The Man Who Was Almost a Man

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF RICHARD WRIGHT

Richard Wright was born on a plantation in rural Mississippi to parents who were born free after the Civil War; his grandparents on both sides were former slaves who were freed as a result of the war. His father left when Wright was young, and, soon after, his mother began having strokes that led to a lifelong medical condition. As a result, Wright was raised primarily by an aunt and grandmother. Despite graduating as valedictorian of his junior high school, he dropped out of high school to work in order to help cover family expenses. In 1927, Wright moved to Chicago, where he wrote the manuscript for his first novel (published posthumously in 1963 as *Lawd Today*) and joined the Communist party. He remained a member until 1942. In 1937, he moved to New York, where he published the short story collection *Uncle Tom's Children* (1938) and his most famous novel, *Native Son* (1940). Wright's *Black Boy* (1945), a semi-fictionalized book about his childhood, was an instant bestseller. In 1946, disillusioned with the United States, Wright moved to Paris, and he lived abroad until his death in 1960. Wright was a major influence on the following generation of Black writers, in particular Ralph Ellison (who served as best man at Wright's first wedding) and James Baldwin (who titled an essay "Notes of a Native Son" in reference to Wright's novel *Native Son*), even though these writers often differed from Wright in style or politics.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Wright's best-known works—*Native Son* and *Black Boy*—deal with the effects of the so-called Great Migration, when millions of African Americans left the South in the hope of finding a better life in Northeastern and Midwestern cities. Wright himself took part in this migration when he moved from his home in Mississippi to Chicago in 1927 and later to New York City. While Wright and his parents were born free, the effects of slavery were still felt in his life and in his work; his grandparents were slaves freed by the outcome of the Civil War. In the aftermath of the Civil War, many states, particularly in the South, passed racist Jim Crow laws that limited the rights and freedoms of Black residents. Wright himself went to segregated schools before he dropped out. At one time, Wright and his second wife both identified as Communists (an economic and political movement that aims to replace private property with public ownership), and Wright was particularly interested in the similarities in the experiences of oppressed workers across the world. Even after publicly breaking with the Communist party in an essay, Wright was tracked by agencies of the United States government for his involvement.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

While Wright never earned a college degree, he was well-read in novels of the nineteenth- and twentieth-century. Dostoevsky's famous novel *Crime and Punishment* was an acknowledged influence on Wright's novel *Native Son*, which also examines contemporary life through the context of a crime, and it may have also influenced "The Man Who Was Almost a Man" (where Dave commits a violent, if accidental, act against a mule and must face the consequences). Wright was also influenced by various forms of literary realism, including two literary movements that began in France: naturalism (a realist movement that embraced logic and fact, based on the theories of the author Émile Zola) and existentialism (a complex movement that explored the problem of human existence and the fear of death; Wright's favorite authors included Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus). Wright went on to influence a new generation of Black writers, who acknowledged a debt to him while at the same time rejecting elements of his style or politics. Two of the most famous are Ralph Ellison (*Invisible Man*) and James Baldwin (*The Fire Next Time*, *Notes of a Native Son*). The way that, in "The Man Who Was Almost a Man," Wright mixes literary narration with his characters speaking in dialect is reminiscent of some of the work of Zora Neale Hurston, another Black modernist writer best known for her novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** The Man Who Was Almost a Man
- **Where Written:** New York City
- **When Published:** 1940 (reprinted in 1961 as part of the collection *Eight Men*)
- **Literary Period:** Black American modernism
- **Genre:** Coming of age story
- **Climax:** Dave is caught after accidentally killing a mule and is sentenced to pay for the damages.
- **Antagonist:** Jim Hawkins, Bob Saunders (Pa)
- **Point of View:** Third person limited

EXTRA CREDIT

Writers and Spies. Wright wasn't the only the only writer with an FBI file. While the agency has been criticized for its extensive focus on Black intellectuals like Ralph Ellison, Langston Hughes, and James Baldwin, other famous individuals who were surveilled by the agency include Ernest Hemingway,

Ray Bradbury, and Allen Ginsburg.

Adaptation. In 1976, "The Man Who Was Almost a Man" was adapted into a film starring LeVar Burton, who is most famous for playing Kunte Kinte in the acclaimed mini-series *Roots*, for hosting the children's television series *Reading Rainbow*, and for his role as Geordi La Forge on *Star Trek: The Next Generation*.

PLOT SUMMARY

Dave Saunders, a black seventeen-year-old living with his family in the American South around the 1930s, is frustrated because the other, older workers always talk down to him. He believes that if he could just get a **gun** for himself, he'd prove his manhood and earn their respect. He goes down to the local store owned by Joe and asks to see a catalog that, among other things, sells guns. Joe lends him the catalog, but adds that he has a gun that Dave can purchase for two dollars.

Dave goes back to his family's house, thinking about how to get the money he needs to buy the gun. He knows better than to ask his father, Bob Saunders, who's liable to at minimum threaten a beating at such a question. Instead, after his mother, Dave goes to his mother, Mrs. Saunders. While she is reluctant to give Dave money to buy the gun—and she actually collects his earnings from his work on Jim Hawkins's farm because she doesn't trust him with money—eventually she gives in after Dave makes the argument that his father deserves to have a gun and that he'll give the gun to his father right after purchasing it.

Once he has the money, Dave buys the gun. Rather than give it to his father, though, he lies to his mother about having hidden it, and then sleeps with the loaded gun under his pillow. The next day, when Dave goes out into the field to perform his usual work, he hides the gun by strapping it to his thigh and takes it with him. As he goes out into the field to work, he takes Mr. Hawkins **mule**, Jenny, with him. He goes out to the farthest field, where he thinks he'll be able to practice shooting the gun without anyone bothering him. But when he does eventually fire the gun, he closes his eyes and ends up accidentally shooting the mule.

Dave is distraught and frantically tries to stop the bleeding. But Jenny soon collapses and dies. Dave buries the gun by a tree and leaves the scene, trying to make up with a story to explain how the mule died that leaves the gun out of it. Later that day, someone finds the mule's body and a group gathers around it. When Jim Hawkins asks Dave to explain what happened, Dave lies and says that Jenny tripped and impaled herself on a plough. Nobody believes the story, and soon one of the gathered men comments that the wound looks like a bullet hole. Mrs. Saunders quietly asks Dave about the gun, and urges him to tell the truth. Now crying, Dave confesses.

Dave's father is furious, and promises to beat Dave for what he's done. He also promises Mr. Hawkins that Dave will make things better. Mr. Hawkins decides that it would be best if Dave pays him back for the dead mule at a monthly rate to come out of his salary—$2 a month until he has covered a full $50. He asks Dave to sell the gun to make the first payment, but Dave lies and says he already threw it in a creek. His father, even angrier, tells him to find the gun, get the $2 he paid for it, and give it to Mr. Hawkins.

That night, Dave can't sleep. He is upset at what happened, and afraid of the beating his father will give him. He sneaks out of the house, retrieves the gun from where he had buried it, and fires it again, this time making sure to keep his eyes open. He fires it four times, until the chamber is empty. He heads back across the field, until he is nearby Mr. Hawkins house, and thinks about how, if he had one more bullet, he'd fire at the house to prove he was a man.

He hears a train in the distance, and thinks about having to pay two dollars a month for so long. Keeping the empty gun with him, he hops onto a moving train, riding it off to somewhere where he could be a man.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Dave Saunders – Dave is a Black seventeen-year-old living with his family in the American South around the 1930s. He works plowing fields on a plantation owned by a white man, Jim Hawkins, where members of his family (including his parents, Mrs. Saunders and Bob Saunders) also work. He dislikes the way he's treated by older fellow workers, who he feels regularly mock and talk down to him. Having internalized a sense that respect is a product of masculine physical power, perhaps in part because his father regularly threatens to beat him, Dave concludes that the one way to prove himself a man is to own a **gun**. Dave then sets about convincing his mother to give him two dollars to buy a gun with the lie that he will immediately give it to his father. Instead, after getting the gun, Dave rather recklessly hides the loaded weapon under his pillow, and then sneaks out with it, planning to go do his field work in as distant a place as possible so he can practice firing it. But this plan backfires when he shoots the gun for the first time—he closes his eyes as he pulls the trigger—and accidentally kills the **mule** Jenny. He attempts to lie his way out of the predicament by saying Jenny accidentally impaled herself on a spike of the plow, but no one believes him and, crying, he confesses. His father is furious, and Dave ends up deeply in debt to Mr. Hawkins, who owned the mule. Faced with this situation, Dave runs away—hopping a train for parts unknown with his now-unloaded gun, hoping to find a place where he can be a man. Dave doesn't show much growth over the course of the

story—he begins it focused on a simplistic idea that strength will make him a respected man, and ends it still looking to become a man. The open-ended nature of the story's conclusion, however, suggests that what *sort* of man Dave will become is still up in the air.

