Aidan Chaisson

Dr. Nicholas Helms

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Variations of Fulfillment: Soyinka and Danticat on Manhood

Bob Dylan wrote, “The man in me will do nearly any task, and as for compensation there’s a little he would ask, take a woman like you to get through to the man in me.” Mick Jagger conversely wrote, “Some girls give me jewelry, others buy me clothes, some girls give me children I never asked them for.” These lyrics are representative of two opposing archetypes of the “fulfilled” man. One uses his status and influence to garner his material wealth and gain the company of many women. The other uses his will to persist, provide, and change to commit to one woman, regardless his own wealth. Wole Soyinka’s play *Death and the King’s Horseman* tells the story of Elesin Oba, a man whose life and death can be related to Mick Jagger’s line. Edwidge Danticat’s novel *The Dew Breaker* follows the life of a man referred to as “Ka’s father”, “the fat man”, and “Papa”, whose later life can more easily be equated to Bob Dylan’s line. These two characters, though their settings and circumstances vary greatly, depict two versions of fulfillment a man may, for better or for worse, pursue.

Elesin Oba, as the king’s horseman, holds high sociopolitical status in his Yoruban community. Soyinka’s play chronicles the day intended to be the day of his death, as it is Yoruban tradition for the king’s horseman to ceremonially take his own life to follow the king in the afterlife. The beginning of the play goes to great lengths to emphasize the community’s

perception of his manhood, as well as his own perception of himself. Take, for instance, this description spoken to Elesin by the Praise-Singer in Act 1:

> Who would deny your reputation, snake-on-the-loose in dark passages of the market! Bed-bug who wages war on the mat and receives the thanks of the vanquished! When caught with his bride's own sister he protested - but I was only prostrating myself to her as becomes a grateful in-law. Hunter who carries his powder-horn on the hips and fires crouching or standing! Warrior who never makes that excuse of the whining coward - but how can I go to battle without my trousers? Trouserless or shirtless it's all one to him. Oka-rearing-from-a-camouflage-of-leaves, before he strikes the victim is already prone! Once they told him, Howu, a stallion does not feed on the grass beneath him: he replied, true, but surely he can roll in it! (Soyinka 19)

Clearly, Elesin's womanizing reputation is central to his appearance as a powerful, admirable man. The relationship between his machismo and his status is logical according to the definition of "manhood," provided by Vanderbilt University Center for Research on Men's Health director Derek Griffith, Ph. D.:

> Manhood is a social status and identity that perpetually needs to be proven through behaviors and practices (Vandello & Bosson, 2013); it reflects the embodiment of virtuous characteristics, demonstration of competence in social roles, and fulfillment of gendered expectations associated with being an adult male (Griffith, 2015). Manhood is an achieved social status that must not only be earned but also continually aspired to, demonstrated, or proven through behaviors and actions that help to distinguish men from boys in ways that affect their health and well-being (Vandello et al., 2019). Manhood is

> precarious (Vandello & Bosson, 2013) because of the structures that impede men from fulfilling the roles and expectations of adult males and from achieving optimal health and well-being (Vandello et al., 2019). (Griffith 2)

According to this definition, Elesin is "manly" because he is socially adept, physically exceptional, and able to maintain his abilities as his age advances. In his case, this way of determining manhood is detrimental in that his successes will be cut short by his upcoming death. Thus, he is driven to be "one who eats and leaves nothing on his plate for children" (Soyinka 20) to, for one final time, prove his manhood. He goes on to use his established influence in conjunction with his allowances on account of his upcoming duty to pick out a young woman with whom he will conceive a child before his departure. Though he succeeds in completing this final wish, his manhood is ultimately proven at the cost of his son's life. In Elesin's mind, his own efforts to solidify his greatness in the memory of his community may have been valiant. However, as Iyaloja instructs his bride to "forget the dead, forget even the living. Turn your mind only to the unborn" (Soyinka 76), his efforts were ultimately made in vain.

The Dew Breaker sees Ka's father attempt to establish his manhood from a different angle, and through different means, but he too ultimately tries in vain to do so. Rather than proving himself through displays of power and influence, he must seek forgiveness and atonement as he distances himself from his violent past, struggling to balance his inner turmoil with his present role as a husband and a father. It can be inferred that, based on information from

Sarah Gammage, that his manhood was compromised when he met his wife, who prompted his move away from Haiti to the United States:

> Indeed, the literature on gender and migration is replete with examples of male migrants determining when and how to migrate, and women and children being swept along in the process, or brought to the host country once the male migrants have settled (Lee, 1966; Mincer, 1978). Mincer (1978) developed a theory of the 'tied mover' or 'tied stayer' where the migration decision rests on a determination of the net family costs and benefits of migration; those who stay or move do so based on the joint calculus of family as opposed to private or individual benefit. It was assumed that women were disproportionately 'tied movers' accompanying spouses and facing reduced labour market options as a result of their joint migration decision (Baker and Benjamin, 1997; Jacobsen and Levin, 1997). Such analyses subordinate women's roles in the migration decision and contribute to their invisibility as migrants who exercise both agency and choice. (Gammage 750)

It can be inferred that, had Ka's father not met his wife, he would have never left Haiti. There, he had official authority, power through intimidation, and access to anything and anyone he wanted access to. Applying Griffith's definition of manhood loosely, he was doing alright in Haiti. Yet, he chose to leave as "she'd been there to save him, to usher him back home and heal him" (Danticat 237). It was on her authority that he gave up his post as a Tonton Macoute and changed his ways to become a gentle father and a passive, translucent man. That transfer of power from him to her is in itself a relinquishment of his manhood, as his prior manhood came entirely from his violence. His recognition that he can be a better man without reliance on

tyranny pushes him to work multiple jobs to provide for his wife and daughter. Yet, this creates a separation between his past and present self that reveals itself in his confession of his past to Ka:

> "And those nightmares you were always having, what were they?"
>
> "Of what I," he says, "your father, did to others." (Danticat 23)

The separation between "I" and "your father" shows his inability, or refusal, to acknowledge that the person who killed people in Haiti is the same person raising Ka. Try as he may to be a good husband and father, that separation prevents him from feeling fulfillment in life.

Elesin and Ka's father represent two extreme opposite, equally flawed versions of masculine fulfillment. Elesin's insistence on maintaining a status as the ideal male caused him to get lost in self-interested pursuits and fail to carry out his long-awaited, long-prepared-for task of following his king in death. His fulfillment relied on the preservation of his ego, which from his community's celebrations grew too large to satisfy. Ka's father's younger years were violent, indulgent, and hollow. He found solace in his wife, and safety in moving away from Haiti, but the loss of his power and his inability to face himself for his wrongdoings prevent him from ever feeling truly fulfilled. In both cases, once these men recognize that their lives is losing their value, they are already too far from any chance of salvation to take reparative action.

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