

Juxtaposition of two
worlds perspectives
in the known world, a
novel by Edward Jo...



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The novel, *The Known World*, by Edward Jones is imbued with literal and metaphoric representations of the known world during the period of nineteenth century America. Life in Manchester revolves around slavery where both master and slaves coexist. 'The Known World' is the title of a map of Earth which lies in Skiffington's office and shows the geography of the then known world in miniature. Because the known world exists, we can confidently deduce that there lies an unknown world. The North and the South share diametrically opposite opinions on slavery and therefore the inhabitants of each space occupy different worlds and share different worldviews. The novel's title is derived because the world assumes not only physical space but contain situations with which the characters are familiar and have come to accept in the midst of slavery and racial marginalization. Slavery has at its base the financial interests of the Euro-American therefore within the economic world the slave is not human. He has a price on his head and toils in the plantation for his master's gain. Storms are images employed by the author to depict the travel of William Robbins as he crosses from the world of blacks to the world of whites. Storms also convey to the reader feelings of depression and grief. A Child's Dream depicts Counsel Skiffington's world literally and metaphorically. The Known World covers geographic regions, the worlds of the North and the South, the world of the Southern paradise, the world of storms and the world of a Child's Dream.

The Known World encompasses a world with which we are familiar geographically and so may represent a physical land mass. The title of the novel, *The Known World* derives its name from a map found in John Skiffington's office titled *The Known World* which dates back three hundred

years ago to the 16th century. On the old map, North America remains nameless, is smaller in dimensions since it is largely unexplored and ‘ unknown,’ while “ America” on the map refers to South America. There is no great familiarity with the New World and so the places are not clearly defined. The map represents the worldview of the German author Hans Waldseemuller who gives a smaller and imperfect version of what the world truly is. Knowledge, background and personal experience mould the author’s worldview which is narrow in scope. The progress of time changes realities in the world geographically. Because of advancement in technology and deeper exploration, the map of the world has improved. New dimensions and locations expand the boundaries of the map. Jean Broussard argues to John Skiffington that he can acquire “ a better map, and more map of today”(175). The previous narrow worldview has expanded over time to previously unknown areas.

In *The Known World* some characters are only acquainted with a limited area because of deficiency in their personal experience and knowledge. Moses, the overseer of Henry Townsend’s plantation, is “ world-stupid...(he) does not know north from south (350). This lack of information works to Moses’ detriment for when he finally breaks free from bondage, he is unable to find his bearings and go north to freedom. Moses’ familiarity of the world does not exceed the confines of the plantation so slave patrollers ultimately capture and kill him. A publicist who desires to publish a Polish poet’s literary works resigns in his ignorance of the country and says “ forget Poland, I can’t even find the damn thing on my map (357). The publicist has his worldview restricted since Poland is missing on his map. Mrs. Broussard, a French

woman, also has a limited worldview. She “ never had a fixed idea of America and was never able to comprehend (it)”(175). America is still unknown, unsearched by the European and is a novelty to the rest of the world. However one character, Alice Night, knows and understands her world more than any other.

One overarching irony in *The Known World* unfolds toward the end of the novel where the seemingly lunatic Alice masterfully recreates and immortalizes her world through art. She captures firstly “ the map of life in the county of Manchester, Virginia”(384). The unquestionable accuracy of the map forces itself on Calvin, Caldonia’s brother, so much that he likens the map to “ what God sees when He looks down on Manchester”(384). In this map, Alice gives us a panoramic view of life in Manchester with its “ houses and barns and roads and cemeteries and wells”(384). Through Alice’s nocturnal ramblings through the county, she is able to capture and retain vivid images of daily life in Manchester. She supposedly feigns madness for it allows her to run free and unmolested even by slave patrollers. Houses denote settlement and family life. Barns symbolize daily activity and food. Roads express journey, travel, movement – the daily commute and transit from one place to the next. Cemeteries signify the reality of the transience of life and the inevitability of death. Wells are a central communal location where one daily draws water to satisfy his basic needs and meets neighbours and friends. Hence, Alice’s map of life clearly captures the essence of life in Manchester.

Alice Night’s second work of art depicts her world of people on Henry and Caldonia Townsend’s plantation. In this painting, she illustrates every
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member of the working force and the masters. “ Not a single person is missing...each person’s face...is raised up as though to look in the very eyes of God”(385). Alice makes a very important point in this painting. Although life is made up of daily activity and objects referring to daily employment, she recognizes that life is made up of people. Masters, co-workers, masters, family, neighbours, and friends are in the map of life. Alice fits the human family in the framework of the universal and the transcendent. God the Creator and Divine Overseer sees all and He alone can capture the world in its completeness where “ there is nothing missing.”(385). The deceased and the living of Alice’s circle are never forgotten. They are still alive in her mind. Her known world includes not only her surroundings and community, but her world also contains the social circle with which she has daily contact and has forged an inextricable bond.