Bob Saunders (Pa) – Bob Saunders is a Black man living in the South around the 1930s. He is the father of Dave Saunders and Dave's younger brother as well as the husband of Mrs. Saunders. The whole family lives on a plantation owned by the white man Jim Hawkins, and Bob is an employee of Mr. Hawkins. Bob believes in imparting discipline through violence, and has beaten Dave on several occasions. He embodies the sort of masculine, physical power that Dave has come to believe is the only measure of a man. Even at the dinner table, Bob speaks harshly with his son, snapping at Dave for bringing a catalog from Joe's store to the table and asking if Dave has been getting along well with Mr. Hawkins. Dave replies that things are going "swell," but Bob still chastises him, telling him that he needs to keep his mind focused on what he's doing. This single-minded focus defines Bob—after years of working for Mr. Hawkins, he has internalized the idea that his value as a person is directly connected to his productivity, and his primary focus is on maintaining a good relationship with his employer. When Dave is caught after having accidentally shot the **mule** Jenny, Bob doesn't attempt to defend or comfort his son. His first priority is to settle the debt with Mr. Hawkins. At the end of the story, Bob promises to beat his son for what he's done, and this threat is part of what spurs Dave to run away from home. In keeping with his old-fashioned masculine ideals, Bob doesn't grow or change over the course of the story.

Jim Hawkins – As the white owner of a Southern plantation around the 1930s, Mr. Hawkins is the employer of many Black field workers, including the Saunders family (Dave, Bob, Mrs. Saunders, and Dave's younger brother). Notably, even after Dave buys the **gun** that he believes will prove himself as a man, he remains deferential to Mr. Hawkins. When Mr. Hawkins catches Dave sneaking out in the early morning to test out the gun, he asks Dave to go plow down by the woods, and Dave plows two whole rows before taking the gun out. Dave's compliance is rooted in more than just the fact that Mr. Hawkins pays his salary; Dave is also afraid of what his own father will do if he finds out Dave isn't getting along well with Mr. Hawkins. When Mr. Hawkins discovers that his **mule** Jenny has been killed and that Dave is the culprit, he doesn't react with physical violence the way Dave's father might. In fact, Mr. Hawkins seems to handle the situation genially, telling Bob Saunders not to worry and laughing about how Dave bought himself a dead mule. He offers to accept two dollars a month from Dave until Dave has paid for the value of the mule (which Mr. Hawkins sets at 50 dollars). While the public mockery that comes after "buying" the dead mule brings Dave to tears, Dave still leaves the situation believing he's gotten off easy. It is only later, as he thinks back, that he realizes what a heavy burden his debt to Mr. Hawkins will be. Dave briefly considers firing a bullet at Mr. Hawkins' house to scare him (having realized earlier in the story that a gun can shoot anyone, "black or white"), but by then, his gun is out of bullets and so he runs away without ever directly confronting Mr. Hawkins. Like Bob Saunders, Jim Hawkins also does not change over the course of the story. He remains a persistent figure of white, male authority who sits atop an economic system that gives him almost total control over his Black employees.

Mrs. Saunders (Ma) – Mrs. Saunders is the mother of Dave and his little brother, as well as the wife of Bob Saunders, living with all of them on the plantation of the white Southern landowner Mr. Hawkins. Although Dave is employed by Mr. Hawkins to plow the fields of the plantation, Mr. Hawkins pays Dave's wages directly to Mrs. Saunders, which sets into motion the events of the story. When Dave makes his plans to buy a **gun** from Joe's store to prove that he's a man, he has to ask his mother for two dollars out of the money he's earned. As a no-nonsense, frugal woman who is saving money to buy winter clothes for the family, Dave's mother is reluctant to give Dave money to buy a gun. Still, Dave knows he is more likely to get the money from his mother than from his father, particularly if he can get her alone. In the end, Dave succeeds in getting the money from his mother by appealing to his father's authority: he says that his father deserves a gun and that as soon as Dave buys the gun, he'll hand it over to his father. At this point, Mrs. Saunders agrees that her husband should have a gun, which signals that, like Dave, Mrs. Saunders has internalized a respect for masculine physical power. Rather than trying to obtain more power and respect as Dave does, Dave's mother plays a domestic role and answers to her husband. The fact that Mrs. Saunders is the only female character with a significant role in the story further draws attention to the patriarchal nature of life on the plantation.

Joe – Joe is a white man who runs a store near Jim Hawkins' plantation. Joe is a big man with an imposing figure and Dave is nervous around him. When Dave announces his plan to buy a **gun**, Joe tries to tell him he doesn't need one, but he agrees to let Dave look at a catalog and take it with him overnight. Eventually, Joe does offer to sell Dave a loaded Wheeler pistol for two dollars, which Dave buys as soon as he gets the money from his mother. While Joe himself seems to generally be genial, his role in the story shows another way that the white community maintains economic dominance at the expense of the Black farmworkers.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Dave's younger brother – Dave has at least one younger sibling who also lives at home with him, Bob Saunders, and Mrs. Saunders on Jim Hawkins' plantation.

Jenny – Jenny is the **mule** that Dave accidentally shoots and

kills with the **gun** that he buys from Joe's store. She is used for plowing fields and is owned by Jim Hawkins, who values her at 50 dollars after she's dead.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

MANHOOD AND VIOLENCE

In "The Man Who Was Almost a Man," Richard Wright explores the complicated, conflicting nature of masculinity through the eyes of Dave Saunders, a seventeen-year-old Black farm worker in the 1930s American South who believes that he can assert his masculinity by purchasing a gun. Wright has sympathy for Dave, telling much of the story in Dave's voice and chronicling the various ways Dave is abused or humiliated, particularly by his father and the older and bigger farm workers. But Dave is also flawed, and displays negative masculine traits, such as recklessness and a brittle pride. In particular, Dave's plan to buy a gun in order to prove himself a man ends in tragicomedy when Dave accidentally shoots and kills the **mule** Jenny, landing himself in serious debt and making him a figure of fun to those around him. By compassionately depicting Dave's doomed efforts to assert his manhood, Wright acknowledges the allure of masculinity while deftly showing how society's violent ideas about manhood—which Dave and the other characters in the story have internalized—can be oppressive and even self-destructive.

Dave wants to buy a gun because he believes that being a gun owner will make him a man, but the story makes clear that he believes this because his family and community also see violence as a central part of masculinity. Dave believes that with a gun you can "kill anybody, black or white"—a level of power and control that Dave does not normally experience. In his home life, Dave defers to his mother and especially his father, who in turn both defer to their white employer, Mr. Hawkins. Dave, further, learns about the power of violence through his father, who often beats Dave as a punishment. While Dave doesn't imagine using the gun against his father, his desire to stand up to anyone who would "talk to him as though he were a little boy" seems to be an outlet for the aggression, fear, and frustration that his father provokes in him, but also a desire to act in his family and community the way that his father does. To get the money for the gun, Dave asks his mother, who has authority over him but not over his father. But his effort to convince his mother to give him the money is unsuccessful until he claims that he's in fact going to buy the gun to give it to his father. His mother then gives in, admitting that his father should have a gun—she, too, believes that the "man" of a family must be able to deal violence.

Yet once Dave gets the gun, his mishandling of it shows that owning a gun can't actually make him a man. In fact, his failed attempt at using the gun makes him a laughingstock and puts him in debt, thereby undercutting his masculinity even more. Dave's simplistic belief that just owning a gun will make him a man makes him irresponsible and careless with it. He sleeps with the loaded gun under his pillow at night and keeps it tied against his bare thigh during the day. Dave doesn't see skill or responsibility as being connected to manhood, and so he shows none in his handling of the gun. Ultimately, because of his lack of skill or care, Dave's gun does the opposite of what he intends. In a darkly comic twist, he accidentally kills the mule Jenny and, rather than gaining new freedom, he ends up shackled with debt to the mule's owner, Mr. Hawkins, and an object of ridicule among the community At the end of the story, Dave briefly considers turning the gun against Mr. Hawkins, the character who owns Dave's debt and is most responsible for Dave's economic oppression. But by then, Dave is already out of bullets, and he never acts on the fantasy. In this moment, Wright acknowledges the way that violence can seemingly offer the potential for freedom. However, the way violence actually functions in the story gives the lie to this fantasy. Violence in the story always leads to a vicious cycle. Dave accidentally kills the mule and undercuts rather than augments his manhood. And Dave's father, after promising to beat his son once again, loses his son, who flees by running away.

