

The known world essay sample

[Literature](#), [Novel](#)



Edward P. Jones's novel illustrates the story across the span of many years, revealing the world of slavery through its many disagreements and its cost of humanity and lives. Jones's perspective has the same effect in this book about slavery, property, freedom and family, all in a most unusual setting. With an intelligent wisdom and an effective sarcasm, Mr. Jones investigates the troubling, inconsistency of a Black Virginia slaveholder.

Although situations like these do exist, Mr. Jones mocks his readers by occasionally citing some nonexistent scholarly treatise on the subject. The *Known World* is actually a work of imagination. An award-winning novel, *The Known World* transcends history and geography. As in any examination of a prewar civilization, it resounds with a shocking foreboding. *The Known World* intertwines the lives of freed and enslaved blacks, whites and Indians, and lets us in a deeper understanding of the continuing multidimensional world created by the institution of slavery.

The story is basically centered on slavery. The dictionary describes slavery as a condition in which one person, known as a *slave*, is under the control of another person, group, organization, or state. A specific form, known as chattel slavery, is defined by the absolute legal ownership of a person or persons by another person or state, including the legal right to buy and sell them just as one would any common object, or the legal right to force the slave to fight in a war.

Jones intensifies his vision of Henry Townsend, the lead character in the story, by gliding gracefully with the character back and forth through time, from his boyhood to the days after his funeral. It is during the latter part of

the story that all Henry, the lead character of the story, has worked for begins to loosen up.

“The Known World” includes the usual and inevitable blunt indictments of slavery. (One year’s rainy slave market is remembered sadly because so many white people caught colds.) But in no way is Mr. Jones’s work morally black and white. Racial lines here are intriguingly tangled and not easily drawn.

Unfolding in Manchester County, Va., in the 1840s, “The Known World” tells the story of Henry who is bought out of slavery by his father only to turn into a manager of a plantation himself. The book begins as Henry lies on his deathbed at the young age of 31. Jones then cycles backward and evokes the boy’s youth as a groom and slave to William Robbins, a white landowner who embodies some painful contradictions: He owns and manages slaves with a ruthless business sense, and yet he is deeply, irrevocably in love with his black mistress.

Although this detail is not a huge surprise, Jones’s soulful depiction of Robbins and his feelings lends the novel a three-dimensional quality so often lacking in novels about the antebellum south. The complexities of Robbins’s character, set down early in the book, also set the tone for other characters, all of whom Jones depicts as caught up in an institution larger than themselves, a capitalism based cruelly, and solely, on the basis of skin color and flesh. There is a white sheriff determined not to own slaves but compelled by force of job to track down those who run away, and there are

bounty hunters who can sympathize with their prey. Poor, landless, and often hungry, they understand the urge to flee for a better life.

Jones has clearly done a marvelous amount of research to carry this time and place to life, but it never weighs heavily on *The Known World*. He relates throughout with a condensed, efficient writing style that feels somewhat smooth at first but develops more significant as it builds up details and a rhythm.

Perhaps it's the irony of fraught and killing for property during life when in the afterlife we have none that makes "The Known World" such a utterly wise read. Jones imparts this wisdom with a patience and understatement that are nothing short of miraculous.

Such calmness in the face of an awful period of America's past puts the responsibility on the reader to feel, and we do. It is difficult to read this book without wishing we could change history; it is impossible to finish it without full awareness of how futile is that dream.

Beginning with this strange idea, *The Known World* exposes a new side of slavery that challenges our historical and literary prejudices and conventions. The archetypal images of the cruel, complacent white master and the noble slave yearning for freedom are not anymore the typical look of slavery. Jones has found new complications in the issue and in doing so had come closer to truth.

For slaves and masters alike, slavery establishes a past full of horror that disturbs the present and destroys the future. As *The Known World* made it obvious, no American is ever free from its consequences.

Jones's depiction of slavery in *The Known World* made us realize that the situation can change us a great deal. It touches on an issue that's quite challenging and made us think of our actions as persons. It makes us think and study our moves.

Slavery may have taken place a long time ago but the effects of slavery still linger in the minds of our forefathers who were once victims of slavery. It is hoped that no such situation will ever take place again in our midst. Having the freedom to do things democratically gives such a wonderful feeling. Freedom must be valued and nurtured by everyone. Having people who are free is indeed a good blessing.

Work Cited:

Edward P. Jones. The Known World. Amistad. 2003