The Man Who Was Almost a Man Study Guide

The Man Who Was Almost a Man by Richard Wright

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Contents

The Man Who Was Almost a Man Study Guide....1

Contents....2

Introduction....3

Author Biography....4

Plot Summary....5

Detailed Summary & Analysis....7

Characters....11

Themes....13

Style....15

Historical Context....17

Critical Overview....19

Criticism....21

Critical Essay #1....22

Critical Essay #2....26

Critical Essay #3....31

Adaptations....36

Topics for Further Study....37

Compare and Contrast....38

What Do I Read Next?....39

Further Study....40

Bibliography....41

Copyright Information....42

Introduction

In the mid-1930s Richard Wright drafted an early version of "The Man Who Was Almost a Man" as a chapter in a novel about the childhood and adolescence of a black boxer entitled *Tarbaby's Dawn*. Wright never finished the novel, but in 1940 the story appeared in *Harper's Bazaar* under the title "Almos' a Man."

In this period Wright was at the height of his powers, publishing his three major works, *Uncle Tom's Children, Native Son,* and *Black Boy* between 1938 and 1945. With *Native Son* he became the first African-American author to write a bestseller and gained an international reputation for his exploration of racial issues and bold, realistic style.

The final version of "The Man Who Was Almost a Man" was not published until 1960—the year of Wright's death—in a collection of short stories entitled *Eight Men*. While it is sometimes compared unfavorably to his early fiction, many critics praised the collection for offering a sensitive look at racial oppression.

"The Man Who Was Almost a Man" chronicles the story of Dave, a young, African-American farm laborer struggling to assert his identity in the restrictive racist atmosphere of the rural South. Longing for a symbol of power and masculinity, Dave fantasizes that owning a gun will win him the respect he craves. After he gets a gun, he learns that he needs more than a gun to earn respect.

Author Biography

Wright was born on September 4, 1908, near Natchez, Mississippi. His father, an illiterate farm laborer, left the family when Wright was six. He was raised by his mother, a well-educated schoolteacher. Wright had a difficult childhood, as his mother was seriously ill; Wright and his younger brother went to live with her parents in Jackson, Mississippi, where he came under the strong influence of his grandmother's strict Seventh Day Adventism.

At the age of nineteen, Wright moved to Chicago. He became involved with a leftist literary group known as the John Reed Club and joined the Communist Party. He worked as a journalist for several leftist newspapers and published essays on Marxism and Black Nationalism as well as short stories and poetry. During this period he wrote an early version of "The Man Who Was Almost a Man" as part of an unfinished novel.

In 1938, after moving to New York, he published his first collection of short stories entitled *Uncle Tom's Children* . The following year he was awarded a Guggenheim grant to finish his first novel, *Native Son,* which became the first bestseller written by an African American. His autobiography, *Black Boy,* appeared in 1945 and solidified his reputation as a courageous African-American voice.

He broke with the Communist Party in 1944 and moved to France, where he lived in voluntary exile for the rest of his life. He associated with many prominent writers and intellectuals and became an outspoken critic of colonialism. He continued to publish both fiction and nonfiction books, but none had the success of his major early works. Toward the end of his life, Wright was plagued by financial and health problems. He died in Paris at age 52.

Plot Summary

The story opens as Dave, the seventeen-year-old protagonist, heads home from a day working in the fields. He fantasizes about buying a gun and knows that if he had a gun his fellow workers would no longer treat him like a boy.

He goes into the local store and asks to look at catalogues. The proprietor, Joe, questions him about what he wants to buy and shows him an old pistol he wants to sell. Dave is excited that Joe is only asking two dollars for the gun and resolves to convince his mother to let him buy it.

He brings home the catalogue and looks at it during dinner. His parents question him about it but he waits until after dinner. When his father has left the room, he asks his mother for the money he has been saving.

Dave's mother first dismisses Dave's request, calling him a fool; but when Dave suggests that he could buy the gun for his father, she reconsiders. She gives him the money and tells him to bring the gun straight to her. He buys the gun, but doesn't go home right away. Instead he plays with the gun until he knows everyone has gone to sleep. Then he leaves for work early, taking the gun with him.

His boss, Mr. Hawkins, questions Dave about why he is early and then sends him to a field to start plowing. In the field he fires the gun and its strong recoil causes him to drop it. He looks up to see Jenny, the mule pulling the plow, running across the field. When he catches up with her he sees that she is bleeding. He tries to block the bullet hole with dirt, but Jenny bleeds to death. In a panic, he buries the gun.

At the end of the day, a group of people has gathered to watch two of Hawkins' workers bury the mule. Dave's parents are among them. When Hawkins questions Dave about what happened, Dave tells what he knows is an unconvincing lie— that Jenny stabbed herself to death on the point of the plow. Dave's mother tells him to tell the truth and asks him where the gun is. His father becomes angry and shakes him and Dave starts to cry. Hawkins promises not to hurt him and Dave sobbingly confesses.

The crowd laughs at him. Hawkins tells him that he has just bought a dead mule and says that he can pay off the debt by working for him for twenty- five months. Dave's father tells him to find the gun and sell it back to Joe in order to make his first payment to Hawkins and then promises to beat him when they get home.

That night Dave continues to think about firing the gun. He wants to fire it one more time, so he sneaks out in the night and retrieves the gun from where he buried it. He fires it several times and uses up the bullets. When he passes Hawkins' house on the way home he fantasizes about firing at it in order to scare Hawkins and to repair his injured sense of masculinity.

As he heads home on the same road where the story opens, he thinks despairingly about working for two years to pay off his mistake. Just then he hears the sound of a train approaching. He jumps aboard the train, heading for "somewhere where he could be a man."

Detailed Summary & Analysis

Summary

Dave heads home after working in the fields. Other men are still at work in the fields, but Dave sees no sense in stopping to talk to them. Tired of being talked down to like a child, he thinks that he will get a gun one day and start shooting into the fields so that they will start talking to him like a man.

On his way home, Dave stops in Joe's store. He feels sure of himself as he enters the store, but this quickly changes as Joe enters from the back. Joe is a large man who greets Dave energetically. Joe asks what he can do for Dave, and Dave replies that he does not want to buy anything, but that he would like to look at the catalogue. Joe hands him the catalogue and Dave asks if he can take it home with him. He promises to bring it back the next day after he has finished with his work in the fields. Joe asks if he wants to buy something and if Dave's mother is letting Dave have his money from work. Dave tells him that he is getting to be a man so he is entitled to his money. Joe laughs and asks what Dave plans on buying.

Dave is shy about answering and he makes Joe promise that he will not tell anyone about what he wants to buy. Joe promises and Dave tells him that he wants to buy a gun. Joe thinks Dave is too young and does not need a gun, but Dave makes his case for being old enough to have one. Dave asks for the catalogue again and Joe relents and gets it from the back room.

When Joe returns with the catalogue he makes Dave promise to return it because it is the only one he has. Dave promises and Joe offers to sell Dave one of his own guns. He tells him that the gun is an old, left-handed pistol, but it is loaded and will shoot. He offers to sell it to Dave for two dollars. Dave agrees to buy it and says he will be back for it after he is paid.

Dave goes home and his mother asks where he has been. He tells her that he was caught up talking with the boys after work. Dave sits down at the kitchen table with the catalogue and his mother sends him out to wash up before dinner. She spots the catalogue and asks about it. Dave tells her that he got it from Joe and his mother tells him that they should keep it in the outhouse. He snatches the catalogue from her defensively and informs her that he has to take it back to Joe. Dave goes outside to wash-up with the book in tow.

Back inside, Dave sits down and looks through the book. His father enters and asks what he has. Dave responds simply that it is just a catalogue. When Dave finds the pages with the guns listed his eyes light up and he exclaims, "Here they is!" (page 409). He becomes self-conscious and sees that his father is watching him. He slides the catalogue onto his lap and the family sits down to the blessing and dinner.

Dave continues to look through the catalogue while eating. Finally, his father tells him to stop and just eat his dinner. He asks how Dave gets along with Hawkins, Dave's employer. Dave tells him that he plows more than anyone else does and they get along fine.

