



## Contemporaneity of English Language and Literature in the Robotized Millennium

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# Identity Construction in “The Known World” by Edward P. Jones

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**Abstract.** Edward P. Jones’s “TheKnown World” analyses social identity. In this odd tale about slavery, a man of African descent named Henry Townsend owns a farm and also slaves. Jones therefore creates a power and dominance system where race is not the only factor. In the story, having a slave is made possible through social connections. By developing a setting and individuals like these, Jones questions both the slave narrative and the neo-slave narrative while improving parts of them. The emphasis of this article is on identity construction and identification. Henry Townsend has been socialised to seek success and power in “The Known World”. Jones depicts black Southerner owning slaves. A former slave named Henry adopts a character to project his power and freedom. Therefore, in the story, freedom and identity are both shaped by the influence of society.

**Keyword:** Identity, freedom, relationship, slavery.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Henry Townsend, the son of Augustus and Mildred Townsend, is born a slave to William Robbins the most powerful individual in Manchester County. Early in the novel, slavery strains familial ties. Henry has always valued masters over parents. Because he was estranged from his parents at a young age, Henry relates to friends more than his family and idolises Robbins more than his father. Henry’s father, Augustus, pays for the release of both he and Mildred. The family splits as a result, with the parents suffering more than the child. As Henry becomes older and more socially adept, his visits with his parents become less enjoyable since he doesn’t have a genuine relationship with them. Although Henry doesn’t gain much from having a strong relationship with his parents, William Robbins’ liking for him helps him advance in both slavery and society. As Henry’s parents’ relationship deteriorates, his attachment with Robbins deepens. Henry becomes Robbins’ groom, strengthening his ties to him. Henry benefits from Robbins’ dedication. But better Henry’s treatment deepens his enslavement. Henry, Robbins’s groom, waits for him to return after his long, tiring treks, and Robbins looks forward to seeing him since he brings relaxation and relief. (27-28)

Robbins has a self-centered affection for Henry because he finds comfort in him. With the slaves, Henry is fed, clothed, and promoted. While this position It not only increases his comfort, but it also increases his value, requiring his parents to pay a higher price for his liberty —Robbins’ method of keeping him around for a longer period of time. Gaining a master’s affection has benefits. Robbins and Henry’s parents are diametrically opposed. While Henry waits for Robbins to get home, his parents are looking forward to his return. Henry doesn’t often see his parents on time. Henry is unable to see how his parents can be of assistance. Henry is indoctrinated by the psychology of slavery and builds a sense of self from cultural norms even though he is unaware that a relationship with his parents will provide him everything, including his freedom. The most major influence on Henry’s life comes from his connection with William Robbins. Henry supports a society that denies him fundamental freedoms and rights by becoming a slave owner. Henry’s mentality has been shaped by his assimilation in this culture of slavery, where freedom means being in charge and having power. Henry has most of the rights and benefits of a free man, but legally, he belongs to his father when he dies. Henry is purchased by Augustus Townsend so that his parents can rejoin free of slavery. Although buying family members is a common practise in slavery, Henry is

never legally free and continues to be enslaved as a result of Manchester County's freed slave statutes. Robbins anticipates meeting Henry since he gives respite and relaxation after his strenuous journeys, and Henry is Robbins's groom. Jones: Augustus would also not seek a petition for Henry, his son, and over time, because of how well William Robbins, their former owner, treated Henry, people in Manchester County just failed to remember that Henry, in fact, was listed forever in the records of Manchester as his father's property. (15-16) Henry is unaware of this, but the reader is. Henry's deceit helps to define who he is. Henry, a slave owner, is a victim of servitude and societal custom. Henry rises to greater rank and influence than even some white men. Henry is enslaved by social convention despite his status and influence. He consents to servitude. Henry makes a living off of it and forges a persona based on servitude. Henry is both a physical and figurative slave to slavery. Henry perished ruled by his ideas. In his final minutes, he had a significant dream. In the style of magic realism, Henry has an out-of-body experience. Henry passes away without being aware of his legal situation or his flawed self-identity. Robbins receives consolation and solace from Henry following his exhausting, protracted journeys.

