

The commodification of slave identities in the known world



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Karl Marx's *Capital: Critique of Political Economy* examines the use and exchange values of commodified material relative to social relations between people. Marx suggests that social relations are continually mediated and expressed with objects, such as, commodities and money. Marx submits, "The value of a commodity originates from the human being's intellectual and perceptual capacity to consciously (subjectively) ascribe a relative value (importance) to a commodity" (Harris 3). Conceptually, such capitalistic principles can be applied unconventionally, assigning value not only to objects, but to intangible products such as identities and skills. The resulting value will thus determine how the product is perceived or received by society.

In Edward P. Jones' *The Known World*, the commodification of certain identities and skills determines an individual's position in society within the institution of slavery. As society is economically dependent on the institution of slavery in the novel, it equates wealth with power, as in William Robbins' case, inciting several characters to seek advancement and greater status. Within this system, labor skills are weighted relative to profit, and thus, slave identities are valued according to their skill set. Consequently, the slave or former slave characters in the novel are exploited in various ways in this pursuit of wealth and status. Among many forms of exploitation, three in particular determine the slave characters' ultimate fates: alienation of labor, disenfranchisement, and dehumanization. Such exploitation can be particularly observed with three victims, Henry Townsend, his father Augustus, and Minerva, as their distinct backgrounds in slavery impact their eventual positions in *The Known World*.

To fully grasp the correlation between the societal desire for power and its tendency to assign value to human beings, it is imperative to first examine the power of wealth, which can be observed with William Robbins, a figure of distinguished status in the novel. Robbins was one of the wealthiest land and slave owners in Virginia. He was known to have mental “ storms” that made even himself believe he was “ losing his mind” (25). Despite Robbins’ lack of sane credibility, his influence did not waiver. In one instance, Robbins was able to convince four other major landowners that “ something threatening was loose in the land” (37). Robbins was bitter about a slave sale that he had recently conducted in which he later concluded that he was cheated by an abolitionist. On a whim, he called for a formation of a militia that would patrol such slave misconduct: “ He was never definite about any of it, but if William Robbins said a storm was coming, then it did not matter how blue the sky was and how much the chickens strutted happily about the yard” (37). No matter how unwarranted or contradictory Robbins’ claims may sound, like the probability of a “ storm” while “ blue skies” and “ happ[y]” chickens suggest otherwise, his word is taken incontestably because of his wealthy status. In this way, Robbins’ wealth represents power, and such is the standard that motivates several characters throughout the novel.

Here, Robbins functions as an example to the rest of society of how business, specifically agrarian, promotes such power and influence. It is the desire for such power, that causes identities and skills, of slaves in particular, to be commodified and subject to exploitation in order for owners to obtain more profit. Consequently, such capitalistic attitudes forced slaves in the novel to build value in order to gain recognition from their owners.

To achieve greater value through labor, slaves often sacrificed parts of their identities, a concept examined by Marx known as an “ alienation of labor” (Harris). An alienation of labor occurs in Henry Townsend’s life in two parts: First, in his childhood as a slave, and later, as a slave owner. As a child, Henry started building his own value on Robbins’ plantation when his parents were freed. As Henry’s parents were still saving money to eventually buy his freedom, Henry felt compelled to climb the ranks of the plantation system and assume the role of Robbins’ horse groom: “ An older boy, Toby, had been the groom but Henry had bribed the boy with Mildred’s food and the boy had commenced telling the overseer that he was not up to the task of grooming” (20). Henry sacrificed the food that his mother packed for him in order to “ bribe” the groom and ascend the ranks of mere field labor. While obtaining this new role, he becomes more focused on building value in Robbins’ eyes and loses interest in his parents’ visits and affection: “ Sometimes Henry did not show up, even if the cold was bearable for a visit of a few minutes” (18). Henry’s pursuit of advancement caused him to neglect and disregard his familial obligations.

Further, he also worked physically harder in order to obtain the recognition he desperately desired from Robbins: “ Sometimes, if he thought he could escape the other tasks of the day, he would stand on a stool and comb the mane until his hands tired” (21). Henry became willing to “ tire” himself out in hopes of his master’s acknowledgment of him. He knew that he had to please Robbins in order to achieve greater status. Through this process, Robbins “ came to develop a kind of love for the boy, and that love, built up morning after morning, was another reason to up the selling price Mildred

and Augustus Townsend would have to pay for their boy" (28). In this way, it can be observed that Henry's alienation of labor to establish a good rapport with Robbins was induced by society's tendency to place higher value on commodifiable skills.