After dinner, Dave's father and brother leave the kitchen and Dave remains at the table. He continues looking at the catalogue. His mother washes the dishes from dinner and Dave asks her if Hawkins gave her the money for his work. She tells him yes, but that she is not going to let him waste the money. Instead, she is keeping the money for him so that he will have new clothes for school in the coming winter. He takes the catalogue to her and says how much he would like a gun. She asks if he has gone crazy and tells him that he is not going to buy a gun.

Dave tries to plead his case by stating that his father does not have a gun, so he should get a gun for the house. He puts his arm around his mother and tells her how hard he has been working and that all he wants is two dollars to buy the gun. His mother tells him that he has no need for a gun because he is just a boy. Additionally, his father would have a fit if he knew that she gave Dave the money to buy it.

He tells her that he will hide the gun from his father. She starts to put away the dishes from dinner as he explains about Joe offering to sell him a gun. Finally, she relents and takes two dollars from the roll of money in her stocking. She gives him the money on the condition that Dave brings the gun back to her and that the gun will be for his father. Dave takes off running to buy the gun.

The next morning, Dave reaches under his pillow and feels the gun. He holds the gun, feeling how heavy it is. He did not come home after purchasing the gun as he told his mother he would. He aimed the gun at imaginary targets, but did not fire the gun because he did not know how. So that he would not have to give the gun to his mother, he waited to come home after everyone was in bed. His mother came into his room in the middle of the night and demanded the gun, but he told her that it was hidden outside and he would bring it to her in the morning.

He gets out of bed and secures the loaded gun to his thigh with a strip of flannel. He sneaks out before sunrise and heads for Hawkins' plantation. Hawkins sees him and asks why Dave arrived so early. Dave tells him he was up early so he came down to get Jenny, the mule, and take her into the fields. Hawkins tells him to plow a stretch down by the woods and Dave agrees.

Dave hitches Jenny to the plow and heads down towards the woods. He plows two rows and then stops and unties the gun from his thigh. He tells Jenny not to run off when he fires the gun. She stands with her head down as he wanders off about twenty feet. He fires the gun, Jenny takes off and Dave drops to his knees, his hand numb.

He goes after the mule and sees that Jenny is bleeding. He panics when he sees the bullet hole in Jenny's side; he was not aiming at the mule. Jenny loses a lot of blood and

then slumps over dead. He tells Hawkins that Jenny got spooked and fell on the plow and that is how she died.

At sunset, two of Hawkins' men dig a hole to bury Jenny. Dave watches and other people gather to look at the dead mule. Hawkins cannot figure out how it happened and Dave's family shows up. His mother asks where Dave is. She finds him and pulls him aside. She asks what he has done. He tells her nothing but his father insists that he tell them.

Dave explains about bringing Jenny down to plow and that she started acting strangely. She twisted around, started kicking and stuck herself on the plow. He tells him there was not anything he could do because she died quickly.

His mother insists that Dave tell the truth. Hawkins still cannot figure how it happened and one man says that it looks like Jenny has a bullet wound in her side. Dave's mother asks what Dave did with the gun. Hawkins asks about Dave having a gun; Dave looks at Jenny and starts to cry. His mother asks if he shot the mule. Dave gives in and tells them that he did not mean to shoot the mule, and that it was an accident.

Dave's father asks where Dave got a gun and Dave tells him that he got it from Joe. Hawkins walks up to Dave and starts laughing. He tells him "looks like you have bought you a mule, Dave" (page 415). The entire crowd starts laughing about Dave buying a dead mule. Hawkins tells Dave that he wants fifty dollars for the mule.

Dave's father threatens to beat Dave unless he tells him where the gun is. Dave confesses that he threw it in the creek. His father says that first thing in the morning they will go down and get the gun out of the creek. He tells Dave to take the gun back to Joe and give the two dollars to Hawkins to start paying on the mule. He also says that he is going to beat Dave for what has happened. As Dave walks away, he hears people laughing and it makes him angry.

That night, Dave has trouble sleeping. He is upset by the people who laughed at him and the prospect of his father beating him. He shudders at remembering other beatings. He thinks that everyone treats him like a mule because all he does is work and then he is beaten.

He remembers firing the gun and decides he wants to fire it again. He gets out of bed and sneaks out of the house. He runs to the woods and looks for the spot where he actually buried the gun. He digs up the gun and starts firing the gun. He fires it until the gun is empty. He puts the gun in his pocket and heads through the field toward Hawkins' plantation. He gets to the ridge and thinks that, if he had one more bullet, he would fire it at Hawkins' house. He hears a train coming in the distance. He thinks about paying Hawkins' for the mule and figures it will take him almost two years to do so. He hops the train, checks to make sure the gun is still in his pocket, and leaves town.

Analysis

"The Man Who Was Almost a Man" is a third person narrative story that centers on Dave, a seventeen-year-old man who believes that he is old enough to have his own gun. However, this is not the case. The fact that Dave repeatedly tells his family and others that he is old enough to be considered a man foreshadows how Dave's immaturity will affect him drastically. He tries to convince people that he is a man, yet when he has the opportunity to illustrate this, he fails and acts like a child. This happens both in the way Dave hides the gun from his mother and when he lies to Hawkins about how Jenny died.

Dave's immaturity shows in the manner in which he manipulates his parents. He knows that his father will not allow him to purchase a gun, so he waits until after dinner to talk to his mother about it. She is reluctant to give in, but ultimately does. When Dave finally gets the gun, he defies his mother's orders to bring the gun directly to her for safekeeping. Instead, he stays out late and sneaks in. When he returns after everyone has gone to bed, he deliberately lies to his mother about the gun's whereabouts. Ultimately, Dave is quite childish in how he handles the gun.

After Jenny is shot and killed, Dave covers up the accident as a child would. He concocts a story about Jenny spooking and falling on the plow. It is evident that there is a bullet hole in Jenny's side, so Dave's story falls apart quickly. Once he is at home and realizes that he must take responsibility for his actions, he, instead of facing up to what he has done, runs away.

The gun is symbolic of Dave's manhood. If he is old enough to have a gun, then surely he must be a man. Yet, when Dave obtains the gun, he cannot control it. He does not know how to fire the gun, and when he finally does fire the gun, it knocks him to the ground and kills Jenny. This incident should teach Dave the responsibility that comes with being an adult, but when he encounters responsibility, he runs away like a child.

Much of Dave's thoughts and all of the dialogue are written phonetically, affecting the sound of regional speech. This is used effectively as it is combined with Standard American English throughout the narration.

Characters

Jim Hawkins

Jim Hawkins owns the large plantation where Dave works as a farm laborer. Dave is working on Hawkins's farm for the summer in order to save money for school. When Dave accidentally shoots the mule, Hawkins charges Dave fifty dollars— equal to two years labor—for the dead mule.

At the end of the story Dave longs to shoot at Hawkins's big house in order to scare him and gain a sense of power in relation to Hawkins, but he has already used up his bullets. As a wealthy white man, Hawkins represents all of the power that Dave lacks.

Joe

Joe is a white merchant in the rural community where the story takes place. He lends Dave a catalogue and when he learns that he wants to buy a gun, offers to sell him a revolver for two dollars.

Ma

Ma is Dave's mother. She controls the finances in the family, so Dave asks her to give him money to buy the revolver. At first she responds by calling him a fool, but she agrees when he tells her that he loves her and points out that his father has no gun. Dave is not afraid to defy his mother and finds her easy to manipulate.

Pa

See Bill Saunders

Bill Saunders

Bill Saunders is Dave's father. He is a strong, authoritative figure who questions Dave about his relationship with Hawkins and threatens to beat him after he is caught shooting the mule. However, his actions have little influence on the events of the plot.

Dave goes behind his father's back to ask his mother's permission to buy the gun. He convinces her with the argument that Pa has no gun; given the close association between guns and manhood, this implies that for all of his apparent masculinity, Pa's manhood is compromised.

Dave Saunders

Dave Saunders is the protagonist of the story. He is the "man who was almost a man," a seventeen- year-old black farm laborer living in a small rural community in the South. The story centers on Dave's longing for a gun and the disastrous events that ensue when his wish comes true.

Dave fantasizes that having a gun will earn him respect in the eyes of his peers and the men around him. He convinces his mother to give him money to buy a gun and then accidentally shoots a mule. Dave tries to cover up his responsibility for the animal's death, but this just exacerbates the humiliation he experiences when his role is exposed.

