, Randall, the oldest Batiste son, is another victim of the absent mother. We learn early on in the novel that Randall dreams of becoming a college basketball player. However, he is burdened with the task of being caretaker of the youngest Batiste, Junior. Randall is hindered from carrying out his dreams because he must set them aside to take care of his family, a duty innately prescribed to mothers. In this way, the physical absence of a mother has ruined a child’s chance at a dream, his chance at a decent life. The last of the novel’s three epigraphs reinforces the value of this concept with the dialogue of “ I said what you wanna be? She said, ‘ Alive.’” (Outkast) This parallels to how Esch feels as though she was misfortunate in the fact that she only got to experience the love of a mother for a short time in her life. She is hopeful that she does not deprive her child of the same love and affection. So, Esch’s dream is simply this: be alive and physically present for her child’s life, a feat unaccomplished by her own mother. Not once was a fond memory of her father mentioned in the novel. This shows that Esch’s father will never offer her the things her mother will. Her mother was her only chance at love, understanding, and connection. Esch is left alone to Salvage the Bones of what is left of her mother’s memory in order to piece together the perplexing puzzle of womanhood.

Not only do children sans a mother not receive the proper guidance provided by her, but they also experience expedited maturity. When their mother died, the children's father slipped into an alcoholic depression that rendered him useless as a parental figure. Therefore, Esch and her brothers were left to fend for themselves. They began to help each other steal, they took care of their father, and they took care of each other. The Batiste children had no choice but to grow up way too quickly to ensure survival. When Skeetah cuts himself stealing from the white family's barn and has a gash across his stomach, he tells no one and treats his own wounds. The Batistes do not receive the medical attention, which a mother would demand due to their "tend[ency] to be more invested in their children than fathers (Kestler, Paulins 315)", from their father. A study conducted in 2015 showed that "children of single father are less likely to have a routine place to receive medical care (Krueger, Jutte, Franzini, Elo, Hayward 6). None of the children are even of 18 yet, however they all use profanity freely and often. The children also leave the house without alerting their father, underscoring the incompetence of fathers to raise children. Even the youngest child, Junior, is not shielded from this. Though he does not curse, he is exposed to adult concepts and adult situations throughout the book that his siblings attempt to screen him from, but he ends up undergoing anyway. For instance, when Junior shows curiosity at where his siblings are going after one of Skeetah's puppies gets Parvo, Esch replied with, "He doesn't need to know that the puppy is dying. He doesn't need to know that young go, too (Ward 42)." In this way, Esch does show characteristics of a mother toward Junior, in that she attempts to shield him from the world's corruption.

The epigraph from Gloria Fuertes describes Junior and the Batiste children perfectly when it states, “ For though I am small, I know many things, And my body is an endless eye Through which, unfortunately, I see everything. (Fuertes).” Though this quote describes all the Batiste children, Junior is the most curious with an “ endless eye.” He always wants to know what his siblings are up to and how he can get involved in adult situations. While Esch’s attempt at showing mother-like qualities is a valiant effort, though, her inability to preserve Junior’s innocence underscores the necessity of the authentic mother figure in the home. The most obvious example of hastened development is seen in fifteen year old Esch’s pregnancy. When she finds out she’s pregnant, Esch shows shock, yet naïveté. She does not understand the true consequences and responsibility that accompany her situation. A study done in 2013 found that “ women’s earnings are likely to be lower preceding a birth (Goldsceider, Scott, Lilja, Tinkew 1634).” Esch’s family is already impoverished, with no chance of escalation. Yet, her childish mind thwarts her from realizing that another child would only exacerbate her desolate situation. It has been supported in a scientific study that single mother homes experience larger limiting conditions than cohabitating and married homes (Ziol-Guest, Dunifon 432). Esch and her father and brothers already occupy a space unfit for living, eat dry noodles, and steal to gain the rest of their belongings. Esch does not recognize the financial and emotional strain that a baby brings because she has not witnessed motherhood enough. This is the largest consequence of Esch’s lack of a mother because not only does it affect her, but it also affects the life of her child, whom has done nothing to deserve the life it will be brought into.