Henry, the plantation owner, is well-off. Henry and Moses built a lovely mansion; therefore, it is strange that in his last vision he and his wife are renting a home that is too small for them both. Henry Townsend is using another person's life as his own. Like his house, which is his father's property, so too is Henry. Henry's idiocy is exposed by death, as though his mind is aware that he is a fraud. In his final hours, Henry feels profound disappointment and appears to be aware that his life was not his own, even if he is not fully aware of his situation. This suggests that he was an outsider in his social group. As Henry was kept in servitude even though he gained relative advantages as he grew older, the incident might be seen as a metaphor for the restrictive nature of slavery. Henry's passing is paralleled in *Incidents in the "Life of a Slave Girl"* is a book by Harriet Jacobs that is based on her own life. Freedom is connected to both space and being locked up. These locations foster independence. Henry Townsend feels constrained and is reminded of slavery by the little leased home. He established his identity and independence as a slave owner in a grand plantation estate. Jacobs discovers freedom in seclusion. Instead of moving north, Linda, Jacobs' alter ego, hides out in a storage area for years. Jacobs says, "I went to sleep that night with the impression that I was for the present the most fortunate slave in town. Dawn illuminated my chamber. I praised God for this secure haven" (246). This hideous crawl space is a haven. Jacobs thanks God for the peace of this retreat. More oppressive than extended physical confinement is slavery. Linda starts to develop an own personality in her little space. She obtained freedom by transcending enslavement and the roles she had been performing in the slave society. Like Linda, Henry allows his identity and freedom to be shaped by his environment. Space makes Henry's experience of slavery more complete. In order to become strong and affluent, Henry buys land from William Robbins and constructs a house. Jones says, "by the time he died he would possess all the property between him and Robbins such that there was nothing separating what they owned" (122). Robbins is a hero to Henry, and their products are interchangeable once he passes away. Robbins and Henry have a similar identity. Moses, Henry Townsend's first slave, works with him to construct the main plantation house, just like Robbins did. The building of this palace solidifies Henry's freedom and control of the estate. While constructing his home, Henry genuinely develops his individuality. Informing his parents about the home makes Henry feel both pleased and humiliated. This is the final time Henry identifies with his parents' cultural heritage. Their romance is permanently ended by Henry's desire for fame and power. "It's going to be a good house, Papa. Even white folks exclaim "What a lovely house Henry Townsend got" (136). Henry blatantly values the approval of white society over that of his kin or ethnicity. Henry's father is furious when he learns that he acquired a slave to help build the mansion. The acquisition of a slave gives Henry his life and sense of self. Similar to the incident from his childhood, Henry fights with his father. Henry argues that he did nothing wrong and behaved as any other white man would. Henry chastises his father for not being more assertive and striving to be above his level. Augustus beats Henry to make him feel like a slave, yet the cruelty he receives solidifies his new identity while erasing his previous one. Henry, according to Augustus, is ignorant of slavery. Despite being born a slave and having been reared by William Robbins, Henry has no affinity for the black slave community. Henry supports Manchester County's well-known white slave owners. Henry follows a fantasy that can never come true, making him similar to the squirrels Augustus beats him with. Henry enjoys success in his large estate and rises to power, yet he is never truly free. His slavery is who he is. As a result, Henry has shockingly become a slave rather than escaped it. As they construct a home, Henry and Moses evolve. The friendship between Henry and Moses gets worse. When William Robbins pays a visit to Henry in the middle of the house, he thinks he and Moses are too close. Robbins chastises Henry for treating Moses equally and issues a dire warning.