Despite the fact that it has led to his downfall, Dave remains fascinated with the gun and convinced of its power to make him a man. He goes out in the middle of the night to furtively shoot the gun again. Focusing on the power it makes him feel, he decides spontaneously to hop on a northbound train with nothing but the old revolver in his pocket.

Themes

Coming of Age

As the title suggests, Dave is poised between boyhood and adulthood. In various ways, all of the other figures in the story—Dave's parents, Hawkins, and the unnamed men he works with—threaten Dave's fragile sense of manhood. Dave's problem is that he is almost a man, yet his lack of social and economic power make him acutely aware that he is *not quite* one.

The story is structured around Dave's quest for a gun as a symbol of power, maturity, and manhood as well as the ironic results of attaining this wish— his further loss of pride and autonomy. However, the story's conclusion—Dave's impulsive decision to break free from the setting that belittles him by jumping on a northbound train—suggests a more successful passage toward maturity and independence.

Race and Racism

Although racial issues are not in the foreground of "The Man Who Was Almost a Man," racism and injustice are underlying themes. Dave's feeling of being disrespected results in part from a typical adolescent struggle with how he is seen by his peers and his parents.

Yet this lack of respect is more acute and poignant because of the segregated, racist culture. The social circumstances that relegate blacks to an inferior status contribute to Dave's sensitivity about being seen as nothing but a boy.

Dave's father, a physically powerful adult man, is characterized as something less than a man because he does not have a gun and because he capitulates to the white Hawkins. Thus, Wright suggests, in an atmosphere of racism Dave will never have the chance to be fully a man unless he takes action to ensure it.

Class Conflict

Dave's economic status is central to his struggle for power and respect. Although he works hard to earn money, he has none of the autonomy that comes with financial independence. On one level, his mother controls the his earnings because she wants to save it for his schooling; education is a means for Dave to escape from his limited potential as a farm laborer.

On another level, Hawkins controls Dave fi- nancially. Dave fantasizes that the gun will give him the power that he lacks as a young black farm worker, but in fact, the gun results in further entrapping him in a situation of economic exploitation.

Dave does not seem particularly conscious of his economic exploitation but his aggression toward Hawkins' property—killing Jenny, the mule, and his thinking about shooting at Hawkins' big white house—suggests that Wright understood Dave's actions as a form of class struggle.

Violence

Dave's strong desire to own and fire a gun has very little to do with malice or violence. He wants the gun for the status it will bring him in the eyes of others and the feeling of power it will give him. He seems almost unaware of the physical violence that firing a gun can cause, which is demonstrated when he unintentionally shoots and kills Jenny.

After the accident, his father beats him and Hawkins has an even bigger advantage over him. This further whets his appetite to possess the gun— again, not to inflict injury, but to repair his own injured sense of self-esteem. The fact that he fires it into empty space suggests that he does not understand how to direct his rage.

Guilt and Innocence

Dave is responsible for a number of acts that are quite clearly wrong. Wright presents us with a character who desires a dangerous weapon, lies to his mother to get it, uses it to kill an innocent animal belonging to his employer, and lies again to cover up his actions. According to abstract values or objective facts, Dave appears guilty of deceit and destruction, but Wright reveals the particularities of Dave's circumstance in such a way as to question such a definition of guilt.

Wright explores Dave's motivations and thought processes, which show him as an innocent person with benign intentions. He never means to hurt anyone else, only to preserve his pride and end his own subjugation. Furthermore, Dave experiences his mistakes as so terrifying and pays for them so dearly that it is easy to see him as a victim. Wright suggests that Dave is trapped in his social and economic circumstance and that his motives are understandable and justifiable.

Style

Setting

The story is set in a rural southern community in the early years of the twentieth century. All of the events of the story take place within the space between Hawkins' large farm and Dave's modest home, including the road that connects them and the store along the way. This constricted setting suggests the limitations of Dave's options and contributes to an atmosphere of entrapment.

The two locales of farm and home suggest a duality between have and have-not, rich and poor, white and black, which is evocative of the larger segregated culture. The road is a particularly significant setting as it is a place of movement and transition where the story both begins and ends.

Narration

"The Man Who Was Almost a Man" is narrated by a third-person, omniscient narrator. That is, the story is told by a narrator who is not part of the story's action and who is able to see into the minds of the characters. In this case, the omniscient narrator has insight into Dave's consciousness, as in the first paragraph of the story, which describes Dave's private thoughts and feelings.

One of the most notable stylistic aspects of the story's narration is Wright's use of dialect—the particular grammar and pronunciation of black southern farm workers—in juxtaposition to standard literary English. When he describes thoughts as well as quoting speech, Wright uses dialect, but when he describes actions he uses standard English. He switches back and forth between these two modes of narration, creating an implicit comparison between internal and external, subjective and objective, subordinate and dominant, as in the story's first two lines, "Dave struck out across the fields, looking homeward through the paling light. Whut's the use talkin wid em niggers in the field?"

Irony

The story's structure is based on irony, which means that the outcome is the opposite of what one or more characters had expected. Irony always has to do with a difference or gap in knowledge. In this case, this gap is revealed through actions and events rather than through tone or speech.

Dave believes that buying and firing a gun will lead to manhood, respect, and autonomy. Thus it is ironic when firing the gun knocks him to the ground, causes his peers to laugh at him, his father to beat him, and Hawkins to claim control over his labor for the next two years—events deeply incongruous with what he intended and anticipated.

Symbolism

The story makes strong use of symbolism. The gun, an old Wheeler pistol, is the central symbol of the story. Dave longs for a gun, any gun, as a symbol of his manhood. He believes that people will take him seriously if he has a gun.

When this fantasy becomes a reality and Joe sells him an obsolete weapon, the respect and freedom he had hoped for turns into humiliation and entrapment. When Dave shoots the gun he is thrown to the ground by its recoil. Then he discovers that he has made the terrible mistake of killing a defenseless mule. Thus, while the idea of a gun symbolizes power for Dave, the actual gun symbolizes powerlessness.

Later, when Dave confesses and is punished, he thinks, "Nobody ever gave him anything. All he did was work. They treat me like a mule, n then they beat me." Thus, instead of being able to identify with the more powerful men in the story, Dave ends up identifying with Jenny, the defenseless mule. However, Dave still perceives the gun as symbolizing manhood and runs away rather than selling it back to Joe as he had promised.

Historical Context

Racism and Black Masculinity

The first decades of the twentieth century were difficult and violent ones for African Americans in the South. The agricultural economy was suffering, leading to poverty for poor whites and blacks; but with "Jim Crow" segregation laws, which appealed especially to poor whites, blacks were kept oppressed with limited opportunities. Moreover, African-American masculinity was threatened during the time when "The Man Who Was Almost a Man" takes place, offering a useful context for Dave's struggle for manhood and respect.

More than two thousand African Americans— the great majority being men—were lynched by angry mobs between 1890 and 1920. Historians cite economic frustrations as the primary cause for this violent phenomenon, but at the time the common excuse for lynching was the alleged rape of a white woman by a black man. Lynching victims were subjected to torture, burning, and even castration.

According to *The Oxford History of the American People,* "hundreds of lynchings were for theft, alleged insult, altercations between black tenants and white landowners, or such trivial causes as killing a white man's cow or refusing to sell cottonseed to a white man at his price." This relates to Dave's reflection that "he was glad he had gotten out of killing the mule so easily," when he is punished for killing Jenny with two years of labor and a beating by his father.

The Great Migration

Due to the economic problems and racial violence of the South as well as new opportunities in industrial northern states, a huge population shift among African Americans took place between the 1890s and the 1940s known as the Great Migration. The interruption of European immigration after 1914 led to a labor vacuum in the northern states; subsequently, black labor from the South was heavily recruited. In fact, Wright left the South for Chicago in 1927.

While racism, violence, and segregation existed in different forms in northern cities, they continued to represent freedom, opportunity, and new beginnings for modern African Americans. For many blacks, the move from southern farms to northern cities represented an important symbolic break from a past of slavery and oppression. Dave's flight by train at the end of the story thus reflects both the underground railroad of slavery days and the "escape" to the northern territory.