Ward implies through text that without the stern hand of a mother, families are ruined. Hurricane Katrina is the mother that uses a stern hand to discipline her family and, in turn, strengthens the bonds between its members. Esch explicitly states, “ She left us to learn to crawl. She left us to salvage (Ward 225).” The “ she” Esch refers to is Katrina. Throughout the novel, the storm builds up as long as the family is undergoing struggles and conflict. All at once, though, the storm becomes the family’s worse nightmare when it comes and ravages the family’s home and sweeps away China in its watery jaws. During the storm, the family reveals their secrets to each other and reveals their feelings to each other. Afterwards, the family is more united and considerate of one another because they realize that their family, however dysfunctional, is a family indeed, and each of its members deserves respect. China being hauled away by the ravenous storm was an integral component of the family’s unity afterwards. This served as a punishment for the family bonds being so severely severed. This incident parallels to China’s final dog fight after Rico had been taunting and bullying Skeetah. Manny asserts, “ Take a lot out of an animal to nurse and nurture like that. Price of being a female (Ward 96).” Although China was not at full health, she fought a strong, male dog in order to gain retribution for Skeetah, whom was going to end up victimized in the fight. Rico had been belittling China because of her gender and also had a physical altercation with Skeetah, with whom China shared a special relationship. As punishment, China took the only thing Rico had to be proud of, his dog Kilo’s streak of winning his dog fights. China’s “ jaw...snapped shut around the mouse of Kilo’s neck... [and she] takes away part of Kilo’s throat (Ward 176).” China was forced to inflict this ghastly punishment on Kilo to vindicate not her own,

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but her beloved Skeetah's honor. She did this regardless of her current state of health because she was fed up. Likewise, Esch lost her temper after she told Manny that he was the father of her unborn child and he denied it. She began "slapping him, over and over, [her] hands in a flurry, a black blur... [she drew] blood (Ward 204)." This was his punishment for betraying her love in this extreme manner. Esch had gotten fed up with Manny's deception towards her, so she had to punish him by taking away something that made him feel arrogant: the fact that he had been having sex with Esch and still had no attachment to her. All these examples are parallel to mothers who hold their tempers for as long as they can.

Whenever things get too hectic, though, mothers must punish, usually by taking away something that their children love. Without this tough love, however, children never realize what it means to appreciate things, or what it means to actually be chastised. If not chastised for wrongdoings, children develop believing that all their actions are proper, and thus become ignorant citizens. The Batiste family witnessed this first-hand when they had no mother to chastise them about how they were treating each other and others. No mother was there to tell Esch that sex is for adults. No mother was there to tell Randall that he should try to raise his own money for basketball camp. No mother was there to tell Skeetah that he should control his temper. No mother was there to tell all the children that they should be more kind to their father because he is undergoing a trying time in life. No mother was there to tell the father that drinking is not the way to solve his problems, and that he should take better care of his children. This tactic of harsh punishment is exactly the tactic used by the mother symbols in

Salvage the Bones. This tactic is also noted in mythology and stories such as Euripides's *Medea*. In the story, Medea's husband Jason dishonors their marriage when he has an affair with the princess of the kingdom. In response, Medea has the things that Jason loves the most, his children, kill the thing that he is soon to marry, the princess. Then, she makes the punishment even more severe by murdering her own children in order to gain retribution for them from her husband. This courageous act shows the lengths to which mothers will go to gain retribution for their families, even if it means committing acts considered immoral.

Not only does this show mothers' affinity for effective, harsh punishment, it exposes another element of mothers: intense anger. For this reason, most hurricanes are named after women, such as "Camille, Elena, Agnes, Gloria, Isabel, Katrina, Rita, Wilma, and Sandy (Locke 13)." Hurricanes are aggressive in nature, as are women and mothers. However, mothers can be described perfectly by Deuteronomy 32: 29. It reads, "I kill and I make alive, I wound and I heal, neither is there any can deliver out of my hand (Deut. 32: 29)." This expresses mothers as nurturer and disciplinarian. They rule with a stern hand, but also love unconditionally; their aggression stems from their love. However, when mothers are angry, no one can escape their wrath. Just as mothers possess fury, mothers can be compared to mythological Furies also. These were the mythological creatures assigned the task of punishment. They "punished criminals and were impossible to look upon because of their appearance (Locke 12)." Likewise, mothers punish the "criminals" in their families, their children. Esch's mother, however, was not impossible to look upon because of her appearance. Instead she was

because she was passed on. However, the Furies proved an integral part of the mythological realm. Without them, criminals would run amuck and no justice would be served. This is the same concept as the mothers' role in the family: a police force.

The absence of a mother figure in Jesmyn Ward's *Salvage the Bones* proves to be the underlying root of all the Batiste family troubles. When the mother of Hurricane Katrina hits, however, the family unity is tested and tried. It is this "mother" that brings the family back together, creating a stronger sense of family unity in the characters. With this, Ward reveals the importance of a physical and authentic mother in the home. Not only are mothers nurturers and comforters, but they are also police and can take on the paternal role of disciplinarian. Mothers are truly man's greatest asset.

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