Henry is advised by William Robbins to remember that owning slaves is both a privilege and a responsibility. Henry must understand the difference between a master and a slave and teach it to his property. Because he regards William Robbins as a mentor, Henry takes this message seriously and begins to redefine himself. He recasts his

relationship with Moses as one of master and servant. Their once-friendly talk becomes sad due to Henry's harsh demeanour. To behave like a plantation master, Henry must identify as one. Robbins mentions the law. He asserts that because the law distinguishes between master and slave, Henry will be protected regardless of his skin tone. The law will still defend Henry if he crosses the border between master and slave, but less successfully. This statement demonstrates how society, not race, usually determines legal protection or position. Henry should thus sever all ties to his race and family in order to forge a status-enhancing persona. This identity will be the source of his release. Once more, Henry is property. While Henry's independence is based on a lie—the construction of his house—it is clear that this identity is a falsehood. Slavery and Henry's artificially created desire to transcend his station and fulfil a greater destiny have made him a slave. After renouncing his ancestry and ethnicity, he must build a new identity. Henry's mistaken belief that he was free while being a slave shows how identity is socially constructed. It enables us to look at the impacts of slavery. Henry's ambition to be like William Robbins shapes who he is. More than simply being free, Henry wants to be. Henry succeeds in obtaining power and prestige rather than independence and a life free from slavery. Henry aspires to become established. By his odd bond with William Robbins, Henry gains credibility and accomplishes his goal. The white master promoted self-worth. Henry may relate to Robbins since he deviates from the slave group in order to achieve freedom. To get freedom, Henry assumes a new identity as a slave owner. Henry's independent existence is shown to have been a fraud after his death. Henry can never be free and embraces slavery. The reader is the only one who is aware of his legal status as a slave, which emphasises this. In most slave and neo-slave stories, the master and slave suffer consequences of servitude. This is the logic of the "The Known World". Both the offenders and the victims relationships and sense of self are distorted by power. The norm of slavery would corrupt civilization. Henry Townsend fabricates a fictitious identity. He rejects slavery, his race, his town, and his family. William Robbins, his former boss, and other upper-class white males are among those with whom he interacts. In a twisted society that promotes slavery, Henry aspires to rise from victim to dominant in order to gain power and freedom. Henry no longer lives as a free man but as a slave owner. Because to the flaws in society, he participates in slavery rather than overcoming it. The mindset of servitude has permanently imprisoned Henry. There is no freedom in the Known World. Freeing one's body comes after liberating one's ideas. Henry is ruled by slavery. Although being legally a slave, he is free. Henry is unable to escape the psychology of slavery and free himself because of the harm slavery has caused to society. This aspect of the story's actuality is furthered by the fact that he is technically a slave. Slavery characterises Henry. Because he is once more a slave, this time to the system—both the idea and the reality—he is unable to generate true freedom. Both the oppressor and the oppressed would be him. "The Known World" connects freedom and identity. Hence, freedom is determined by identification. Henry succeeds in escaping slavery, unlike other fictional figures. They overcome their enslavement and create a new identity.

## 2. CONCLUSION

"The Known World" is about independence and discovering oneself. Both of these concepts are blatantly socially constructed, and Jones capitalises on these difficulties to create a brand-new and distinctive neo-slave narrative. Jones, in contrast to other contemporary writers of neo-slave narratives, complicates his story by focusing on the content rather than the form. The ideas and concepts of Henry Townsend teach us about the psychology of slavery and highlight the irony at the centre of the narrative. The goal of this article is to undertake a thorough analysis of the ideas of identity and freedom via the prism of the characters Henry Townsend in order to draw attention to the fact that the book functions as a neo-slave narrative. Ultimately, the conversation raises a number of queries about the traits of the neo-slave narrative, including how it operates and how Jones fits into the category. Jones presents a unique portrait of the institution, which undermines the readers' perception of slavery. Jones prompts readers to reexamine slavery as a result. Readers are prompted to think about the untold stories of slavery by his portrayal of it in "The Known World". Jones deviates far enough from the typical neo-slave narrative to show that genre issues are usually complex and hard to address. Although Jones's work is groundbreaking, he makes care to follow some of the genre's more nuanced conventions. "The Known World" is permeated by intersexuality. The piece also highlights the tradition of rewriting the slave narrative form as the source of the neo-slave narrative. This paper explores how Jones embraces the neo-slave narrative tradition while maintaining the slave experience via identification and emancipation.

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