

The true genesis of
slavery: the known
world by edward p.
jones



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The True Genesis of Slavery

Slavery, a word that continues to leave society in lasting bitterness. Images of inhumane conditions that appear instantaneously and the ugliness that it adds to the history of our nation lead to an aversion to saying the word. This evil practice started in America around the 17th century and continued to exist even during the 20th Century. It started as a way to help build this nation - but over the years, this inhuman practice initiated a debate that almost broke apart this country. Slavery has been the cause of wars, ending of family relations, and destruction of the self-esteem of millions of people. Even now into the 21st century, this continues to influence today's society.

In the novel, *The Known World* by Edward P. Jones, one of the main topics brought to light is the system of slavery and the type of culture it produces. Through various stories from the eyes of different characters, the author paints a picture of how the practice of slavery had manifested itself as a form of social system. This ties to the title of the novel itself, "The Known World" where the characters believed that the world of slavery was the right way to build a society - since it emphasized power, ownership, castes, etc. Within the animal kingdom, the common characteristic among all species is having dominance, and this novel describes the true nature of slavery which is the drive of the human species to have control over one another. The novel suggests that slaveholders are the type of species that thrive on control and dominance and are desperate to gain that ability.

During the period leading up to the Civil War in the southern United States, the nature for the need of power and ownership that human beings desire to

hold over one another is the predominant theme discussed in *The Known World*. African American ownership of other African Americans as slaves was a central subject that was discussed and encourages the reader to not only concentrate on the relationship between particular races but on the fundamental desire to own other people. Jones sets the scene by pointing out: “ In 1855 in Manchester County, Virginia, there were 34 free black families... and eight of those free families owned slaves.”(Jones, Ch. 1, 7) One of the free black families was that of Henry Townsend; an African American who was born into slavery and his father eventually bought his freedom. When he was a teenager, Henry distinguished himself as a fine leather worker and boot maker, and once he was free, he earned enough money over the years to start a farm and build himself a house. Under the care and mentorship of William Robbins, who once owned him and now has a fatherly affection for the former slave, Henry adopted the lifestyle of the county’s upper-class whites, which, of course, meant owning slaves.

Although the novel is a work of fiction, the inspiration for many of the characters and stories were based on true events and people; one relating to a free black who owned slaves and had a close relationship with his former master as well. Mark Harris, a journalist for *Entertainment Weekly* wrote:

Andrew Durnford, a free black who owned a Louisiana plantation with seventy-five slaves, “ was finely attuned to the planter ideology and considered himself a patriarchal master in the best tradition” of his slaves: “ He took pride in his role as their protector as well as their owner. With the exception of his personal body servant, he never showed any interest in releasing them from bondage” (274-75). In 1835, “ Durnford traveled north

to Virginia to purchase additional hands for himself and his white mentor, John McDonogh” (275). (Harris)

This description of a former slave is very similar to the relationship that Henry had with his white former master and mentor William Robbins in *The Known World*. At that particular time period, especially in the south, the majority of the people accepted slavery as a way of life and believed that it was ethical to own slaves for power and economic purposes; Henry Townsend was one of those people. To be a “proper” slaveowner, he had to relinquish his previous life as a slave and redefine himself to embrace the social system of slavery and to abide by the law to enforce the distinction between master and slave. He believed that since he had the power and the protection of the law, it was his responsibility to enforce this distinction. Henry’s belief was that the law was in place to maintain order and stability and feared that if anyone were to go against the law, the society that they lived in would fall apart – leading to violence, chaos, and the overall economic downturn. However, his views fail to take into consideration the violence that was already taking place, in the form of disabling or killing slaves, to maintain the system. In chapter 4 of the novel, Henry tells his parents that he bought a man (slave), “I ain’t done nothin that any white man wouldn’t do. I ain’t broke no law.” (Jones, Ch. 4, 138) Upon hearing this, his parents are shocked and do not accept or respect his choice, but he does not understand what he has done wrong. His statement and understanding describe the shift in his perspective from being a slave to a slaveowner being that his closest friend and mentor was his previous owner William Robbins. Henry’s desire for power and status resulted in the adoption of the values of

white people and led to him becoming a slaveowner. He firmly believed in the social system of slavery by restricting his values and sacrificing his sense of mercy and justice. In essence, he chose to forget the life of a person who is held in the chains and overall toxicity of slavery.