While Wright shows the negative consequences of Dave's actions throughout the story, the ending of the story—in which Dave runs away by hopping on a train car to a new, unspecified destination—is more ambiguous, offering a surprising possibility of hope but also the possibility that Dave will continue to follow the same destructive patterns. Dave's decision to run away at the end of the story can be read as optimistic. It suggests, perhaps, that he has learned that he will not be able to overcome the oppression or obstacles he faces with just a gun. A railroad could represent progress and new frontiers, and in Dave's case, the railroad could even be seen as a physical manifestation of the Underground Railroad—by leaving on a train, he is attempting to escape a life of beatings and debt slavery. At the same time, the fact that Dave purposely brings the gun with him on the train—even when it's empty of bullets—seems to represent his continued attachment to harmful ideas about masculinity. The story's lyrical, final line about rails stretching to a place "where he could be a man" leaves open both possibilities. It suggests, on the one hand, that Dave's belief in violence as the core of manhood will travel with him and his obsession with being that sort of violent man will continue to haunt both him and those he encounters. But it also suggests, on the other hand, that in

leaving behind his father and community and *their* focus on violence as a core tenet of manhood, Dave might learn another, different way of being masculine. Wright's ambiguous final lines suggest that despite Dave's shortcomings, and despite all the obstacles he faces, it is still too early to tell what type of man he'll become.

RACISM AND POWER

White characters don't appear often or for extended periods in "The Man Who Was Almost a Man," but it's impossible to understand the anxiety Dave Saunders experiences throughout the story without considering racism. The story is set in the American South around the 1930s, nearly forty years after the end of the Civil War and the emancipation of the slaves. Yet by explicitly setting the story on a "plantation" in the South, and showing how authority and power in the story always ultimately flows down from the white man who owns the plantation, Richard Wright dramatizes the ways that, even after emancipation of the slaves, systems of racist power continue to ensure that the Black workers on the farm remain under the power and control of white people.

The white Mr. Hawkins, who owns the plantation where Dave and his family work, is established as the premier authority over the plantation early in the story. The first paragraph of the story makes clear that Dave depends on "ol man Hawkins" for his pay, and it soon becomes clear that his father does as well. The entire income of Dave's family, then, is dependent on Mr. Hawkins. Mr. Hawkins's plantation is also designed to function by creating divide the loyalties of his back workers—much as slave-owning plantations were in pre-Civil War days—such as by using Black foremen to oversee other workers. These practices offered those given the additional power to protect the white master of the plantation, since their power and improved place flow directly from that master. Dave's father, Bob Saunders, occupies one of these marginally more powerful positions, and to protect his position, he's willing to exert Mr. Hawkins' will on other workers, even his own son—in every conversation with Dave, Bob Saunders focus is on how Dave should listen to and work well for Hawkins. "Hawkins" name itself is symbolic—it is a reference to a hawk, a bird of prey that enjoys a perch at the top of the food chain, just as Hawkins commands the power at the plantation.

While Hawkins control over the plantation and some of his practices for running it are reminiscent of the pre-Civil War South, the climax of the story dramatizes one of the clearest ways that racist power functions differently in the 1930s south while still exerting control over the Black characters. After it's uncovered that Dave accidentally shot and killed Mr. Hawkins's **mule**, Jenny, Mr. Hawkins declares that no one is going to hurt Dave, and that instead Dave will just have to pay him back the cost of the mule—$50—at the rate of $2 per month. In slave-holding times, a plantation owner might well have whipped or otherwise harmed or killed a slave who had caused such "property damage." Hawkins, though, does no such thing, and at first Dave thinks that the debt he now owes amounts to getting out of "killing the mule so easily." It's only later that Dave realizes how much power Mr. Hawkins has gotten over him by imposing the debt—that it'll take him almost two years to pay for one dead mule. The underlying implication is that while the Black workers on the plantation are not legally slaves, they are nonetheless subject to what might be described as "wage slavery"—they are entirely dependent on Mr. Hawkins for whatever money they can earn, that money is never enough for them to be independent, and they can never cross Mr. Hawkins because of their dependence on him.

The fact that Mr. Hawkins lives in a "big white house" is also significant. In addition to the racial connotations, the color of his house invokes the White House, where United States presidents live. Through this image of the house, Wright is simultaneously demonstrating how power on plantations has evolved (instead of cracking a whip, Mr. Hawkins uses social skills and economic power to exert control, like an experienced politician) while simultaneously condemning the role the United States government played in ignoring or even promoting these imbalances of power.

While in "The Man Who Was Almost a Man" Wright often depicts Dave's efforts to become a man as comedic, the story underlines a deeper tragedy: that Black Americans more generally weren't recognized as "men"—as full human beings—even after emancipation. In "The Man Who Was Almost A Man," this process of dehumanization begins at Mr. Hawkins. The story shows how a white man in the United States can exert frightening and unjust power subtly, without using violence, without even being all that present. Rather than sensationalizing or focusing on only the most extreme examples of racism, in this story Wright depicts a form racist power that, precisely because it *avoided* violence, could maintain an appearance of legitimacy while being just as pervasive, and giving white men just as much control over Black lives.

ECONOMIC OPPRESSION

The Saunders family is poor—Dave's mother is worried about saving enough money for winter clothes and shows extreme frugality by asking to use the catalog that Dave borrows from the local store as toilet paper in the outhouse. While Mr. Hawkins, the owner of the plantation where the Saunders family works, is not depicted as a violent or openly cruel man, in "The Man Who Was Almost a Man," Wright details the insidious ways that the economically powerful use their money and resources to oppress those with less money.

While Dave's quest to buy a gun is ostensibly about proving his

masculinity, being able to buy the gun is also a way for him to prove his economic independence, and Wright notes how income can affect a person's self-worth. Within the story, there is a clear hierarchy, where the characters at the top are the ones who control the money. As a Black teenager working on a Southern plantation, Dave is at the very bottom of the hierarchy: he earns a wage from Mr. Hawkins for the work he performs in Hawkins's fields, but as a teenager that wage doesn't even go to him: it is given to his mother, who then uses the money for their household. Dave earns money he can't use, while his mother gets Dave's money but it is barely enough to get by. When Dave needs to come up with the two dollars to buy a gun, he begs his mother to give it to him, because he knows that even talking to his father about money might result in a beating—it is Dave's father, then, who really controls the family's finances. Even Dave's father, however, must answer to Mr. Hawkins, who doesn't even appear until late in the story but whose authority is always felt through his ability to pay or withhold wages.

The aftermath of the death of the **mule** Jenny shows how the control of money and resources naturally results in those in power getting even more power, and those who are economically weak getting ever more oppressed. After Dave accidentally shoots and kills the mule, Mr. Hawkins doesn't get upset. Though Wright depicts Jenny's death as gruesome—she is "slopping in blood" and dies with an open mouth and blank, glassy eyes—Hawkins just treats her death as an economic consideration, slapping a value of $50 that Dave needs to repay. On the one hand, placing a value on a life of any sort harkens back to the way that slaves in pre-Civil War South were reduced purely to their economic value. On the other, it also shows how Hawkins now sits atop an economic system that always works to his benefit. Mr. Hawkins may even *benefit* from the $50 repayment: when Dave is caught after killing the mule, he has no room to negotiate, and Mr. Hawkins has the power to extort more from him than the mule is worth. By saddling Dave with almost two years' worth of debt for killing the mule, Mr. Hawkins links Dave's fate to Jenny's. Wright shows the reader that, to Mr. Hawkins, the value that Dave provides is not so different from the value a mule provides. This realization echoes a conversation earlier in the story in which Dave's father asks how Dave gets along with Mr. Hawkins and Dave replies that he "plows mo lan than anybody over there." Dave wants to give an answer that will please his father, and he realizes that the best way to prove he has worth (to Mr. Hawkins, and therefore also to his father) is to prove he's a good worker, well worth the investment that Mr. Hawkins pays him as wages.