Communism and Communist Intellectuals

When Wright wrote an earlier version of the story entitled "Almos' a Man" in the mid-1930s, he had recently become involved in a circle of communist intellectuals in Chicago. The class critique implicit in "The Man Who Was Almost a Man" must therefore be understood within this ideological context. Communists espouse a radical philosophy that promotes the enlightenment of oppressed workers and the destruction of the economic system of capitalism, working toward a goal of the common ownership of resources by all workers.

In 1933 Wright joined a new club promoting both political action by communist sympathizers and the creation of radical art. Through its literary magazine this club offered him a forum where his art was taken seriously by blacks and whites alike. In the circle of communist intellectuals Wright found not only a group of artistic peers who appreciated his writing, but a framework for understanding his experiences of racial oppression in a global economic context.

"The Man Who Was Almost a Man" can be seen as part of Wright's mission to reveal the experiences and struggles of the common working person as represented by Dave and to criticize the unjust power of the capitalist as represented by Hawkins.

Critical Overview

Wright's literary reputation was established in the early 1940s when he published two critically acclaimed bestsellers, *Native Son* and *Black Boy,* in rapid succession. Though he was a prolific writer in many genres, over the decades the great majority of critical attention has focused on these two major works and, to a lesser extent, his first book of short stories, *Uncle Tom's Children*, all written before Wright turned forty.

At the height of his popularity Wright was considered the best African-American writer of his generation, but his critical reputation has since declined. In fact, recent critics view his work as uneven. In 1946 Wright left the United States to live in France. He continued to write fiction and nonfiction until his death at age fifty-two.

In 1960, when *Eight Men* appeared, Wright had fallen into relative obscurity with his earlier success sometimes attributed to his topical subject matter rather than the literary merits of his writing. Additionally, scholars may have neglected Wright because his career fell between two great high points in African-American letters—the Harlem Renaissance of the 1930s and the Black Power movement of the 1960s. However, the rise of the field of African-American studies has led to a renewed scholarly interest in Wright in recent years.

The critical reaction to *Eight Men* was tepid; most reviewers find only one or two of the eight stories up to Wright's standards. The collection contains stories written over the course of twenty- five years, representing a wide range in style and subject matter. Some critics praise the greater subtlety and sympathy evidenced in the collection's representations of race relations, suggesting that Wright's exile led to a more humanistic and philosophical outlook.

Yet most critics prefer the older stories, including "The Man Who Was Almost a Man." These stories are considered similar to his major early works.

In *New Republic,* Irving Howe asserts that "these stories do give evidence of Wright's literary restlessness, his wish to keep learning and experimenting, his often clumsy efforts to break out of the naturalism which was his first and, I think, necessary mode of expression. . . . I think he went astray whenever he abandoned naturalism entirely."

While Howe perceives *Eight Men* as successful in his naturalistic stories, *Commonweal*'s Richard Gillman condemns the book as "dismaying stale and dated."

An early critic of Wright, James Baldwin provided a positive review of the short fiction collection. He asserted that Wright, had he not died, would have been on the edge of a new artistic breakthrough, "acquiring a new tone, and a less uncertain aesthetic distance, and a new depth." Baldwin also praised the older stories: "perhaps it is odd, but they did not make me think of the 1930s or even, particularly, of Negroes. They made me think of human loss and helplessness."

In an unfavorable review, W. G. Rogers of the *Saturday Review* maintains that only one story, "The Man Who Went to Chicago," "shows Wright at his realistic, bludgeoning, blunt best."

Regarding Wright's direct style, Gloria Bramwell compares "The Man Who Lived Underground," to Ralph Ellison's 1952 classic *Invisible Man* in a way that may sum up Wright's status on the literary scene:

"Today Americans are more sophisticated and more likely to approve Ellison's action as he strips society's pretensions bare, laughs at it and at himself, and mocks its attempts to destroy him. Wright was never far removed enough to do more than suffer and articulate that suffering incompletely . . . but powerfully enough to touch us. And he is merciless in the presentation of that suffering . . . It fascinated, it horrified, it aroused, it even repelled, but its force was undeniable. It has the hypnotic force of nightmares from which we cannot wake voluntarily. . . . He articulated as no other an American nightmare. That he could not waken out of it himself is our loss."

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3

Critical Essay #1

Madsen Hardy has a doctorate in English literature and is a freelance writer and editor. In the following essay, she discusses the significance of the gun as a symbol of manhood in "The Man Who Was Almost a Man."

"Shucks, a man oughta hava little gun aftah he done worked hard all day," muses Dave, the protagonist of Richard Wright's short story "The Man Who Was Almost a Man." A man ought to have a little gun. Throughout the story, Dave, who is almost but not quite a man, never wavers in this conviction that a gun will make the difference and signal the manhood to which he aspires.

In this sense, Dave provides an interpretation of the significance of the gun, the story's central literary symbol. Armed with a gun, Dave believes that he will no longer be scared. He will be powerful and respected. However, through both plot and narration Wright is careful to show that Dave is naive and misguided in this belief.

For one, Dave is childish in his strategy for getting a gun. "Mebbe Ma will lemme buy one when she gits mah pay from ol man Hawkins," Dave speculates, sounding every bit a boy as he resolves, "Ahma beg her t gimme some money." He is childish when he tries to solve the problems that ensue after his mishandling of the old revolver, attempting to plug the bullet hole he has shot in the mule's side with dirt and telling a "story he knew nobody believed" about how she died.

The story is crushingly sad. Dave makes a bid for more respect only to inspire shame and humiliation. He ends up further entrapped in a situation that made him feel diminished—something less than a man and also, perhaps, less than a person. The symbol of manhood in which Dave has invested so much—both financially and emotionally—fails him. This would seem to be proof that a gun does not make a man after all.

Is Wright really debunking the idea that a gun can make the difference between being almost and fully a man? Even after it leads to Dave's humiliation and financial ruin, the obsolete weapon has an almost magical power in his eyes and holds a power that he cannot give up. At the end of the story Dave holds it in his hand almost like a charm as he jumps aboard a passing train and leaves his family, his past, his mistake, and his debt behind.

The story's abrupt ending, when Dave spontaneously flees, offers a reprieve from the suffocating fate he seemed to have brought down on himself. I am interested in how the gun and its exhilarating effect—which is, on the one hand, central to Dave's folly—ends up, on the other, empowering Dave to make a move that is a truer assertion of independence, if a desperate one.

The main events of the story expose Dave's ideas about the gun as completely wrong. Every result Dave had wished for is ironically reversed. But it does not seem to me that

Wright's intention is to completely dismantle Dave's fantasy that the gun will bring him some kind of desperately needed power to transform himself.

The idea that a gun symbolizes power is so prevalent it may seem barely worth stating. Yet since Wright seems to be saying that in a way Dave is wrong and in a way he is right in his belief that a gun makes a man, thinking about the different kinds of power it represents is important for understanding the meaning behind Wright's deceptively simple symbolism.

To begin on a most literal level, a gun gives its carrier power through the threat of physical violence. After all, the South was not safe for young black men in the 1920s when the story is set. Thousands of black men were summarily executed by mobs of whites for petty or unproven crimes in a practice called lynching. In fact, in the unfinished novel of which Wright originally conceived the story as a part, the protagonist hears word that a laborer in the next county has been lynched shortly before the events that make up "The Man Who Was Almost a Man" begin.

However, it is significant that in the version Wright did publish there is no mention of lynching and no other imminent sense of physical danger for Dave. He seems to have no concept of the practical use of a gun at all. He never refers to needing a gun to defend himself or wanting to shoot someone out of a sense of anger, vengeance, or justice. He doesn't want to use the gun so much as he wants to *possess* it.

"Lawd, ef Ah only had tha pretty one! He could almost feel the slickness of the weapon with his fingers. If he had a gun like that he would polish it and keep it shining so it would never rust. N Ah'd keep it loaded, by Gawd!" Rather than being either criminal or revolutionary, his attitude toward the gun is somewhere between consumerist and erotic longing.

This brings us to the next interpretation of the kind of power a gun represents. The most familiar symbolic meaning of a gun, popularized through a method of interpretation called psychoanalysis, is that it represents the phallus or the male sex organ. This interpretation is useful because it directly connects guns to the idea of manhood. To have a gun is to have a phallus—the embodiment of manhood. Isn't this exactly what Dave is after?