Blacks like Henry Townsend have fostered their desire to own slaves based on their experience with white masters and is disturbing that many black masters held similar attitudes to slavery as their white counterparts. In Henry's case, the issue centers on transfer from familial relations with Augustus to his allegiance to his master William Robbins. The relationship between Henry and his old slave master shows a deeper and emotional binding than the relationship that Henry had with his biological father. This could be because while his father worked as an artisan outside the household of the owner, Henry was a house slave. House slaves were taught to consider themselves superior to the slaves working in the plantations or fields and this conception of superiority was reinforced by the way they dressed, their housing and the food they ate (Degler). Due to this, many house slaves tended to identify with their owners and accept their values which resulted in them viewing slavery as a justified institution. This practice can be observed in the novel when Robbins delayed the selling of Henry to Augustus by continuously increasing the price, and mentoring Henry in the ways of the world. All this culminates into the (mis)education of Henry in the practices of slavery and the foundation for his future beliefs.

While Henry associates the ownership of slaves with prosperity and success in general, other characters in the novel use religion to play their role as master and for the continued practice of slavery. Henry's wife, Caldonia
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Townsend, believes that she will help & protect the slaves under her care and guiding them to a good life as they could not manage alone; in which she uses religion to justify her means. “ We will be together in all of this. God stands with us. God will give us many days, good and bright days, good and joyful days.” (Jones, Ch. 3, 64) When Caldonia speaks to all the slaves following the death of Henry Townsend, she assures them that they will not be sold off but will stay with her, and God will grant them bright and joyful days. Her means of comforting the slaves only tell them that the death of their master will not free them, as they had hoped. This instance is an example of situational irony, where one’s reality contrasts with the expectation; by stating that “ God stands with us” Caldonia is suggesting that God condones their enslavement. Thus, illustrating the corrupting influence of slavery even on a woman like Caldonia, who is essentially kind; not recognizing how slavery has warped her humanity.

Christianity played a large role in the mindset of the people during that time; people who read the Bible understood that it was not wrong to possess slaves since the prophets themselves owned and regulated slavery. The Bible’s justification of slavery, as assumed by the people, was in the book of Genesis, chapter 9, Noah ‘ s youngest son Ham saw the nakedness of his father and had him covered, by his brothers. Noah then cursed Ham to be a servant to his brothers forever, “ Cursed be Canaan! The lowest of slaves will he be to his brothers” (The Book of Genesis, 9. 25-26). This is known to be the first act of slavery, which people argue is sanctioned by God. Many interpreted Ham’s curse as placed upon people of darker skin color, in this case, Africans. The argument was that since Ham’s descendants were to be

slaves forever, and Africans were already slaves and inferior, they should continue to remain in slavery. Based on this understanding, a free black woman named Fern Elston, who was educated and a teacher, participated in the establishment of slavery. In a statement to a journalist, she says, " All of us do only what the law and God tell us we can do." (Jones, Ch. 4, 109) She suggests that God condones slavery and justifies that the practice is legal. However, she fails to recognize how slavery's influence had warped people's minds to justify human bondage. Her thoughts had warped and accepted the concept of slavery as a norm.

This is totally in line with how various cultures have evolved. " Culture means the whole complex of traditional behavior which has been developed by the human race and is successively learned by each generation. A culture is less precise. It can mean the forms of traditional behavior which are characteristic of a given society, or a group of societies, or of a certain race, or of a certain area, or of a certain period of time. Margaret Mead, 1937" (Monaghan, 47). Another anthropologist Alfred Kroeber compared culture to a coral reef. Built by secretions of millions of small animals, it outlasts every living member and provides a structure for many generations to come. Similarly, human culture provides a structure or standards for future generations. " However we define culture, most anthropologists agree that it has to do with those aspects of human cognition and activity that are derived from what we learn from members of society, keeping in mind that one learns a great deal that one is never explicitly taught" (Monaghan, 35). Culture is not something that is taught in a classroom but it is a set of ideas that is derived over a period of time. It gets adapted based on changes in the

environment and living conditions and is transmitted over multiple generations. “ Culture, then, consists of standards for deciding what is, standards for deciding what can be, standards for deciding what one feels about it, standards for deciding what to do about it, and standards for deciding how to go about doing it. Ward. H. Goodenough, 1963” (Monaghan, 45). Before following any practice or culture, one must study and learn enough about its social rules and customs. This will enable them to be accepted and live among people of that culture.

This novel, about a freed black slave that ends becoming a slaveowner himself, highlights the true nature of slavery. Despite revealing how various people conceptualize slavery, the novel constantly reminds the reader that an institution that reduces people to property is always immoral and is always fueled by the desire for control and dominance – even though they try to justify it through the rationale of religion. The author clearly shows that it is not the concept of race that leads to slavery – but the mindset of a group of humans who are desperate to be viewed as superior over other humans. Through the words and actions of various characters, the author shows how some used economic justification to support slavery – while others took the path of religion for the same purpose, the core reason for this practice was just the desire for control. The very genesis of slavery can be attributed to the simple fact that every human desire to own another – and exercise control over the other. Having the ability to control and dominate another living creature is over and beyond just a sense of racial superiority.

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