While race clearly plays a role in the power imbalances between the characters in "The Man Who Was Almost a Man," Wright's keen focus on the economics of Mr. Hawkins' plantation demonstrates that Wright was also thinking more broadly about the relationship between the haves and the have-nots. While at times Wright seems to acknowledge the possibility that violence (i.e., the gun) could improve the economic situation of powerless Black Americans, the tragic and ridiculous outcome of Dave's experiences with the gun on the plantation seem to indicate that the new economic constraints now set up around Black Americans in the South are more complicated, entrenched, and invisible than any armed revolution could upend. Ultimately, near the end of the story, Dave realizes his oppression when he thinks: "They treat me like a mule." He sees that in the economic structure of the farm, he is, like Jenny, an asset rather than a person. Moments later, Dave sneaks onto a train and runs away, seeking a place "where he could be a man"—which might be taken as referring to a place that doesn't operate on an economic situation that makes independence for Black people such as Dave impossible.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

THE GUN

The **gun**'s symbolism in "The Man Who Was Almost a Man" operates on two levels. The first level is what the gun symbolizes *to* Dave. For Dave, who has grown up to equate the respect that a man gets with the physical violence that the man is capable of, the gun represents manhood. Having a gun, Dave believes, will give him a level of power and control that he doesn't often get to experience among his older co-workers and domineering, and sometimes physically abusive, father.

Yet at the level of the story, the gun has a more complicated symbolic meaning. Over the course of the story, the gun comes to symbolize the danger and self-destructiveness of so simplistically equating manhood with a capacity for violence. From the moment Dave gets the gun, it seems as if things are about to go disastrously, and then they do go disastrously. First, after getting the gun, he is careless in how he handles it—sleeping with the loaded weapon under his pillow, and then strapping the weapon to his thigh. The story in these moments gives off a sense of foreboding, making clear that the excitement that Dave feels for his capacity to cause violence has made him reckless and unheeding of the responsibility that comes with such power. Then, when he actually fires the gun for the first time, he is so nervous and inexperienced that he closes his eyes and accidentally shoots and kills Jenny the **mule**. Dave had thought owning a gun would immediately make him a man. That he couldn't even fire the gun correctly gives the lie to that idea. Jenny's death then ends up with Dave even more oppressed, and more of a laughingstock then he was before:

he's forced into debt to Mr. Hawkins, the owner of the mule, mocked by everyone who hears the story, and likely to get beaten by his father. The way that Dave's purchase of the gun so profoundly backfires makes it clear that Dave's idea that a capacity for violence is the core of becoming a man is not just false, but leads to terrible consequences. That Dave ends the story by running away with the gun—but a gun that now lacks any bullets—makes clear that he ends the story still in the sway of his destructive and simplistic conception of what makes a man, but also that he still has the chance for those ideas to change and mature.

JENNY THE MULE

In 1865, the Union enacted an order to provide some freed former slaves with "40 acres and a mule," with the idea that these freed families would then be able to own the land they were once enslaved to work, and support themselves. In other words, it was a promise not just of legal freedom, but also of economic self-control. This promise went unfulfilled. After the war, President Andrew Johnson explicitly reversed the "40 acres and a mule policy," and throughout the South racist Jim Crows were instituted that restricted both the rights and economic prospects of Black Americans.

In "The Man Who Was Almost a Man," Jenny the mule references the stolen promise of Black political and economic freedoms. Jenny is owned not by any of the Black farmworkers, but rather by the white plantation owner Mr. Hawkins. While Mr. Hawkins himself does not come across as overtly cruel, what the story makes clear is that he does not have to be in order to control his Black workers, because he exerts economic control over them. He controls their pay, and he controls the resources that allow the workers to do their jobs. When Dave accidentally kills Jenny, Mr. Hawkins can act "kindly" and "fairly" by putting Dave into a debt that will take more than two years to repay. Jenny the mule, therefore, in both life and death, comes to represent the Jim Crow system in the South that ensured that Blacks would always end up at the bottom, regardless of what happens.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Harper Perennial edition of *Eight Men: Short Stories* published in 2008.

The Man Who Was Almost a Man Quotes

❝ Shucks, a man oughta hava little gun aftah he done worked hard all day.

Related Characters: Dave Saunders (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 3

Explanation and Analysis

This quote occurs very early in the story and marks the first time Dave has the thought that motivates all his actions throughout the rest of the story: that in order to prove his manhood, he needs to acquire a gun. Dave has internalized this violent idea of what makes a man from others around him, particularly his father (who beats Dave) and the older field workers (who talk down to Dave like a child). Dave sees having the ability to deal violence that a gun offers as a surefire way to prove his manhood, to make everyone else respect him as a man because they fear what he can do to them.

Note also how Dave connects the gun and being a man to hard work. Put another way, he connects the gun and manhood to what he is owed or deserves in exchange for his economic output. At this point Dave seems to have a sense that his hard work may result in reaping the benefits down the road, but over the course of the story it will become increasingly clear—both in general and to Dave—that his work won't in fact lead to him earning respect or the sort of independence he thinks is the right of a man.

Throughout the story, the line between Dave and the narrator is blurred. In this case, the narrator tells the reader what Dave is thinking word-for-word, rendered in the same spellings used for his dialogue. Elsewhere, however, the exposition of the story is written in what might be described as a high literary style. The contrast between these two styles highlights the fact that it was unusual for a story of this era to give so much space to the interior thoughts of a Black man in the 1930s American South. In mixing the use of dialect and literary style, Wright insists on both the authenticity of his portrayal of Dave and the other Black characters in the story while at the same time insisting that Dave's thoughts—and the thoughts of Black people more generally—deserve such literary treatment as much as ay white character might.

"How you n ol man Hawkins gitten erlong?"

"Suh?"

"Can't yuh hear? Why don yuh lissen? Ah ast yu how wuz yuh n ol man Hawkins gittin along?"

"Oh, swell, Pa. Ah plows mo lan than anybody over there."

"Waal, yuh oughta keep yo mind on whut yuh doin."

"Yessuh."

Related Characters: Dave Saunders, Bob Saunders (Pa) (speaker), Jim Hawkins

Related Themes:

Page Number: 7

Explanation and Analysis

In this scene, Dave has returned home with the catalog that shows the pictures of guns for dale, and is distracted by it during dinner conversations with his father, Bob Saunders. Bob is clearly annoyed at Dave's distraction. Meanwhile, much of Bob's dialogue throughout the story returns to the ideas he is focused on in this conversation: that Dave must prove himself worthwhile in the eyes of his white employer, Mr. Hawkins. The repeated nature of these quotes shows the inflexible character of Dave's father, who doesn't change over the course of the story, hovering over his son with constant disapproval. The fact that Dave doesn't hear his father at first also demonstrates one of the many ways that the two of them have trouble communicating.

Even when Dave replies that he and Mr. Hawkins are getting along well, the answer doesn't seem to appease his father. The story doesn't explicitly offer a reason for Dave's father's constant disapproval. Perhaps it is because he knows that his son can be foolish and gets involved in schemes like the plan to buy a gun. It could also be a result of his father's own ideas about manhood, and the need to flex strength and power at all times. Finally, it also can be taken as showing the degree to which the Saunders family is dependent on Hawkins. Despite the fact that the story takes place long after the end of slavery in the American South, the Saunders family still lives and works on Hawkins' plantation and their livelihoods entirely depend on Hawkins being happy with the work they do. Bob Saunders may be the head of *his* small household, but he is by no means independent.

"But Ma, we needa gun. Pa ain got no gun. We needa gun in the house. Yuh kin never tell whut might happen."

Related Characters: Dave Saunders (speaker), Bob Saunders (Pa), Mrs. Saunders (Ma)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 8

Explanation and Analysis

Dave has decided to convince his mother to give him the money to buy a gun when his father isn't around. When Dave finally gets his mother alone, he begins making his case for her to give him the money that he earned working for his white employer, Mr. Hawkins (because the wages were given to his mother, not Dave). She initially dismisses his arguments. But what finally persuades his mother is the argument that he should buy a gun because his father doesn't have one, and a man needs a gun in the house. The fact that this argument works shows that Dave's mother has similar ideas about masculinity: that being a man means having the capacity to be violent, to kill.

The argument also specifically refers to the situation of Black people in the South at the time when the story was set. Dave and his mother both recognize the constant threat of violence that a Black person living in the early 20th century would have experienced, particularly while employed by a white man in the South. While this threat of violence is mostly unfulfilled in the story (since the primary physical violence Dave experiences is at the hands of his father), the gun is still attractive because it offers a promise of power and security that would not otherwise be available to the Saunders family. Dave's mother knows that it's dangerous to allow Dave to buy the gun, but she also knows that life on the plantation can be dangerous and unpredictable.