The next question is this: If Dave isn't interested in the practice of physical violence, what kind of power does the gun provide as a phallic symbol? According to psychoanalysis, the phallus doesn't have to do with anatomical parts or sex per se so much as it has to do the status and authority associated with masculinity. The phallus represents power of the father within the male-dominated family and, by extension, the male-dominated society. Actual fathers may or may not have the patriarchal power that is associated with fathers in general.

Thus, it is significant that the plot pivots on the fact that Dave's father does *not* have a gun. His father *does* appear to be an authoritative figure at the dinner table when he asks Dave gruffly how his work is going, but Dave knows to go to his mother for the two

dollars he needs to buy the gun. When he first approaches his mother she calls him a fool. It is only when he reminds her, "Pa ain got no gun. We needa gun in the house," and tells her he loves her that she agrees to give him the money to buy it and bring it back to his father.

Notice that despite his father's masculine manner, he lacks the power associated with manhood that Dave has identified as crucial: "Shucks. A man oughta hava little gun aftah he done worked hard all day." Dave's father works hard but he doesn't have a gun and neither does he have the power to make household financial decisions. It is Dave's mother who keeps "a slender wad of bills" stowed in the top of her stocking.

In this case, the phallic power that Dave seeks is not modeled on what his father has but on what he lacks. Therefore, let me suggest that the allure of the gun does not, as one might suppose, have to do with Dave becoming a man like his father but instead with his sense that the conditions of his father's life prevent even him from being fully a man.

Dave's father is presumably a farm laborer; so is Dave. His father earns his money through manual labor and he asserts his authority through the threat of beatings. He is, therefore, physically powerful. However, his father lacks access to some other order of power that Dave knows exists, even if he does not have the tools to describe quite what it is. His father lacks the power connected to the catalogue, money, and, of course, the gun—which, in the story, serves as an *object of economic exchange* more than an object of physical violence.

Dave's world is not only male-dominated, it is divided by racial and economic forms of dominance according to which the father is divested of some important forms of phallic power. Dave's mother holds the family purse strings, but it is the white storekeeper Joe and the white landowner Hawkins who determine the value of guns and mules and labor. It is through association with exactly these more subtle forms of power that the gun represents true or full manhood for Dave.

Dave's father represents the rural southern life, physical labor, and passive compliance with the white power structure that echo conditions of slavery under which his own father's generation suffered. Dave lacks the tools to analyze his father's conditions of oppression or his own but he does have a sense, as he trudges from Hawkins' field to his humble home, that as long as he walks the same path as his father he will remain in some ways profoundly powerless.

By keeping the gun and hopping aboard a northbound train, he at least opens up the possibility of a new kind of manhood in the future. With this impulsive act, Dave becomes part of a historic migration of African Americans seeking new beginnings and economic opportunities in the booming industries of northern cities.

For Wright, the son of a Mississippi farm laborer who sought his fortune in Chicago, the figure of the rural southern father fails to offer an acceptable model of manhood, leaving sons to face a future of "almost manhood" or to take a chance on an unknown future

and pay the painful price of leaving the past—with ties of community and family—behind.

Source: Sarah Madsen Hardy, "Gun Power" for *Short Stories for Students,* The Gale Group, 2000.

Critical Essay #2

In the following essay, Hannon discusses the exploitation of African Americans in "The Man Who Was Almost a Man" in the context of the exploitation of temporary faculty at universities.

In response to an early draft of this essay, a reader at *College Literature* made the point that "adjuncts have always existed; until the 1970s they were typically faculty wives"; the reader went on to ask, "has adjunct exploitation only recently become an issue because there are more men in the ranks?" The reader's insight helped me to see the historically "feminized" position of adjunct faculty, and to recognize the underpaid and underacknowledged labor of temporary teachers and staff as an effect of structural sexism in American institutions. The reader caused me to question whether my criticisms of the academic hierarchy were the result of an unconsciously perceived threat to my own "masculinity," since masculinity, as a gender construct, historically has been tied to income security. By extension, I am compelled to consider whether my response to low-status employment is conditioned by the loss of white male privilege, real or imaginary, in the wake of much-needed affirmative action programs in higher education. But this reader overlooked my argument that the widespread replacement of retired faculty with temporary, fulltime, non-tenure-line appointments represents a threat to tenure, academic freedom, long-term program development, and the faculty-administered university department that was not posed in the past by the use of adjunct faculty. The trend toward temporary staffing threatens to add a class barrier to the ideological divisions that, as Gerald Graff has demonstrated, already obstruct communication and problem solving among department faculty. Faculty on two- or three-year appointments do not have a stake, and often have no voice, in departmental matters such as hiring, promotion, and tenure decisions, curriculum reform, undergraduate major requirements, and graduate program development. Yet often, these are the faculty with the most experience in how other university departments address these issues, and to shut them out as a matter of policy is injurious to them and their departments. This is an issue of class blindness, because what temporary faculty often perceive as dysfunction in a department, many of their seniors consider the normal order of business: non-tenure-line faculty are apprentices, the argument goes, training for a future position which will provide them the full rights and privileges of academic citizenship. This stance is supported by a pervasive fiction of merit, which implies that temporary faculty who do not advance to tenure-track positions simply do not work hard enough, or teach or publish well enough to succeed. Faculty who hold such attitudes and express them in the profession's journals and newsletters often do so despite evidence to the contrary in their own departments. In some cases, departmental policy serves to elide this evidence by foreclosing opportunities for adjunct and temporary faculty to receive official recognition, let alone reward, for their publications and successful teaching records.

If some faculty are unable to recognize the causes and long-term effects of labor exploitation in their departments, students are similarly conditioned to rationalize economic, racial, and gender inequities in literary texts as the result of differing degrees

of ability and individual incentive. In my experience teaching Wright's "The Man Who Was Almost A Man" for instance, students focus on the theme of immaturity in Dave Saunders, and resist tying this theme to the exploitative economic conditions which infantilize both him and his father. Wright's story (written in 1936, published as "Almos' A Man" in *Harper's Bazaar* in 1940, and as "The Man Who Was Almost A Man" in the posthumous *Eight Men* [1961]), is about a black tenant family working for a white landowner, Mr. Hawkins. The story opens with an ambiguous insult to seventeen-year-old Dave Saunders's masculinity, which Dave thinks would be redressed were he to possess a gun: "a man oughta hava little gun aftah he done worked hard all day." Wright clearly develops the gun as a phallic symbol which will substitute for his and his father's appropriated "manhood," itself a metaphor for economic security and self-sufficiency. When the story opens, Dave walks from the fields to the general store, traditionally the site of exploitation for tenant farmers and sharecroppers (both black and white), and he asks Joe, the white store manager, if he can borrow the Sears catalogue, the symbol of Hawkins's control over the commodities available to his tenants. Joe hands over the catalogue, and confirms that Dave's "manhood" has been appropriated by the exploitative economic system when he tells Dave, "If you wanna buy a gun, why don't you buy one from me? I gotta gun to sell." At home Dave thumbs through the catalogue's pornographically glossy pictures of guns; the story moves quickly between Dave's interior thoughts and the narrator's commentary, and both use sexually charged language to represent the weapon's potency as a phallic symbol: "Lawd, ef Ah only had tha pretty one! He could almost feel the slickness of the weapon with his fingers. If he had a gun like that he would polish it and keep it shining so it would never rust. Ah'd keep it loaded, by Gawd!" After supper, Dave offers his mother an opportunity to retrieve the family phallus: "with the open catalogue in his palms," Dave approaches his mother, raises the book, and says, "Ma, Gawd knows Ah wans one of these." His mother resists, but ultimately acquiesces when Dave reminds her that without a gun, her husband also feels emasculated. She hands Dave the cash and says, "Lawd knows yuh don need no gun. But yer pa does."