The North and the South in the context of the Known World allude to slavery and the polar disparities of opinion with regard to the rights and the freedoms of the African American. The world of the North stands for the emancipation, and civil rights of slaves. It was common knowledge that “ in the Northern States, (it) is well understood to have been fixedly averse to all pro-slavery views”- Slavery (10/10/1851) NY Times. Therefore the north is a haven to fugitive blacks and Negro freemen. In separate incidents, Elias and Augustus try to escape slavery and judging from the position of the sun and the stars, they determine the north and head in that direction. On the other hand, the South believes in the natural subservience of the blacks and therefore is supportive of slavery. “ The slaveholding interest is held to be ‘ the South’” - Southern Politics 11/15/1859 NY Times. This statement rings

true since the main plot, scenes and action unfold in the South. “ Everyone interested in the Old South knows that its peculiar institution, chattel slavery, was justified in a number of different ways.” (3) Chattel Slavery and Wage Slavery. The Anglo-American Context 1830 – 1860. Marcus Cunliffe . Slavery is a world and a reality that exists. Moses, one of Henry’s main slaves, “ had thought it was already a strange world that made him a slave to a white man” (9). The South espouses the view that slaves are but brute animals who “ will answer to” his master. This term is so common among southerners that Counsel introduces Minerva as one who “ will answer to Minnie or Minerva or whatever you choose” (32) and Winifred, her loving mistress, puts “ will answer to” on a poster announcing Minerva’s loss. Robbins, a prosperous southern slaveholder, objects to “ the fool’s idea of nigger heaven in the North” (37). He disagrees with the idea of the abolition of slavery and the upgrade of the status of slaves to free and equal beings.

Chattel Slavery is an institution which generates income for capitalist America and Europe. “ In a country controlled by white men’s interests (the negro) had no master with an interest in him to safeguard” (17). Indeed, slavery is commonly known as The Slave Trade and this term underlines its economic connotations. In *The Known World*, instances of slave commerce recur repetitively. Henry Townsend and William Robbins, chief slaveholders, take inventory of their slaves entering in a log the physical description, birth, marriage, cost price, selling price, and death of each slave they own. In the business world, chattel slavery dehumanizes the slave by commodifying him. He is reduced to property, an asset, a means of production and even a “ legacy”(74) according to Maude. Family ties, civil rights, justice and human

dignity are trodden underfoot and give way to the almighty dollar. In the economy, slavery becomes such a business that insurance covers the mutilation, escape and accidental death of slaves. In business, nothing is for free. To purchase his freedom, the slave, at the discretion of the master, has to pay sums of money beyond the reaches of his pocket. For several years, Augustus Townsend earns money to redeem himself and his entire family from slavery. Robert Colfax, William Robbins and Counsel Skiffington build their sprawling empires on the backs of slaves. Slave speculators like Stennis and Darcy kidnap and sell free and enslaved blacks to the willing buyers of the South. Henry and Caldonia own an extensive cotton field – cotton being a product much in demand on the world market.

The storm is a metaphoric image that describes a world of chaos, turbulence, disquiet and discord. When Robbins transitions from the black world to the white world on his visits to Philomena Cartwright, his black paramour, he lapses into a state of unconsciousness which he describes as “ storms in the head” (21). The storms rage as Robbins moves from one world to the next because of incompatibility and undoubtedly the hostile antagonism existing in the white and black world. Divergent principles, ideals, and standards govern both worlds. Irreconcilable disparities and ingrained prejudices of both worlds make the journey from one place to the next a torture to Robbins. The world in which Robbins lives disallows any friendly interaction between whites and blacks beyond the common relationship of master and slave. Robbins loves Philomena deeply more than he does his white wife but the fury and intensity of the storms in his mind signify that he has his thoughts unsettled about the extra-marital and interracial relationship.

Storms are also symbolic of foreboding doom and illustrate to the reader the depth of sorrow into which a character is plunged. There are two actual storms mentioned in the novel. One storm bursts upon Stamford, an elderly slave who is repulsed and rejected by all his lovers and women folk on the plantation. As a child, a senior slave tells him that without women it is impossible to survive slavery. He believes and lives this theory and so his world becomes one where women are indispensable. After repeated rejections, " he (thinks) that he was not long for the world, that no young stuff would ever love him" (197). In a fit of grief, loneliness and depression, he contemplates suicide . As a consequence, " all the heart he (has) for living in the world (leaves) him" (200). Women are the world for Stamford and so without women, " young stuff" (21), he sees his life as unbearable and nothing. The other storm presages Luke's death. Luke, a boy slave, plays on the outside oblivious to the dangers of lightning while Elias tries to save him. Six pages later, Elias tries to save Luke from working on a plantation notorious for cruelty to slaves and its arduous hardship but the master decides that Luke must work there and so the frail boy dies of overwork. On the contrary, when Elias falls in love with his future wife, Celeste, he describes the feeling as a " quietness and stillness in the world he had never known before" (98). The harmony, compatibility and legality of the relationship have nature's blessing.

The world of Southern paradise is called A Child's Dream - Counsel Skiffington's grand slave plantation and estate, " the finest ...in the South" (368). A Child's Dream evokes images of a world of passing fancy, a wonderland of transient bliss and even a utopia. Furbished with many

comforts and known as the most luxurious mansion in the county, it crumbles to naught. Paradoxically, A Child's Dream is also a place of hardship. Counsel owns one hundred and twelve slaves so he perpetuates the culture of serfdom, and oppression of black slaves. His dream becomes a nightmare when disaster strikes. His home becomes suddenly infected and infested by the deadly, contagious smallpox and his crops begin to fail. His family and slaves die and the empire goes up in smoke literally. He burns his home in a fit of grief for his own misfortune and to rid himself of the painful memories of a departed wife, children and prosperity. A Child's Dream is a metaphor for Counsel's success and then unexpected failure. At first he enjoys material success and happiness but later on, he awakens to a harsh reality and becomes humbled by the adverse vicissitudes of life.

In conclusion we see different worlds existing in the 19 th century through the eyes of slave and master. Each world is formed by the background, views, choices, experience and individuality of each person. As one progresses through time, the known world changes dimensions for circumstances never remain constant. The known world however expresses acquaintanceship and understanding of life's occurrences and explores individual reactions related to what life brings. In The Known World, environments, surroundings, people, opinions, and institution play important roles in shaping the life and worlds of characters.