In the gray light of dawn he held it loosely, feeling a sense of power. Could kill a man with a gun like this. Kill anybody, black or white.

Related Characters: Dave Saunders

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 10

Explanation and Analysis

Dave wakes up the morning after buying the gun and realizes for the first time the true extent of its power. Previously, Dave's motivations for buying the gun were presented in interpersonal terms: he wanted the gun in order to have specific people in his life respect him, like the other older workers in the field. This scene, however, is one of the first times that Dave directly considers the role of race on the plantation. Dave's knowledge that he could kill anyone—even a white man—makes him feel powerful, suggesting that before he owned the gun, he felt powerless around white men, like his employer Mr. Hawkins (who is not mentioned by name here, but who is the main white character Dave interacts with in the story, aside from Joe the store owner).

While racism runs throughout the story, there are no slurs, whips, burning crosses, or other overtly obvious or stereotypical signs of racism that Dave experiences. Yet the story does capture system racism at work, though of course it was written before the term "systemic racism" became common. This systemic racism is evident in the way that Dave knows that he has to act differently around white characters, as when he balks upon first enters the white man Joe's store, even though Joe has done nothing to threaten him. It is also evident in the way Hawkins economic control of the plantation means he can control his Black workers without resorting to the obvious physical racist violence of the pre-Civil War years. Dave himself doesn't engage in much introspection about race over the course of the story, and so this quote is important because it makes clear that at a fundamental level he recognizes the pervasive racism underlying his oppression.

❝ The gun felt loose in his fingers; he waved it wildly for a moment. Then he shut his eyes and tightened his forefinger. Bloom! A report half deafened him and he thought his right hand was torn from his arm.

Related Characters: Dave Saunders

Related Themes: ♂

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 11

Explanation and Analysis

It's the moment of truth: Dave tries to fire his newly purchased gun for the first time. Unfortunately for him, this action will end in disaster. Wright foreshadows this disaster by capturing the visceral details of firing a gun, showing exactly how things can go wrong for an amateur like Dave. The looseness of the gun in Dave's hands shows that he doesn't have control over it—literally—which foreshadows how he will lose control of the chain of events that he's about to set off by firing the gun. But just because Dave cannot control the gun's power doesn't mean the gun *has* no power—Wright uses the onomatopoeia "Bloom!" to emphasize how powerful the gun is when fired. Wright also uses hyperbole, noting that Dave feels like the gun tore his hand from his arm, even though the gun isn't quite that powerful, which again emphasizes how Dave doesn't yet have the skill to handle the power of the gun.

By creating these contrasts between Dave's expectations (that just by owning it, the gun will make him a man and therefore give him more control) and Dave's actual experience of not being able to control the gun as it should be controlled, Wright shows how Dave's fantasies about the gun and manhood differ from the reality he lives in. The simple ability to dish out violence isn't, in fact, the only measure of a man.

❝ Then he saw the hole in Jenny's side, right between the ribs. It was round, wet, red. A crimson stream streaked down the front leg, flowing fast. Good Gawd! Ah wuzn't shootin at the mule.

Related Characters: Jenny, Dave Saunders

Related Themes: ♂

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 12

Explanation and Analysis

In this scene, Dave discovers that not only did his firing of the gun frighten the mule Jenny, but he actually accidentally shot her. As with other parts of the story, Wright mixes the high literary style of the narration with the more colloquial style of Dave's thoughts. "Crimson stream" is a poetic way to describe blood flowing from the mule's wound, and this language is shocking because it's being used to describe a dying mule, which isn't normally a very poetic image. While Dave has just made a very serious and careless mistake by shooting his gun with his eyes closed and hitting the mule, Wright's high style of language elevates the situation, taking

something that could potentially be merely comical or gruesome and turning it into something tragic.

Several times in the story Wright draws a contrast between what Dave intends and what Dave actually does. Dave did not aim the gun at the mule, but he shoots her anyway. While Dave is not entirely blameless (the story foreshadows several times that Dave's reckless handling of the gun will end in tragedy), he is also the victim of bad luck. Despite Dave's flaws, the literary style of Wright's narration helps portray his misfortunes sympathetically such that he is portrayed not just as a wayward youth with ridiculous ideas about manhood, but rather that he himself is a victim of such ideas that are pervasive in his society..

Somebody in the crowd laughed. Jim Hawkins walked close to Dave and looked into his face.

"Well, looks like you have bought you a dead mule, Dave."

"Ah swear fo Gawd, Ah didn go t kill the mule Mistah Hawkins!"

"But you killed her!"

Related Characters: Dave Saunders, Jim Hawkins (speaker), Jenny

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 15

Explanation and Analysis

When it is discovered that the mule Jenny has been killed, Dave is quickly identified as a likely suspect, and a crowd gathers to witness what will happen to him. Throughout the story, Dave is forced to endure characters belittling him or looking down on him, and the crowd scene is a culmination of this verbal abuse. Notably, most characters in the crowd (with the exception of Dave's father) don't even touch Dave—they reduce him to tears with words alone. The scene illuminates one of the key ideas about masculinity that Dave and the others on the plantation believe—that being a man means avoiding shame. While Dave's punishment for killing the mule is a debt he'll have to repay to Mr. Hawkins, a crucial component of this punishment is also the public shaming that he endures at the hands of the crowd.

The dialogue between Dave and Mr. Hawkins once again explores the contrast between Dave's intentions and what Dave actually does. Dave protests that he didn't intend to kill the mule, but Mr. Hawkins replies that he did anyway. This scene, then, illustrates the harsh reality of the plantation, where intentions don't count for anything, and a man is judged for his external actions—again providing insight into why Dave decided to buy a gun in the first place. It also shows how constant and inflexible Mr. Hawkins is as a character.

Finally, the scene implies the way that Mr. Hawkins can manage his plantation, and its Black workers, in a way that puts him in complete control without the overt and obviously racist tactics of the pre-Civil-War years of slavery. Mr. Hawkins doesn't physically punish Dave in any way. Instead, he uses economic control to force Dave to "buy" the dead mule. Mr. Hawkins comes off seeming reasonable, even kind, while at the same time putting Dave into a debt he can't escape.

Nobody ever gave him anything. All he did was work. They treat me like a mule n then they beat me.

Related Characters: Jenny, Dave Saunders

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 17

Explanation and Analysis

As he lies in bed at night thinking about what happened after his employer Mr. Hawkins discovered that he had killed the mule Jenny, Dave has a revelation: the way his boss treats him is just like the way he treats a mule. While Dave has experienced discontent with his life on the plantation before, this scene shows a new level of awareness—and anger—from Dave. Previously, Dave did not rebel when his father told him the best thing to do was to keep his mind on his work and keep a good relationship with Mr. Hawkins, even though Dave was unhappy about it. Dave's revelation that, to Mr. Hawkins, he will never be anything more than a mule changes everything. Dave, here, is recognizing that his entire value to Mr. Hawkins is economic—as with a mule, it is measured by how much value he produces relative to the costs he creates. To Mr. Hawkins, he is not a man, with intrinsic worth. He is a tool. This realization sets into motion the events that will ultimately lead to Dave hopping on to a train and leaving the plantation.

In this quote, Wright once again juxtaposes a standard literary narration style with the more colloquial style of Dave's thoughts. In this case, the role of the literary narration is to give greater authority to Dave's thoughts. By presenting the information in a neutral voice ("Nobody ever gave him anything"), Wright provides context to prove that Dave's thoughts about being treated like a mule are meant to be taken seriously rather than dismissed like some of Dave's earlier delusions about the gun.

When he reached the top of a ridge he stood straight and proud in the moonlight, looking at Jim Hawkins' big white house, feeling the gun sagging in his pocket. Lawd, ef Ah had just one mo bullet Ah'd taka shot at that house. Ah'd like t scare ol man Hawkins jusa little . . . Jusa enough t let im know Dave Saunders is a man.

Related Characters: Jim Hawkins , Dave Saunders

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 18

Explanation and Analysis

After being punished by being forced into two years of debt for his accidental killing of the mule, Dave goes out at night with his gun to try firing it again. After he fires his remaining shots, he goes up on a ridge and looks down on Mr. Hawkins' house and fantasizes about shooting a bullet at the house. The scene is significant, both because it's the first time Dave's violent fantasies have specifically included Mr. Hawkins but also because even in Dave's fantasy, he doesn't actually imagine shooting Mr. Hawkins, only shooting near enough to scare him. For Dave, this is a moment of character growth—while previously he blamed his problems on people in a social rank closer to him (like the other older workers), he realizes now that ultimately it is people like his employer Mr. Hawkins who are most responsible for making Dave feel like less than a man.