First-year students rarely want to pursue these connections between masculinity, race, and economic exploitation, because for them Wright's story is a simple tale of immaturity and the consequences of irresponsible behavior. In this, their stance is curiously like James Baldwin's, who wrote that this and one other story in *Eight Men* ("The Man Who Saw the Flood") "did not make me think of the 1930s, or even, particularly, of Negroes. They made me think of human loss and helplessness." Of course, both Baldwin and my students are correct: Dave does use the gun irresponsibly. He carelessly shoots Mr. Hawkins's mule Jenny and then makes up a preposterous story about the mule's going wild and falling backward upon the plow. But when I suggest that Wright inserts this plot into a larger discussion of race, class, and gender inequity—for instance, that Dave articulates a specifically racial rage while "looking at Jim Hawkins' big white house" and fantasizing about taking a "shot at tha house. Ah'd like to scare ole man Hawkins jusa little"; or that Jenny's death is symbolic of Dave's betrayal of his mother, or of the treatment of women workers generally under Depression-era labor structures— students prefer to revert to the fictions of merit and equal opportunity in a "free market" economy, and to assert that Hawkins's treatment of

Dave, his demand of two dollars a month for the next twenty-five months, is a perfectly fair resolution to the story of Dave's incompetence.

It is difficult for some students to perceive the invidiousness of Dave's situation because, for laudable reasons, they have trained themselves to occupy a race- and class-neutral stance toward both literature and work. From this position, Dave's twoyear indenture to Mr. Hawkins is not an effect of race or class discrimination, but rather a matter of Dave's compensating for the economic injury his own irresponsible behavior has caused Mr. Hawkins. Here again, students' belief in the self-determined, concrete individual serves to elide historical difference, to make the utter instability of Dave's eco nomic position invisible. Since we continue to teach that "apprentice" years of industry are rewarded under the American system with promotion and greater economic autonomy, it is difficult for students to see that under the debt-driven agricultural system of the postbellum South, Dave's two-year encumbrance would likely translate into lifelong servitude. This delusion has a long history in America: despite successive years of crop liens and store credit, late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century southern farm workers were told, and often believed, that if they worked hard they could climb the "agricultural ladder" out of indenture and into the small (or large) landowner class. Paul Mertz, in the *Encyclopedia of Southern Culture,* writes that "these persistent views were a major impediment to efforts to reduce rural poverty." Other impediments included the unchallenged power of landowners who could set terms of employment unilaterally, and the job insecurity of farm workers, which parallels that of today's contingent workers closely enough to merit quoting at length from Mertz's description:

They worked under year-to-year verbal agreements that left landlords free to dispense with their services at settling time. With a great surplus of unskilled labor at hand, planters usually felt little need to hold dissatisfied or unwanted tenants. Most landless farmers were highly mobile, moving as often as every year or two. This transience was socially and economically wasteful; it deprived tenants of any role in their communities and reinforced illiteracy by preventing regular schooling for their children. It destroyed incentives to maintain farm property and contributed greatly to soil erosion.

Analogies to academic piecework here are clear: without tenure protections, temporary and adjunct faculty, especially those who appear dissatisfied by agitating for better working conditions, can be released at any time; moving from one adjunct position or instructorship to another, they incur large debts and are discouraged from being active in civic events; and the lack of a clear reward system diminishes the chance they will spend "free" time contributing to programs for the long-term health of their institutions or local communities. In the private sector, the endless drive for short-term profits at the expense of long-range planning and corporate "citizenship" leads to similar consequences. Driving down worker morale in all three labor contexts (the Depression South, and today's academic and private sectors) is the implicit charge (implicit too in my students' criticisms of Dave Saunders) that contingent workers either "prefer or choose temporary work," or "possess serious characterological flaws that prevent their employment in full-time, 'real' jobs."

The reluctance of some to address issues of economic inequity stems from our national habit of romanticizing exploitative situations as moments of opportunity. My students have indulged in this habit in responding to the final lines of Wright's story: after Dave climbs atop a moving train, he feels "his pocket; the gun was still there. Ahead the long rails were glinting in the moonlight, stretching away, away to somewhere, somewhere where he could be a man. . . ." When I raise the issue of modernist irony, and suggest that Wright is using it to emphasize the futility of Dave's attempt to escape problems deriving from his low economic status, I find I can convince only about a third of my students. Most will read these lines as Yoshinobu Hakutani does, in the context of other powerful images of freedom in American history and culture. Hakutani writes that "just as the Mississippi was to Huck and Jim a symbol of escape, independence, and freedom, modes of transportation such as trains, trucks, and planes appear frequently in Wright's work." This reading overlooks the fact that such symbols rarely lead to full, self-sufficient lives in Wright's novels and stories, and that in his own life, Wright found this kind of release only by escaping America's oppressive racial climate altogether. A similar desire to see opportunity in low-status positions accounts for the widespread acceptance of the temporary help industry's public relations claims that contingent employment is beneficial for the worker since it provides "greater scheduling flexibility, varied and satisfying work experiences, skill acquisition and development, access to permanent employment opportunities, and a cornucopia of other supposed monetary and non-monetary rewards." While some of these benefits are real, people who cite them to justify exploitative arrangements ignore the fact that they can just as well be provided by meaningful full-time (permanent) positions.

In academia, the same litany of alleged benefits of contingent employment is recited by apologists for the present trend toward contract employment as an alternative to tenure. David Helfand, for instance, faults tenure for rewarding "those with a desire for the security of lifetime employment, rather than those less averse to risks, who might be better suited to pioneering work on the frontier of knowledge and to inspirational teaching of the young." I agree that the current tenure system has rewarded some undeserving professors while pun ishing many innovative adjunct and junior faculty; the answer, however, is not a wholesale conversion to a system based upon five-year renewable contracts, unless these carry strong protections for academic freedom, and unless the renewal process can somehow be removed from university politics. With the continued overproduction of Ph.D.'s, it is unlikely that universities will negotiate 5-year contracts that include salary increases and rewards for teaching and scholarly merit. It is more likely that deans, like the banks to whom a landowner in Wright's (or Faulkner's) own time inevitably would have owed mortgage payments, will take the first opportunity to foreclose upon prior contractual arrangements, and replace long-term workers with cheaper, more itinerant labor. To return to Wright's story, when Dave Saunders alights from his train to seek employment, he likely will find only shortterm, day-wage work, since by the late 1930s many southern landowners were accepting payments from the New Deal's set-aside programs, releasing their "share" workers and re-employing them merely on a piecemeal basis during planting and harvest months (an early version of today's "planned staffing"). . . .

Source: Charles Hannon, "Teaching the Conflicts as a Temporary Instructor," in *College Literature,* Vol. 24, No. 2, June, 1997, pp. 126-41.

Critical Essay #3

Taking the deer hunt from William Faulkner's story "The Old People" as a model of the literary tradition of a hunt as a boy's initiation into manhood, Loftis shows how the conventions are subverted in Dave's killing of the mule.

For a people living in a new and unsettled land, variations on the archetype of the young hero who achieves manhood by hunting and slaying a wild beast came early and naturally as a literary theme. American writers have consistently dramatized the threat of the wilderness as an element in their heroes' *rites du passage*. The courageous and determined Natty Bumpo, the Deerslayer, is still an All- American hero and a model for the heroes of later generations. Captain Ahab, equally courageous in his madness, is perhaps the archetype in its demonic or perverted form. Modern writers continue the tradition: Hemingway with Francis Macomber and Faulkner with, particularly, Ike McCaslin. In American literature, however, the hunt is a European and thus white tradition, and its heroic and mythic dimensions hardly seem available to black American writers—unless used ironically to underscore the gulf between the chivalrous white hero and the black field hand or urban outcast. But when deftly handled, this problematic theme becomes an artistic asset for the black writer: the hunt can embody the hero's maturation at the same time that its parodic implications dramatize the disparity between black and white possibilities of growth and development in American society. The initiation story can thus criticize the society within which it occurs in a uniquely effective way, as it does in Richard Wright's "The Man Who Was Almost a Man."

To clarify the precise nature of Wright's parody of the hunt tradition, I would like to compare it with Faulkner's story of Ike McCaslin's initiation in "The Old People." I am not arguing here that Wright is directly parodying Faulkner or that there is any direct connection at all between the two stories, but for several reasons, Faulkner's story is a useful and logical one to represent the normative, mainstream pattern of the hunt in American literature in a comparison with Wright. First, the stories are contemporaneous: Faulkner's story was first published in *Harper's Magazine* in September 1940; Wright's had appeared only nine months earlier, in January 1940, in *Harper's Bazaar*. In addition, the thematic and geographical similarities between the two stories invite comparison, while the ethnic and cultural differences between the authors and the stories suggest new areas of interpretation, especially for Wright's story. Most important, Faulkner's story offers a double initiation where the successful hunt itself serves almost as a preliminary to the more important, more mysterious initiation of the vision of the ancestor-buck. Because he is reaching beyond the simple hunt-as-initiation, Faulkner relies particularly heavily on the tradition itself to inform his initial hunt with meaning and thus becomes especially representative of that tradition.

