

## Manhood

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by Fred Coppersmith

"When I was a child, I spoke as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child: but when I became a man, I put away childish things." This Biblical passage perhaps best exemplifies and underlines the inherent flaws seen in the characters created by John Steinbeck and Richard Wright in, respectively, the short stories "Flight" and "The Man Who Was Almost a Man." Pepé Torres and Dave Sanders are cut from the same cloth, and the problems that both face are brought about by their shared delusions and misconceptions about what manhood in reality is. As even the title of Wright's story suggests, these are characters on the brink of maturity -- men who are *almost* men and, perhaps, who would become men with knowledge and patience. These characters, however, have neither, and their respective stories are not so much rites of passage into adulthood as depictions of immature, inexperienced children whose false ideals of masculinity lead them to disastrous results.

The very first description that we are given of Pepé in Steinbeck's "Flight" does, in fact, serve only to further illustrate this point. "And there was Pepé," Steinbeck writes, "the tall smiling son of nineteen, a gentle, affectionate boy, but very lazy....Pepé had sharp Indian cheek bones and an eagle nose, but his mouth was as sweet and shapely as a girl's mouth, and his chin was fragile and chiseled. He was loose and gangling, all legs and feet and wrists, and he was very lazy." Despite his age, and despite the fact that he is the quote-unquote "man of the house" since his father's death, we are given no reason to infer that Pepé is anything other than the "foolish chicken" his mother calls him. Pepé, for all his talk and all his dreams, is no more than a "peanut," and certainly not a man, at the beginning of the story.

This, however, raises an important question: what does Steinbeck tell us, through Pepé's story, about the nature of manhood in general? Pepé is a simple, naïve and foolish boy, whose idea of masculinity rarely matches with the realities of life. He is a man, he believes, because his mother allows him to ride to Monterey alone, because he gets drunk on wine, or because, in a heated argument, he kills another man with his father's knife. "The knife was with Pepé always, for it had been his father's knife." To Pepé, the blade is a talisman, representing and personifying everything that manhood itself means to him. It was his father's knife -- a man's knife -- and now that Pepé has it, he must therefore be a man.

And yet, as we soon come to realize, he falls short of genuine maturity. He is thrust, through his own foolish actions, into a situation he cannot fully comprehend, a situation that requires he act like a man when he is in reality still a boy. "A boy gets to be a man when a man is needed," his mother says. "Remember this thing. I have known boys forty years old because there was no need for a man." Now that there is a need, however -- now that Pepé has forced himself to become a man and leave behind childish things -- he is incapable of doing much more than feigning manhood. It is his mother's initiative that drives him to flee; it is *her* experience and *her* knowledge that Pepé must rely on if he is to survive. Pepé is little more than a wide-eyed boy trapped in a man's body and in a man's circumstances.

Furthermore, it can perhaps be easily argued, a real man would accept the responsibility for his actions, would accept the blame for killing another man, rather than take flight and hide from the danger. "Pepé goes on a journey," his mother tells the two younger children. "Pepé is a man now. He has a man's thing to do." As they stand watching him ride into the distance, however, they realize what has actually happened to Pepé -- what he has forced upon himself. "He has gone on a journey. He will never come back," says his sister Rosy. "He is not dead. Not yet." Pepé, they understand (even if he doesn't), has stumbled blindly into manhood, lacking any of the experience or understanding that would make him a real man. The price of his ignorance, of his overconfidence and brash stupidity, will be his life.

Dave Sanders is luckier, if only in that he has not managed to kill himself by the end of "The Man Who Was Almost a Man." Like Steinbeck's Pepé, Dave equates manhood with power and that power with a weapon and the fear and awe that he thinks it can instill. "One of these days he was going to get a gun," Wright writes of Dave, "and practice shooting, then they can't talk to him as though he were a little boy."

The simple, irrefutable, truth remains however: Dave Sanders *is* at heart a little boy, immature and certainly not a grown man.

Dave, who craves to be respected as a man and who hopes to snatch that respect through the threat of a gun, is ironically afraid of his father and unwilling to act like a man in his presence. "He did not want to mention money before his father," the text informs us. "He would do much better by cornering his mother when she was alone. He looked at his father uneasily out of the edge of his eye." Yet Dave's immaturity seeps even into his conversations with his mother, where he is forced to plead with her for enough money to buy a gun (and the fact that Jim Hawkins did not pay Dave, a seventeen-year-old boy, directly tells us much in itself about this so-called man). "You ain't nothing but a boy," she tells him. "You don't need a gun."

As we soon realize, this is not simply an overprotective mother, denying her son his right as a man. Dave *is* only a boy, and an immature one at that. To him, manhood is something that you can buy for two dollars down at Joe's store, something that will earn you respect if only you keep it polished and loaded: "The first movement he made the following morning was to reach under his pillow for the gun. In the gray light of dawn he held it loosely, feeling a sense of power. Could kill a man wida gun like this. Kill anybody, black or white. And if he were holding this gun in his hand nobody could run over him; they would have to respect him."

Yet when Dave actually fires the gun (something that he wasn't sure he knew how to do), he is brought anything but respect. When he inadvertently kills Jenny, Jim Hawkins' mule, he is laughed at and made a mockery. "Dave turned and walked slowly," reads the text. "He heard people laughing. Dave glared, his eyes welling with tears. Hot anger bubbled in him. Then he swallowed and stumbled on." The swagger is gone from his step and he is revealed as the naïve child that he truly is.

The gun, though, still holds a certain allure for him. Later that night, unable to sleep, "he had an itch to fire it again. Ef other men kin shoota gun, by Gawd, Ah kin!" The incident earlier that day, the stupid, pointless murder of Jenny, is forgotten. Dave has had a taste of what he thinks is power, and he yearns to reclaim it by digging up the gun. "Lawd, ef Ah had jus one mo bullet," he thinks, once the gun is again in his hands, "Ahd taka shot at tha house. Ahd like t scare ol man Hawkins jussa little....Jussa enough t let im know Dave Sanders is a man." Like Pepé, who thinks he is a man because he has killed, Dave thinks he, too, is a man because he holds an agent of death in his hands.

Neither Dave Sanders nor Pepé Torres is depicted as an exemplar of masculinity. Both Steinbeck and Wright show us characters painfully unaware of the realities of the world, characters whose foolish and meaningless actions propel them into that world without the ability to properly cope. Both Pepé and Dave choose to run from responsibility -- to escape, if only for a short time, the reality of the manhood they so desperately sought -- and both are reduced to their baser, more animalistic selves. Whereas Dave is revealed to be a petulant, childish fool, Pepé can hope no more than to "move with the instinctive care of an animal." Neither, no matter what they say or think they want, is really willing to put away the childish things of their past. As F. Scott Fitzgerald said, "It is much easier to skip it and go from one childhood to another."