

DOMESTIC PREY: RICHARD WRIGHT'S PARODY OF THE HUNT TRADITION IN "THE MAN WHO WAS ALMOST A MAN"

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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 Bumppo, 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.¹ Most important, Faulk-

1. For a general comparison of Faulkner and Wright as Mississippi writers, see Jackson Blyden, "Two Mississippi Writers: Wright and Faulkner," *University of Mississippi Studies in English*, 15 (1978), 49-59.

ner'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 hunt-as-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";² 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

2. Richard Wright, "The Man Who Was Almost a Man," in *Fiction 100*, ed. James Pickering, 2nd Ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1978), p. 1060. Further quotations from the story are identified in the text by author and page number. Both Wright's and Faulkner's stories are widely available; I have quoted from this text because it conveniently contains both.

soon as he is "big enough to walk alone from the house to the blacksmith-shop and then to carry a gun."³ 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 ownership 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, p. 1054). 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 what?" 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, pp. 1055-56)

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" (Wright, p. 1056). 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, p. 309). 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, p. 309). 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.

3. William Faulkner, "The Old People," in Pickering, pp. 307-08. Further quotations from the story are identified in the text by author and page number.

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, p. 305), 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, p. 1057). 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, p. 1057). He further warns Jenny: "When Ah pull this ol trigger, Ah don wan yuh t run n acka fool now!" (Wright, p. 1057). 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, p. 1057), 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, p. 1057). 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, p. 1057)

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, p. 1057), 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, p. 1057). 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, p. 1058).

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, p. 1058), his story collapses completely. "All the crowd was laughing now" (Wright, p. 1059), 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, p. 1060).

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,"⁴ "technically unpolished"⁵ 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.

4. Martha Stephens, "Richard Wright's Fiction: A Reassessment," *Georgia Review*, 25 (Winter 1971), 466.

5. Steven J. Rubin, "The Early Short Fiction of Richard Wright Reconsidered," *Studies in Short Fiction*, 15 (Fall 1978), 408.