Initiations occur within personal, social, and literary contexts, and Wright's parody of the huntas- initiation exploits the differences between those contexts for his hero, a seventeen-year-old black field hand, and the pattern as it develops for most white heroes, like Ike McCaslin. The fact of initiation is, of course, a partial creation of individual identity, and identity is closely bound to names and naming. Fenimore

Cooper's Deerslayer, for example, receives his name from his prowess as a hunter, although his initiation involves the killing of a man, not just an animal. In "the Old People," Ike McCaslin's name is not only a given, it is a part of a larger web of identity with implications for larger meanings in the story. His father, Carothers McCaslin, was an old man when Ike was born, and his present guardian is his cousin McCaslin Edmonds. As these interlocking names suggest, a great deal of the story investigates Ike's hereditary background to establish his relationship to the white, black, and Indian communities of which he is a part. His initiation, then, solidifies a complex of relationships to family, community, and heritage.

Dave, on the other hand, has only his given name as the story opens. He has family—mother, father, brother—but neither their given names nor the family name is provided until late in the story. And when we finally learn that Dave's surname is Saunders, the fact is presented not just as information but as something significant that Dave has earned and has had to assert, to claim. After successfully firing his pistol and just before hopping the freight train out of Mississippi, Dave looks at Jim Hawkins' "big white house" and thinks to himself, "Lawd, ef Ah had just one mo bullet Ah'd taka shot at tha house. Ah'd like t scare ol man Hawkins jusa little . . . Jusa enough t let im know Dave Saunders is a man"; his assertion of his name is identical with his assertion of his manhood. Only now that he has mastered the pistol that had caused his apparent disaster, just before the ultimate assertion of abandoning his family and immediate social setting, can Dave rightfully claim the identity that is associated with his own name. Dave must earn that which is a complex given for Ike McCaslin.

Second, the relationship of each protagonist to guns points to an important distinction between their situations. Guns are a natural part of Ike's life. He grows up among hunters, and he is given his first small rifle as soon as he is "big enough to walk alone from the house to the blacksmithshop and then to carry a gun." Ike is taught to shoot small game, and then, when he is ten, when he can count his name in two numbers, he is taken on the big game hunts in the wilderness. It is part of Ike's heritage to own guns and to use them to prove his manhood.

For Dave, however, the gun is at first only a dream. His desire for a gun and his equating owner ship of the gun with manhood seem almost pathetic. He envisions it as the great equalizer: "One of these days he was going to get a gun and practice shooting, then they [the other field hands] couldn't talk to him as though he were a little boy" (Wright). Dave's attempts to get money from his mother to buy the gun reveal that he is in fact still a child; he whines, wheedles, and begs, and his mother responds as if he were a child. As he approaches her, he "shyly" raises the catalogue that he has opened to the page of pistols:

"Ma, Gawd knows Ah wans one of these.""One of whut?" she asked, not raising her eyes."One of these," he said again, not daring even to point. . . ."Get outta here! Don yuh talk t me bout no gun! Yuh a fool!" . . ."But yuh promised me one—""Ah don care whut Ah promised! Yuh ain nothing but a boy yit!" (Wright)

Dave's final argument is that the gun is really for his father (suggesting perhaps a tacit association in his culture also between manhood and owning a gun). To this his mother finally relents, telling Dave, "Yuh bring it straight back t me, yuh hear? It be fer Pa." In a literal sense, Dave never receives permission to own a gun. Although he keeps the gun and takes it with him when he leaves, his family and immediate social environment do not allow for him what was so natural for Ike McCaslin.

Finally, while Ike McCaslin has a teacher and guide, Dave lacks not only that but even adult male models for defining adulthood. Ike has had Sam Fathers, whose very name suggests his relationship to Ike, to teach him to hunt and to become a man. When Sam abandons the farm and goes to live in the Big Bottom, Ike is only momentarily confused. He recalls that Sam had already told him, "I done taught you all there is of this settled country. . . . You can hunt it good as I can now" (Faulkner). He realizes that Sam's leaving is "not only temporary but that the exigencies of his maturing, of that for which Sam had been training him all his life some day to dedicate himself, required it" (Faulkner). When Ike shoots his first deer, Sam Fathers is standing just behind him, and it is Sam who ritually slits the deer's throat and marks Ike's face with the steaming blood to signal his achieved manhood.

Dave has no adult black males to guide him or even to serve as models that could allow him to define manhood. He is surrounded daily by anonymous black field hands; he lives in a matriarchal family; and his larger social setting is obviously dominated by white men, Joe at the store and especially Jim Hawkins, his employer. His father is virtually a phantom figure in the story, appearing at supper where he asks Dave what he is reading and again in the scene when Dave is being brought to account for the mule he killed. In that scene Dave's father promises to beat him, but he offers no support for Dave or resistance to Jim Hawkins about the settlement for the mule. We have been told that Dave's father does not own a gun, and Dave's mother assents to Dave's claim that he should own one. Inadequate as the gun is as a symbol of manhood, the absence of the gun perhaps suggests that Dave's father does not, can not serve as Dave's model of manhood. If anything, Dave's adults are threats and exploiters, virtually the opposite of the guides with which Ike McCaslin is so abundantly supplied.

These three factors, then, provide the context in which we must read the crucial scenes of killing animals. Ike's initiation through hunting is fairly straightforward. He is nervous, of course, but he has Sam Fathers at his side to instruct and guide him through the critical moments. When the buck appears, Sam says, "Now, . . . shoot quick, and slow" (Faulkner), and when Ike, who will never actually remember the shot, runs excitedly to the buck, Sam warns him not to approach from the front. Sam also slits the buck's throat and marks Ike's face, signifying his manhood. Ike still has in store another and perhaps more important initiation, but that Faulkner opens the story with this hunt scene suggests both its importance and its traditional meaningfulness as a literary device.

If Ike's initiation is both traditional and serious, Dave's is both unique and funny. Dave has not gone out that morning to hunt; he has sneaked his gun along into the field he is supposed to plow for his boss, Jim Hawkins. The gun is hidden, and Dave must maneuver himself into a place where he can try to fire it. To be sure he is safe, he plows

"two whole rows before he decide[s] to take out the gun" (Wright). He then looks around carefully, unstraps the gun from his leg, and proudly displays it to the mule: "Know whut this is, Jenny? Naw, yuh wouldn know! Yuhs jusa ol mule! Anyhow, this is a gun, n it kin shoot, by Gawd!" (Wright). He further warns Jenny: "When Ah pull this ol trigger, Ah don wan yuh t runnacka fool now!" (Wright). In fact, he is telling Jenny what he himself really needs to know, and he warns her not to behave in essentially the way that he himself will after he fires the pistol.

The shot itself is a disaster. Dave moves away from Jenny, holds "the gun far out from him at arm's length, and turn[s] his head" (Wright), unconvincingly telling himself that he is not afraid. "The gun felt loose in his fingers; he waved it wildly for a moment. Then he shut his eyes and tightened his forefinger. Bloom!" (Wright). The gun is as much in control of Dave as Dave is of the gun in this scene, and his reaction to the shot, even before he realizes that he has shot Jenny, is childishly funny:

A report half deafened him and he thought his right hand was torn from his arm . . . and he found himself on his knees, squeezing his fingers hard between his legs. His hand was numb; he jammed it into his mouth, trying to warm it, trying to stop the pain. The gun lay at his feet. He did not quite know what had happened. He stood up and stared at the gun as though it were a living thing. He gritted his teeth and kicked the gun. Yuh almos broke mah arm! (Wright)

Unlike Ike's superficially similar confusion caused by the intensity of his experience, Dave's confusion is funny because it results from his overreaching his abilities and reveals the disparity between what he believes he is and what he actually is.