Still, while this is a moment of growth for Dave, it isn't completely triumphant. As he does elsewhere in the story, Wright provides concrete details in the text (in this case, the empty gun sagging in Dave's pocket) to signal that Dave's elaborate fantasies will never become reality. Even if Dave did have a bullet to shoot, it seems unlikely that this would have the positive outcome he expects, given his previous experience with the gun. While Dave has grown from his realization that Mr. Hawkins is the source of his oppression, he is unable to let go of the idea that firing the gun just one more time would solve all his problems, suggesting that in many ways, he still hasn't learned from his experiences.

The passage also makes a point that moves beyond what Dave himself realizes. Any reference to an American "big white house" carries with it a potential reference to the most famous white house in the United States: the home of the President and center of the United States government. Through this connection, the story seems to suggest that in addition to Dave's realization that Hawkins stands at the center of his oppression is an even deeper realization: that the United States government and its politics and polices are the true sources of the entrenched economic dependence that robs Dave and all of the other Black characters on the plantation of any true freedom.

He felt 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 . . .

Related Characters: Dave Saunders

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 18

Explanation and Analysis

At the very end of the story, facing years of debt to Mr. Hawkins and an imminent beating from his father, Dave runs away: he hops on a train, taking the empty gun with him, and the train pulls away toward a new, unspecified destination. While Wright has combined Dave's thoughts in dialect with literary narration throughout the story, the final lines are purely narration. This is because the ending is purposely ambiguous, and giving direct access to Dave's thoughts would undermine the ambiguity. Wright does not even give a hint of what destination the train is heading for. The train's journey can be read as parallel to Dave's—like the train, it isn't clear where Dave will ultimately go in his journey to become a man, or in what way he will become a man, or even if he will ever truly become a free and independent man.

But while the ending represents a new beginning, it also suggests continuity. Dave is unwilling to hop on the train without the gun, even though it's empty. He feels his pocket to make sure it's still there. In the end, then, Dave is unable

to let go of the gun and all of the violence-based ideas about masculinity that it represents. Still, this seeming pessimism contrasts with the lyrical nature of the final lines, which includes a description of the rails of the track glinting in the moonlight. The conflicted nature of the ending suggests that there is still conflict within Dave and that it is still too early to determine what sort of man he'll become.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

THE MAN WHO WAS ALMOST A MAN

As he's heading home from the fields for dinner, Dave Saunders thinks about some of the other, older workers in the field who always talk down to him as if he were a little boy. Dave thinks to himself that he's not afraid of those other workers, even though they're bigger than him. He concludes that if he just had a **gun**, he'd be able to prove he's a man and shut them up. In fact, he decides that at 17, he's enough of a man that he deserves a gun. He plans to ask his mother for money so he can buy one.

From its opening lines, the story quickly establishes that Dave's views of masculinity are shaped by the people around him and, more specifically, by how they treat him. Further, it makes clear that this version of masculinity is rooted in violence and power. Dave's quest to buy a gun is inspired by these violent ideas about manhood.

On the way home, Dave stops by Joe's store. He feels confident at first, but once he sees Joe—a white man—his courage begins to slip. Joe asks what Dave wants, and Dave responds by vaguely asking if he can borrow a Sears Roebuck catalog to look at overnight. Joe questions if Dave is going to actually buy something, since his mother doesn't yet let him have his own money. Dave indignantly responds that he's nearly a man, which makes Joe laugh. Eventually Joe's questions lead to Dave admitting that he wants to buy a gun. Joe tries to talk Dave out of it at first, but he eventually agrees to let Dave borrow the catalog.

When Dave arrives at Joe's store to buy the gun, he finds that he doesn't have the courage he expected to have. Some of this may be because Joe is a white man—even without saying anything, he seems to intimidate Dave, emphasizing how much more authority white men had in the South in the early twentieth century. Joe's laughter at Dave's claim that he's a man emphasizes this point—clearly Joe doesn't see Dave as a man yet. This is partly because of Dave's young age, but it's also possible to infer that Joe's ideas about race also plays a role in his dismissive behavior toward Dave. The fact that Dave's mother holds his money further suggests Dave's status as a child, while also establishing the role that money plays in granting or thwarting independence in the story.

Dave feels triumphant for getting Joe to give him the catalog. As Dave is leaving, Joe has an idea, and mentions that he actually has a **gun** Dave could buy. Joe explains that it's an old gun, and when Dave asks, promises that it will come fully loaded. He says that Dave can have the gun for two dollars. Dave brags that he can get that much money together as soon as he gets his pay. Joe promises to hold the gun at the store for him in the meantime. Dave takes the catalog with him when he goes.

Because he tried to talk Dave out of buying a gun in the previous scene, Joe seems to realize that selling Dave a gun may not be a good idea, but ultimately, he is more interested in getting the sale, foreshadowing one of the many ways in the story that Black characters will be judged by white men according to their economic value. Dave's attempts to demonstrate what he believes is a convincing display of masculinity, bragging about his money and how easily he could buy the gun, again show his sense that masculinity is defined by the ability to show physical and economic power.

When Dave makes it home, his mother, Mrs. Saunders, chides him for being late and for coming to dinner before washing up. Then his mother notices the catalog where he had put it on the table. She questions him about what it is and where he got it. When Dave admits he got it from Joe's store, his mother suggests using it in the outhouse. Dave pleads for her not to do that, and, reluctantly, she returns the catalog to him. Dave is nervous and distracted as he washes up for dinner, such that his mother threatens to take the catalog from him and burn it. Dave is able to get her to relent, and then pores over the catalog, so engrossed with it that he doesn't realize his mother has put food on the table.

As the only female character with a major role in a story focused on manhood and masculinity, it is worthwhile to pay attention to Dave's mother's situation and viewpoint. Her role is domestic, as indicated by the fact she is making dinner when Dave returns from his work out in the fields. At the same time, she also treats Dave like a child, chiding him and threatening to burn the catalog. Her desire to use the catalog as toilet paper in the outhouse also points to Dave's family's limited financial situation, and his mother's role as the one who figures out how to keep their home running despite meager resources

Soon, Dave's father, Bob Saunders, and his younger brother enter the room and sit at the table. Dave's father also asks about the catalog, to which Dave replies that it's just a catalog. Dave gets excited when he comes upon the catalog's listings of **guns**, but then he realizes his father is watching and catches himself. He shifts to eating his dinner. While he eats, Dave decides not to mention the gun at all to his father—he knows that talking about money in front of his father won't go well. Instead, he plans to corner his mother alone.

Dave's father does not have many lines in the story, but from his introduction, it becomes clear that his presence hovers over Dave and that he is the source of many of the ideas about masculinity that Dave has internalized. Dave's father doesn't even have to say anything—just his stare and Dave's nervous reaction is enough to communicate that he is always judging Dave, and that there is danger—possibly physical danger—for Dave should his father judge him wanting. This scene also illustrates the ways in which Dave and his father don't communicate: Dave decides not to even attempt talking about the gun with his father, suggesting that he is afraid of speaking openly with him.

Dave's father tells Dave to stop fooling with the catalog, and then asks Dave how he's getting along with Jim Hawkins, the plantation owner. Dave responds that it's going well, and that he plows more land than anyone else. Dave's father responds that Dave should keep his mind on his work.

Dave's father is clearly the dominant force in this family, but this conversation makes clear that his entire focus is on making the white plantation owner, Mr. Hawkins, happy. Put another way: Dave's father has internalized his white employer's views as his own. To Mr. Hawkins, both Dave and his father are economic investments, and their value is related to what they can produce for him as field workers. Dave's father's insistence that his son focus on nothing but his work may be heartless, but it is also realistic—an accurate description of what Mr. Hawkins wants from his workers. It also implies the degree to which Dave's family is completely dependent on Hawkins for their income.

When Dave's father and younger brother leave the kitchen, Dave begins working up the courage to ask his mother about the **gun** he wants to buy. He continues to look at pictures of the gun in the catalog and imagines what it would look and feel like in his hand. His fantasy about owning it becomes ever more elaborate, as he makes promises to himself about how he will polish the gun and keep it in pristine condition, and how he will keep it loaded.

Dave's elaborate fantasy about the gun is also a fantasy about being treated like a real man. And similar to his ideas about manhood, his ideas about the gun are all external: about how good it will look, how it will command respect, and how it will hold the threat to deal out violence.

