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Motherless Motherhood

Jesmyn Ward looks at motherhood and everything that comes with it in "Salvage the Bones" by forcing it on Esch, a young girl with no real role model or mentor to teach her what it means to be a mother. Esch has to learn what being a mother means and looks like by salvaging meaning from her few memories of her mom, made-up stories, and the one mother in her life: her brother's pitbull. Esch has drawn some valuable lessons from these sources, although she still considers herself missing something. By the end, Esch learns that the void might be natural and realizes that no matter her confusion, she will have family and friends there to make it all easier.

Esch works as the perfect device for Ward to investigate motherhood because she is, in many ways, a blank slate. Her mother died before Esch had much time to develop memories of her, and between her family and friends, Esch is surrounded by men. The lack of female role models for Esch to look to and an emotionally distant father force Esch to look outward for the traditional unconditional love and acceptance often found in parents, especially mothers. Esch develops a crush on Manny, her older brother's friend, and the two start a relationship; unfortunately, their relationship quickly becomes abusive due to the age difference. It is clear Esch is being used, but to her, the physical relationship is a sign of love and acceptance. So, when Esch gets impregnated by Manny, she realizes she has to not only grow up without a mother but also learn how to be one herself.

One of the first places Esch looks to for the meaning of motherhood is her brother's dog, China, who has recently given birth to a litter of puppies. China is also a fighting dog who participates in fights with other pit bulls; this creates a conflict in Esch's understanding. China is the most respected dog in their local fighting ring because she is vicious and aggressive. However, this intensity leads to her killing one of her puppies when it tries to eat her food. Esch sees this happen and has to decide how to interpret it. She respects and admires China for her strength and status; Esch wishes she possessed the same confidence, so she thinks learning from China could be helpful. However, Esch also recognizes the sadness in the puppies' death, and so she must reckon with and balance the inherent suffering that comes with survival and the love and care a mother owes her child. Esch would benefit from being more confident and self-assured, and seeing that in China inspires her. This admiration results in Esch starting to see herself in China, so at the end of the book, when China gets lost in the flood she has a strong response: she imagines the future as she and Skeetah sit by the pit, waiting for China, thinking "He will look into the future and see her emerge into the circle of his fire… China. She will return, standing tall and straight… China will bark and call me sister… She will know that I am a mother." (258) Esch has to imagine China surviving the flood because if China can't then she cannot. If the only mother and strongest female in Esch's life can't survive the worst of life, what does that mean for Esch? She needs this outcome to be a reality. China teaches Esch the passion and intensity of motherhood; to love and raise another, you must first believe in and love yourself, but motherhood is also knowing when to hold back and be soft.

Another source Esch looks to for guidance in her quest to understand motherhood is Greek mythology, particularly the story of Medea. Medea's story is filled with betrayal and rage, which resonates with Esch, especially after Manny's rejection upon learning of her pregnancy. Medea, who sacrificed everything for her husband, only to be cheated on, responds with an act of vengeance by killing their children and his mistress. This story of extreme love turned into destructive fury is relatable for Esch. She often identifies with Medea's feelings of betrayal and anger, particularly towards Manny and the other men in her life. Esch sees much of herself in Medea: strength, vulnerability, and the complex feelings and emotions surrounding motherhood. Medea's story for Esch, like China's, is not simple; it isn't one of pure love and goodness; it reflects the realities of how difficult and emotional motherhood is, how Esch will have to deal with hardship, but that she has the strength to make it through.

Throughout the book, Esch tries to understand how to be a mother, how she will manage to raise a child when she hardly remembers being raised herself, and how she can love a kid when she struggles to love herself. The realization Esch comes to in the end is that while she does need to learn what being a mother means to her, she is also putting too much pressure on herself. Few parents genuinely know what it means to raise another human before they actually do it; that's why they surround themselves with family and friends who can support them and help them learn. Big Henry teaches this to Esch, telling her, "This baby got plenty of daddies" (255). Esch's quest is admirable, salvaging motherhood from different parts of her life, but it is not one she has to go on alone.