Yet, to his horror, Dave discovers that he too has shot an animal, Jim Hawkins' mule Jenny. The grim humor continues as the panic-stricken Dave chases the bleeding mule "for half a mile, trying to catch her" (Wright), merely managing to make a bad situation even worse. When he does catch Jenny, he futilely tries to stop the bleeding by plugging the bullet hole with "handfuls of damp black earth" (Wright). She escapes his grasp again, and Dave catches her only when she stops and kneels to the ground, "her front knees slopping in blood" (Wright).

If Ike is justifiably proud of his hunting success, Dave is not and tries his feeble best to disguise his. He hides the pistol and concocts an absurd story about Jenny's suddenly acting peculiar and falling on the point of the plow. Try as he will, Dave cannot convince Jim Hawkins or the other field hands that he is telling the truth, and when his mother appears and asks him, "Dave, whut yuh do wid the gun?" (Wright), his story collapses completely. "All the crowd was laughing now" (Wright), and Dave's humiliation is complete.

If Ike McCaslin's killing the deer is his transition into manhood, so in a different sense Dave's killing the mule is his; Ike's is a conscious act that marks a normal stage of development, while Dave's is a childish error that means nothing in itself but forces the development that Dave could not otherwise achieve. His rejection of his bondage to Jim Hawkins to pay for the mule motivates Dave to return to the hidden gun and to assert

his manhood by successfully firing it. This success in turn provides the confidence he needs to reject his childhood, turn his back on his family, and board the freight train headed "away, away to somewhere, somewhere where he could be a man . . . " (Wright).

Dave's initiation by shooting an animal, then, is a parody, not specifically of Faulkner or of "The Old People," but of the tradition that informs Faulkner's version of the hunt with much of its significance. Wright's child-man, unlike Faulkner's, lacks the familial and cultural mechanisms and personal supports that make growing up a natural journey with identifiable ritual milestones. Dave, quite the contrary, finds barriers and dead ends at every crucial turn. If Ike's deer has symbolic significance, so does Dave's mule. First, it is a domestic, not a wild, animal, and Dave's domestic situation, his family and immediate social setting must be eliminated before he can mature. Second, Jenny is short for Jennifer which derives from Guinevere which in turn derives from the Welsh "gwen," white. Dave's society is one dominated by whites who refuse to allow any black male to truly mature, and Dave must symbolically kill this domination before he is free to grow up. If Ike's initiation is within a tradition, Dave's lies outside that or any other tradition. Wright's solution to the artistic problem of presenting a unique initiation where the traditional motifs not only will not work but in some ways represent the very obstacles that keep them from working is to parody the tradition itself. Far from the "crude and careless," "technically unpolished" writer he is sometimes labelled, Wright in fact succeeds in a sophisticated manipulation, parody, of a complex literary tradition, the hunt, to embody his vision. Through this parody Wright shapes a convincing and moving account of the black experience of growing up in the rural South in the second quarter of the twentieth century.

Source: John E. Loftis, "Domestic Prey: Richard Wright's Parody of the Hunt Tradition in 'The Man Who Was Almost a Man,'" in *Studies In Short Fiction,* Vol. 23, No. 4, Fall, 1986, pp. 437-42.

Adaptations

Learning in Focus made a film adaptation of "Almos' a Man" in 1976, directed by Stan Lathan, written by Leslie Lee, and produced by Dan McCann. The film was released on videotape by Coronet Films and Video in 1985.

Topics for Further Study

Dave believes that a gun will make him a man. What are other objects that signify manhood in contemporary culture? Choose one such object and compare it to the gun in "The Man Who Was Almost a Man." What do these two objects say about what it means to be a man in each time and place?

Do some research about the economic situation of black farm laborers in the early twentiethcentury South. How was the situation of such laborers similar to and different from the institution of slavery that had been abolished half a century earlier? How does this comparison enhance your understanding of the story?

At the end of the story Dave jumps aboard a train heading north. The story takes place during a period when huge numbers of African Americans were migrating north for a variety of social and economic reasons. Do some research about this migration.

When Wright wrote an early version of "The Man Who Was Almost a Man" in the mid-1930s, he was an active member of the Communist Party. Research the basic tenets of the Communist political philosophy and consider how the story reflects these ideas.

In the 1930s many authors—both black and white—utilized dialects in their writing. Find another author who uses dialect, and compare its effect on the representation of African Americans with that in "The Man Who Was Almost a Man." Why do you think Wright chose to write in dialect?

Compare and Contrast

1930s Spurred by the stock market crash of 1929, the Great Depression cripples the United States economy. In 1932 approximately 25% of the work force is unemployed. Social security and unemployment insurance do not yet exist to help the disenfranchised.

Today: During the late 1990s the United States enjoys a period of strong and steady economic growth. The stock market reaches record highs and unemployment is at its lowest point since the 1960s. Welfare programs are significantly cut in many states.

1930s There is a national glut of agricultural products, resulting in wheat and corn prices falling to the lowest point in American history. Under a New Deal program, the planting of staples such as grain, tobacco and sugar is reduced, fields of crops are plowed under, and surplus foods are bought and distributed to the needy by the government. The exploitative economic system of sharecropping—where black tenants work the land of white landowners— remains prevalent.

Today: Agriculture is run like a big business and is dominated by a small number of corporations. Yet farming remains carefully regulated by the federal government. Due to developments in farm machinery, populations shifts, and reductions in cotton productions, the number of sharecroppers in the South has declined by more than 80% since 1935.

1930s African Americans are oppressed by "Jim Crow" laws that enforce racial segregation in public places. The National Association for the Advancement for Colored People (NAACP) is established to fight for the civil rights of African Americans in 1909.

Today: Decades after laws designed to ensure equal opportunity for blacks are put in place as part of the Civil Rights Movement, a disproportionate number of African Americans still live in poverty. The policy of Affirmative Action, designed to offset discrimination and increase opportunity for blacks in schools and workplaces, is struck down as unconstitutional in a number of court cases.

1930s In rural areas, a family gun is a common household item. Gun control laws restricting the sale of firearms do not yet exist and guns are easily available for purchase through general stores and catalogues.

Today: Gun control laws restrict the purchase of firearms, but there are still more than two million firearms in U.S. homes. Unfortunately, there are almost forty thousand firearm-related deaths each year.

What Do I Read Next?

Uncle Tom's Children (1938), Wright's first and best-known collection of short stories, explores the legacy of slavery and the psychology of oppression among blacks of the deep South.

Native Son (1940), Wright's most celebrated work, was the first novel by an African American to become a bestseller. It tells the controversial story of a young black man's anger and rebellion.

Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man (1912), offers an insightful portrait of African-American identity and race relations at the turn of the century. Its author, James Weldon Johnson, is considered an important precursor to Wright.

Invisible Man (1952), written by Ralph Ellison, was a best-selling novel and a National Book Award winner. This landmark novel offers a powerful account of a black man's struggle as he migrates to a northern city.

Go Tell It on the Mountain (1953), a semiautobiographical classic by James Baldwin, tells of a minister's son's search for identity in 1935 Harlem.

Makes Me Want to Holler (1994), an autobiography about growing up black and male in the 1970s by *Washington Post* reporter Nathan McCall, describes his experiences with violence, prison, and the education system.

Further Study

Fabre, Michel.*The Unfinished Quest of Richard Wright,* New York: Morrow, 1973.

A comprehensive biography of Wright that covers a great deal of material not found in either of his autobiographies. Fabre views the various political and artistic stages of Wright's life as a series of partially successful struggles.

Kostelanetz, Richard. *Politics in the African-American Novel: James Weldon Johnson, W. E. B. DuBois, Richard Wright and Ralph Ellison,* Greenwood Publishing, 1991.

A study interpreting the novels of Wright and three other major African-American writers in terms of political ideas.

Wright, Ellen, and Michel Fabre, eds. *The Richard Wright Reader,* New York: Harper & Row, 1978.

A wide selection of Wright's writings including some of his important nonfiction essays on race, writing, and politics.

Wright, Richard. *Black Boy: A Record of Childhood and Youth,* New York: Harper, 1945.

Widely considered a classic, Wright's autobiography describes his southern upbringing, his move North, his beginnings as a writer, and his involvement with the Communist party.

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Short Stories for Students (SSfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, SSfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of SSfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of SSfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in SSfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by SSfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

SSfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Short Stories for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Short Stories for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Short Stories for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from SSfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from SSfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of SSfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Short Stories for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of SSfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Short Stories for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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