Dave opens the catalog for his mother to the page with the **gun** on it, but his mother doesn't understand what he wants. Dave doesn't even dare to point at the gun, but eventually his mother understands and asks if Dave has gone crazy. She tells him to "Git outta here!" and stop asking about it. Dave argues that she promised to get him one, but she responds that she doesn't care what she promised. Dave says that he'll never ask her for anything else again. Dave's mother remains firm and declares that he will never touch a penny of the wages that Mr. Hawkins pays to her for Dave's work.

The fact that Dave corners his mother after the other male members of the household have left the room suggests that Dave realizes her position as a woman makes her more vulnerable to his influence. Still, Dave's mother doesn't give in right away. Her main advantage is that she holds the wages that Mr. Hawkins gives to her for Dave's work. While the hierarchy of power on the plantation is clearly ordered by race and gender—with white men at the top, then black men, then black women—Dave's mother shows how money also plays a role and how it can even temporarily reverse the usual hierarchy.

Dave tries a different approach to convince his mother to buy him the **gun**. He says that the family needs a gun because his father doesn't have one yet. His mother replies that even if the family did get a gun, Dave wouldn't be the one to have it. Dave replies that he worked hard all summer. He says he only wants two dollars out of his own money. He promises to give the gun to his father. His mother asks in a low voice why he even needs a gun. She thinks it'll only bring him trouble. Dave replies that he'll hide the gun, and then adds that he's almost a man now. His mother asks who will sell Dave the gun, and he tells her about Joe at the store. His mother confirms that the price is only two dollars while she slowly puts the dinner plates away. Finally, she turns to him.

Dave and his mother agree on some ideas about masculinity: they both believe that a father is the head of a household. Dave therefore appeals to the authority of his father in order to convince his mother to let him buy the gun. He also appeals to his mother's fear—she recognizes that as a Black man in a white-dominated society her husband is vulnerable. A gun could help protect him, in theory. Dave's mother has a feeling that giving Dave the money to buy the gun will only lead to trouble, but she ultimately puts this feeling aside, and there is a slight sense, that this may also be because, as a woman on the plantation, she doesn't question what the men do.

Dave's mother promises to let Dave get the **gun** on one condition: he has to bring it straight back for his father. Dave agrees and asks to go get it right away. Dave's mother finally pulls out the money from under her dress. She doesn't agree that Dave needs a gun, but she concedes that Dave's father does. She tells Dave that he needs to come right back to her with the gun (and that if he doesn't his father will lick him good). Dave agrees, takes the money, and runs back toward the store. His mother calls after him, but he doesn't listen.

Dave's father continues to exert influence on his wife and son, even after he has left the room. Meanwhile, he remains Dave's justification for buying the gun—and the fact that Dave's mother agrees that Dave's father should have a gun shows that she, too, buys into the idea that manhood requires the ability to wield violence; but also implies that she sees that her family faces physical threats—perhaps because of their race—that a gun might allow them to face. The transfer of money from Dave's mother to Dave shows that she is losing her ability to tell him what to do. Further, it shows the basic power of money: once Dave has the money, he stops listening to her.

The next morning, the first thing Dave does is reach under his pillow for the **gun**. He holds it loosely and feels its power. He knows that he could kill anybody, "black or white," and he believes this means everyone will have to respect him. He tests the gun's weight and marvels at it.

While Dave was initially motivated to buy the gun on account of mockery from the other older field workers (who are Black), his quick realization that he could also shoot a white man indicates the true source of his oppression. The gun's weight foreshadows its power—and also its danger.

The night before, he did not come straight home as his mother asked him to. Instead, he went out to the fields until he knew his family was asleep, testing the weapon out by aiming it at imaginary foes. He did not fire it, however, and is not sure that he knows how to fire it. When his mother had come to him in the middle of the night asking for the gun, he lied and told her he had hidden it somewhere outside.

The fact that Dave doesn't know how to shoot the gun suggests that buying the weapon was not enough to instantly turn him into the type of man he wishes to become. He aims at imaginary foes, showing that his ideas about the gun are still based more in fantasy than in reality. Dave's lies to his mother suggest that, at this point, he can only get what he wants through trickery, not strength.

Now in the early morning, Dave wraps the loaded gun to his thigh with a strip of old flannel and skips breakfast to head down toward the barns before it even gets light outside. Mr. Hawkins stops him, looking at him suspiciously because Dave is early. Dave lies, however, and says he's just going to hitch up the mule Jenny to plow the fields. Mr. Hawkins says that since he's up so early, he may as well plow a stretch down by the woods, and Dave agrees to do it. Dave hitches up Jenny and starts to plow, still feeling the weight of the **gun** on his thigh.

Strapping the deadly weapon to his bare thigh seems reckless, and demonstrates that Dace doesn't understand the gun's potential danger. The first conversation between Dave and Mr. Hawkins quickly establishes the relationship between the two of them: Mr. Hawkins is not just Dave's employer, he controls every aspect of Dave's work. Mr. Hawkins eyes Dave with suspicion when he sees him awake so early in the morning, suggesting that he views Dave as an unreliable worker and that Dave's father is correct to worry about Dave's relationship with Hawkins.

Dave plows two whole rows with the **mule** Jenny before even taking the **gun** out. He talks to the mule, excitedly telling her what the gun is and what it can do. Finally, he decides to test the gun. The gun feels loose in his fingers. He closes his eyes and shoots it. The sound half-deafens him and the force jerks his arm. He hears Jenny whinny and gallop away. His hand hurts so much from the kickback that it goes numb. The gun is now at Dave's feet, and he's not entirely sure what happened. He grits his teeth and kicks the gun, angry at it for hurting his arm. Jenny is far away over the fields.

The scene of Dave trying to shoot the gun is comic, with him clearly not knowing what he's doing. He can't even hold the gun tight when he tries to test it, and he closes his eyes when he's about to shoot. The outcome of the first test shot seems comic, too, with the kickback hurting his arm and the blast half-deafening him. Dave thought just having a gun would make him a man; his inability to use the gun hints at all the aspects of manhood he has overlooked: skill, knowledge, responsibility. Dave's ideas about the gun have all been masculine power fantasies. This scene punctures those fantasies.

Dave chases after the **mule** Jenny, calling for her to hold on. When he catches up with her, he finds her trembling. Her left side is wet and red with blood. Dave looks closer and can't believe he shot the mule. He tries to restrain the mule to get a better look. A crimson stream is flowing down her leg. Dave panics. He knows he has to stop the blood or else Jenny will bleed to death. He chases her for half a mile until she stops, breathing heavily. He leads her back to where he left the **gun**, then tries to plug up the hole in her side with damp black earth rubbed over his hands. Jenny keeps resisting as more blood flows out, forming a pool. Dave feels that there must be something he can do, but soon the mule sinks to her knees, and then dies.

While the aftermath of Dave firing the gun at first seems comic, now it's revealed as tragic—he accidentally shot the mule—which not only further punctures his former fantasies about the gun, it shows that such fantasies have deadly consequences. Dave's efforts to regain control of the situation by catching the mule and plugging up the wound suggest he won't let go of his delusions about the gun easily. That his efforts are futile suggest that these delusions will only lead to more trouble for him.

Dave's stomach feels empty. He takes the **gun** and buries it at the foot of a tree. He tries to cover the blood with dirt but stops when he realizes it's no use—there's no hiding the big dead **mule**, Jenny. Dave doesn't want to tell his boss Mr. Hawkins that he shot the mule, so he comes up with a lie: that Jenny stumbled and fell on the point of a plow. Dave realizes this lie isn't very plausible and slowly walks across the field.

Dave begins to accept that he's in trouble. The corpse of the mule is too big to hide, and likewise, Dave won't be able to hide from the inevitable punishment he'll receive for killing the mule. Even as he accepts this, however, he is unwilling to abandon the gun. The fact that he chooses to bury the gun (knowing that when he's caught, it will certainly be taken from him) suggests that on some level he still buys into the idea that the gun could give him power.

At sunset of that day, two of Mr. Hawkins' men are burying the **mule** Jenny at the edge of the woods. Mr. Hawkins remarks that he doesn't know how in the world it happened. Soon Dave's family arrive to the gathered crowd, asking where Dave is. Mr. Hawkins points him out, and his mother grabs him and asks what he did. Dave says he did nothing, but his father also demands that he explain what he's done. Dave tells his lie about Jenny being impaled after falling on the point of the plow. Mr. Hawkins asks if anyone has ever heard of such a thing, and the crowd murmurs. Dave's mother insists that Dave tell the real truth. At this moment, one man notes that the mule's wound looks like a bullet hole, causing Dave's mother to ask what he did with the **gun**. The crowd focuses on Dave. Mr. Hawkins asks if Dave really had a gun. Dave's father catches Dave by the shoulders and shakes him vigorously, demanding that he tell the truth. Dave looks at the dead mule and begins to cry while Dave's mother, Dave's father, and Mr. Hawkins continue to ask him what happened.