Ultimately, this alienation of labor extends into Henry's adult life as he eventually assumes the role of a slave owner after his parents buy his freedom. Having endured the sorrows of slavery, Henry's parents disapprove of his new identity as a slave owner. Although they empathize with Henry's desire to obtain status within the undeniable institution of slavery, Henry's parents hope to inspire moral uprightness in him. With Robbins as his mentor, however, Henry fails to adopt his parents' sense of morality by following Robbins' leadership advice.

In an instance when Elias, one of Henry's slaves, was caught escaping, Henry resorts to cruel punishment that he had learned on Robbins' plantation: " He had decided that a whipping would not be enough, that only an ear would do this time. He had just not decided if it should be the whole ear or only a piece, and if a piece, how big a piece?" (89). In this instance, it can be observed that Henry's sense of humanity has diminished as he contemplates violent punishments towards his own slave. As society values the wealthy, Henry buys into the institution of slavery, despite his prior position therein. Although he eventually became free in the physical sense, his learned and conditioned skills under Robbins has placed him in an immoral and counter-intuitive position in society as a slave owner, separated from his humanity by virtue of his labor.

Next, the commodification of human beings in *The Known World* leads to Augustus' disenfranchisement as a freed slave. Despite his earned freedom, Augustus is reduced to a price in an unfortunate encounter with slave patrollers. Travis, one of the patrollers with a biased and prejudicial agenda, disregarded Augustus' claim of freedom: "You ain't free less me and the law say you free" (211). When Augustus brought out his legal papers indicating his right to freedom, "Travis began eating the papers, starting at the bottom right corners, chewed the corners up and swallowed" (212). Then, Travis further disenfranchised Augustus by illegally selling him to a passerby for a mere "fifty dollars" (215). Because of Augustus' history as a slave, Travis clings to the idea that slaves are never "free" and rejects Augustus' rights and humanity. Society's prescription of inferior value to slaves fosters Travis's false sense of entitlement in conducting this illegal transaction, depriving Augustus of any claim. Ultimately, Augustus is once again enslaved by exploitative powers as he is reduced to potential profit for his new master.

Similarly, such prejudicial societal standards entail the dehumanization of the child slave, Minerva. For John and Winifred Skiffington's wedding, Minerva was given as a gift from John's cousin, Counsel, and his wife, Belle: "About three o'clock, after matters had quieted down some, Belle went out to where her maid was in the backyard and returned with a slave girl of nine years and had the girl, festooned with a blue ribbon, stand and then twirl about Winifred" (31). In this scene, Minerva was objectified and treated as a prize that could be won with a "blue ribbon" on. Minerva is dehumanized as she is instructed to "twirl" about, like some pet who has been conditioned to

perform tricks for the mere amusement of human beings. She is further degraded when Belle informs Winifred of her name: “ She will answer to the name Minnie, but her proper name is Minerva. She will, however, answer to either, to whatever you choose to call her” (32). Essentially, Belle implies that Minerva can be and do whoever and whatever her new owners desire. Here, Minerva is reduced to a mere object of amusement and obedience as a result of her lack of status as a child slave. Her limited skills as a child foster the treatment of her as a mere “ wedding gift” whose sole purpose is to please her new owners.

Commodification of identities shapes the way people are viewed and consequently, how they are treated by society. In *The Known World*, wealthy members of society exhibit a tendency to assign distinct values to slaves or former slaves based on their skill set and how much profit they represent. As human beings are reduced to objects of profit, the institution of slavery that exists in this novel requires readers to view and apply commodification beyond materialism, and instead, metaphysically. In the novel, the varying skills of slaves, and even freed slaves, contribute to their commodification, thus determining how they are treated by others in their environments. The slave characters are forced to constantly adhere to their masters’ desires despite the various forms of exploitation they must endure. As a result, these enslaved characters become dehumanized and objectified, as in Minerva’s case. Additionally, freed slaves become subject to the corruption of the slave system, as observed in Henry’s role-switch and Augustus’ disenfranchisement. Society’s treatment of the slave identity as mere commodity in the novel forces the characters to be perpetually subjugated.

In this way, the desired values in The Known World, imposed by society, surrenders the morality and humanity of its members.