

# Growing up: self-awareness and adulthood



As we grow up, our parents teach us life lessons to prepare us for adulthood. Depending on how we choose to approach these lessons, we may or may not understand how to attain a mature way of acting. In the story, “The Man Who Was Almost a Man” by Richard Wright, the narrator, Dave Saunders, had very little guidance on how to be an adult, and wanted nothing more than to be just that. Dave, wasn’t properly taught the essential information of how to be responsible or familiar with social norms. Dave Saunders’ parents were uneducated and led Dave to be the same way. Knowing the proper characteristics of how to be an adult, is an acquired knowledge. As a result of this, Dave shows the reader he is unaware of what separates a “boy” from a “man” and a “girl” from a “woman”. Dave grew up in a society that taught him to have a negative view towards one’s youth.

In Wright’s short story, the narrator and those surrounding him had a very negative view of youth. “One of these days he was going to get a gun and practice shooting, then they couldn’t talk to him as though he were a little boy” (Wright). This quote from the story, is an example of the way Dave felt. This pessimistic environment, led Dave to feel powerless and weak. With the proper lesson by his parents, Dave could have known how to deal with his emotions. He could have also learned the value of his actions. Early on in the story, Dave goes to talk to a store owner, Joe. Dave explains that he wants a gun, and Joe offers to sell him one. Dave wanted to own a gun because of the weak feeling inside of him. He felt he needed something to make him feel more manly and more like an adult. He wanted this, not only for himself, but to prove this to his town. When Dave arrives home, he initiates a conversation with his mom about him buying a gun. His mom reacts with

harsh disapproval. After a very slim amount of arguing is had, his mom agrees to him purchasing Joe's gun. Dave's mom couldn't hold her ground, and this limited parenting contributes to Dave's immature personality. Dave didn't seem to have proper parenting, which is essential to be an independent and grown individual. Dave's mom had one condition to him buying a gun; the condition was that he had to bring it home to her for her husband, Dave's father, to have. Dave agreed to these terms, and proceeds to buy the gun. Not long after, Dave disobeys his mother's only request, and he does not go straight home. Dave waited until he knew his family would be asleep before coming home. Also when, his mother awoke him in the middle of the night asking for the gun, and he claims he hid it, meanwhile it was alongside him. The following morning, he leaves for work, bright and early, to avoid giving the gun to her. The preceding examples show the lack of concern that was centered around Dave and his actions. If he was shown the proper parenting, he might have approached his life with a better mindset.

"The Man Who Was Almost a Man," written by Richard Wright, expresses what it means to be an adult. Throughout the story Dave believes that a boy cannot become a man unless he can shoot a gun properly. However, that's not the situation. To be considered an adult, it's important to be responsible, and have an understanding of the value of one's actions. Dave's parents treated him like a very young child from early on in the story. His mother felt it was necessary for her to hold onto his payment from work. She didn't give him the opportunity to be a responsible adult in that situation. When she does give him responsibility, it's the responsibility of purchasing such a dangerous weapon, and he fails her. Dave heads off to work with his gun, the

day after he purchases it. Not only does Dave disrespect and disobey her by holding on to it, he proceeds to make a major mistake. At work, he decides to try shooting it, considering anywhere else in town the shot could be heard. Dave works for Jim Hawkins. While at work, Dave hooks the plow to Mr. Hawkins' mule. He then travels to be at a decent distance where the shots would be unheard. When he takes the shot, he closes his eyes and accidentally shoots Mr. Hawkins' mule. Now, Dave tries to save the mule, but she dies. When Dave gets back to the farm to share the sad news, he lies about what happened and keeps the situation a secret. Instead of being mature and taking responsibility for his poor actions, he lies. At that moment, Dave proved to the reader that he is very immature. An adult could properly admit to their mistakes, and accept the consequences. When an uproar arose, people were suspicious of Dave's story. His mother shares the truth about Dave and the gun. Dave eventually confessed, but now he became the laughingstock of the town. He also had to pay Mr. Hawkins for the mule. Now he knew he would be teased for paying " Fifty dollars for a dead mule" (Wright). Dave also feared for the potential beating from his father. Instead of trying to explain to Dave how wrong his choices were, Mr. Saunders decided that beating Dave would be more effective. Dave knew he was too old for it, and it wasn't going to make any difference. That night, instead of going to return his gun like he was asked to, he decided to go out shooting again. He wanted to prove to himself he was good at shooting and was truly a man. Even during such a delicate situation, Dave risks any of the respect he has. While he's shooting, he becomes proud of his success, but after he was out of bullets, he realized the reality of his future. He thought that staying home with his parents would never allow him to grow up. He also

thought that it would be tough paying Mr. Hawkins each month for his mule. With the flow of stressful thoughts, Dave makes the decision to hop on a train and leave town. Dave does this with no money, food, water or anything that is crucial to his survival. This proves Dave's actions to be seriously reckless and completely immature. Also, he left his responsibilities behind, despite the severity of what he has done. This can all be brought back to the way he was raised.

As Dave Saunders grew up, he probably had a rough time. It is clear to the reader that he, along with his family, is uneducated. When the author lets you see Dave or his mother's diction compared to any other character in the story, it's obvious they weren't raised the same. This can also be proven by the reaction of the town when the news is out about Dave killing the mule. They all immediately proceed to criticize Dave, and almost make light of the situation. They blame it on his age. It seems to be much deeper than his age. Dave was a seventeen-year old boy, and that seems pretty old for the way Dave acts and is treated. Dave is trusted with such a big job, but isn't trusted with his own pay. The town is surrounded with negativity, with every aspect. Not only is this town a negative place, but the story itself. The author writes with a pessimistic vibe. Throughout the story, the reader expects a form of "coming of age" clarity, but he never experiences that. He didn't try to fix anything at any point. His solution to people treating him like a child was to buy a weapon. Not only does he just buy it, he buys it with the intention to hurt someone. " Could kill a man with a gun like this. Kill anybody, black or white" (Wright). This quote from the story, stated by Dave, shows the reader, he is serious about his intentions. Dave was never considering the value of

his actions, and his parents were never willing to help him. All of these qualities in his life, don't allow him to be a true adult.

Throughout “ The Man Who Was Almost a Man”, the author, Richard Wright, tried to teach a lesson of self-awareness and adulthood. Wright wants it to be clear to his readers that one needs to truly identify their mistakes before they can be successful. One's actions has a direct impact on their future. We are meant to be advised and raised by adults throughout our youth. This is to help us see their mistakes and mold our lives into something better.

Dave's parents were unsuccessful with this, and that led the story to end the way it did. Growing up is a very crucial time in life to be aware and responsible.

## **Works Cited**

Wright, Richard “ The Man Who Was Almost a Man” 1961 Print