The story jumps forward in time, to the consequences of the discovery of the dead mule. While no one immediately accuses Dave of killing the mule when it is first discovered, it becomes increasingly clear that things are looking bad for Dave. When Dave's mother asks Dave what he did, Dave denies doing anything. When his father asks, he tells an elaborate but implausible lie. Finally, when Mr. Hawkins asks, Dave has no choice but to tell the truth. Once again, this shows the hierarchy of the plantation—Dave can straight up lie to his mother, and evade his father, but he can't do anything against the white plantation owner Mr. Hawkins, who is the ultimate authority. While Dave's father has threatened to beat Dave before, this scene is the first time that he physically hurts Dave, which links Dave's delusions about the gun to his father's violence.

Dave finally admits what happened. Stuttering, he swears he didn't mean to shoot the **mule** Jenny. His father asks where he got the **gun**, and Dave admits it was from Joe's store. Mr. Hawkins asks how Dave happened to shoot the mule. Dave insists again he wasn't aiming at the mule. Someone in the crowd laughs.

Dave tries to at least convince Mr. Hawkins and his father that his intentions weren't bad. This elicits a laugh from the crowd, suggesting how little Dave's intentions matter on the plantation. All that really matters, particularly to Dave's father and to Mr. Hawkins, is what Dave does.

Mr. Hawkins comes up close to Dave and informs him that he just bought himself a dead **mule**. The whole crowd begins to laugh and taunt Dave, who keeps his head down and twists his feet in the dirt. Mr. Hawkins then tells Dave's father not to worry about it; Dave can just keep working as usual and pay Mr. Hawkins two dollars out of his salary every month. He thinks for a moment, then sets the price of the mule at 50 dollars. Dave's father demands to know what Dave did with the gun, threatening to beat Dave. Dave lies and says he threw it away in the creek, to which his father replies that Dave must go out first thing in the morning to find it again, return it to Joe, and then give the money to Mr. Hawkins as a first payment on the debt. Dave walks away to the sound of people laughing. He has tears in his eyes and is angry.

Dave got the gun to address being mocked by the other farmhands and so he would be seen as a man, but now he is being laughed at by the gathered crowd. The gun has produced the opposite result of what he hoped. And yet, Dave lies about the location of the gun: he continues to believe in the power it can offer him, and wants it for himself. Meanwhile, note how Mr. Hawkins doesn't react to Dave killing the mule with an outward show of anger. In pre-Civil War days, a plantation owner would likely have whipped or worse a slave who had accidentally killed a mule. Mr. Hawkins does no such thing. The power that Hawkins wields is not physical at all; it's economic. For Dave's moment of bad judgment, he puts Dave into over two years of debt. In this way, the story shows how true power does not rest on physical power, but rather on economic control. And it shows how this economic system is insidious: it allows those in power to seem kind, while putting those they control in ever more powerless positions.

That night, Dave doesn't sleep. He is glad at first that he got out of killing the **mule** so easily, but he also feels hurt, particularly when he remembers how the crowd laughed at him. Dave is also dreading the beating that his father has promised to give him. Dave remembers previous beatings and quivers. He thinks that he is being treated like a mule, and blames his mother for telling on him.

Dave bought the gun because he thought it would allow him to escape feelings of shame, to deal violence rather than receive it; but it has only led him to more shame, to greater threats of violence. The fact that he blames his mother suggests both that he isn't ready to take responsibility for his own part in killing the mule and that he feels more comfortable blaming someone closer to his level on the plantation hierarchy rather than someone further above him, like his father or Mr. Hawkins. His sense that he is being treated like a mule fits into his pattern of grievance, but is also a key insight: he is treated essentially like a mule, and like a mule his entire value is determined by his economic value to Mr. Haskins.

Dave thinks about how he fired the **gun** and gets the urge to do it again. He decides that if other men can shoot a gun, he can too. The house is still and Dave decides the rest of his family must be asleep. He slips into his overalls and goes out toward the woods. He stumbles on the ground, looking for the spot where he buried the gun earlier. He finds it, and digs it up.

The story has shown how Dave is caught in a cycle of shame, violence, and lack of control. He thought that buying the gun would get him out of that cycle, and was catastrophically wrong. But now, still caught in that cycle with no other way out, he continues to cling to the delusion of the gun as the only solution to his problems. This way of thinking is at once both ridiculous and in some ways rational: the gun clearly isn't a solution to his problems, but there also isn't any other better solution than the gun.

Dave blows the dirt off the **gun** and checks the barrel, which holds four cartridges that haven't been shot yet. He looks around, and the fields are silent in the moonlight. As he goes to shoot the gun, he closes his eyes and turns his head. But then he decides he wants to keep his eyes open and his head facing forward, so he forces himself to keep his eyes open as he squeezes the trigger. His shot is successful, and the recoil doesn't cause him to drop the gun the way it did the first time he shot the gun. He empties the remaining cartridges by firing into the empty fields.

Dave demonstrates progress with the gun—this time he keeps his eyes open and he doesn't drop it. After seeing the negative consequences of the gun firsthand, Dave has finally developed a better understanding of it. He has developed some skill, some knowledge. Still, it is questionable whether this will do Dave any good, since he fires all his remaining cartridges into an empty field, where they are wasted. He has some skill in handling the gun, but no tactical ideas about using a gun. Though it is also possible to read his decision to fire into the field as Dave's unconscious acknowledgement that actually using the gun against a person will only lead to much worse consequences for him—that the allure of the gun is the fantasy and threat of power it offers, but that the consequences of actually using the gun would show just how weak his position in society truly is.

Dave starts to walk back home. When he reaches the top of a ridge, he stands tall and proud in the moonlight as he looks down at Mr. Hawkins' big white house. He feels the **gun** sagging in his pocket. He wishes he had one more bullet to take a shot at the house. He'd like to scare Mr. Hawkins, to let him know that he, Dave Saunders, is a man.

This is the first time Dave's violent fantasies have specifically included Mr. Hawkins, recalling Dave's earlier realization about how the gun could kill anybody "black or white." Here, Dave directly acknowledges the role that the white Mr. Hawkins plays in oppressing him, rather than passing the blame off to those closer to him, like his father, his mother, and the other field workers. At the same time, Dave's fantasies remain just that: fantasies. Not only won't he shoot at Hawkins' house, he can't: his gun is empty. The reference to Hawkins' "white house" also connects Dave's oppression to the entire political structure of the United States, since the President lives in the White House. The story's implication is that Dave's situation is the result of political choices, of public policy, designed to control and extract economic value from Black people like Dave.

Dave hears a train coming down the tracks nearby. He thinks about his debt to Mr. Hawkins and realizes it'll take him nearly two years to pay it all back. Dave goes down a nearby road, toward the train tracks. He keeps a hand on the gun, and something quivers in his stomach. The train cars thunder past, grinding on the steel tracks. Dave decides that he's going to be riding the train that night. He feels hot all over. After a moment's hesitation, he reaches out and pulls himself atop a train car, lying flat. The empty gun is still in his pocket. Ahead, the railroad tracks gleam in the moonlight, stretching on to somewhere new, to somewhere where Dave could finally be a man.

Dave finds himself in an impossible situation, facing years of debt and beatings from his father. Dave bought the gun because he thought that the gun would allow him to escape this situation, but of course it didn't. His decision to run away by hopping the train, then, is a different sort of escape from this exploitative and impossible cycle that would certainly dominate the rest of his life. That said, the open-ended final lines of the story leave many aspects of Dave's story ambiguous. While the open railway tracks suggest the possibility of a new beginning for Dave, his decision to take the gun with him suggests that some things will also stay the same. He is still looking to "be a man," and it may be that in leaving where he is he can over time discover that being a man is not simply a product of a capacity for violence. But his choice to bring the gun with him suggest that he may be holding on to his old ideas about masculinity, even if they are as empty as the gun in his pocket, and even if the United States makes any sort of true independent manhood for Black Americans to be something always beyond reach. Ultimately, the story leaves Dave as he sets out on a journey, leaving open both the possibility and potential further tragedy of his quest to become a man.

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