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**The Development of Henry Townsend
in *The Known World* by Edward P. Jones**

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Introduction

The historical fiction *The Known World* by Edward P. Jones is a novel that offers a complex and contradictory view of slavery and the human nature. The novel consists of many of the classical elements known to belong to slave narratives and novels about slavery, for example the horrors of slavery, the journey from South to North and the concept of passing. However, at the same time the narrative gives an unusual and not so simple representation of the antebellum South and of slavery. Timothy Ryan states that the narrative “questions and complicates traditional literary conventions for representing slavery” (par. 22). I was struck by this complex and interesting characterisation that transforms the issue of slavery from a racial to a human issue. This gives the reader an important experience and if we did not know it before, we soon learn that the issue of slavery was complicated, and, as Ryan writes, this novel “shows that slavery was never just black and white” (par. 32).

The fact that one of the central figures in the narrative was a black slave owner was one feature of many that intrigued me. There are many characters worth studying. Ryan for examples focuses on John Skiffington, who, Ryan thinks, “embodies the complications and contradictions of slavery” (par. 25). However, my initial interest of the black slave owner Henry Townsend remains and will be dealt with here. Jones himself explains that “[i]t was always for me about the characters, [...] and the good and bad things they do to each other” (Marshall par. 14).

The focus of my paper is the character Henry Townsend and the remote causes for his motivation dealing with his choice of becoming a slave master. The reasons for this being interesting are, as stated above, not only racially related, but also that this is contrary to his parents’ convictions and their legacy. First, my aim is to prove that Henry acts against his parents’ convictions and their legacy. Then, in order to comprehend Henry Townsend my concentration will be on the relationship with his parents and with his owner William Robbins and Henry’s status in society as a free black man. My thesis is that William Robbins is a more significant and authoritarian person in his life than his parents and therefore more influential.

To help understand the characters, it is also crucial to have an understanding of the period of time Jones has written about. Jones himself did actually not do a wide background study:

Jones mustered a couple of attempts at writing the novel, six pages from the first chapter, six pages from the last chapter. But that was his entire output for a decade, in part because he kept thinking about those 40 unread books about slavery. Finally, in a pivotal moment, he scrapped them. (Marshall par. 18)

This does not have to mean that his knowledge of the subject beforehand was not comprehensive. In fact, the novel consists of many historical references, both true and false, that play a significant part in the plot and the understanding of the characters.

Historical Background

There are certain aspects of ante-bellum history that are important to understand in order to analyze a character like Henry Townsend. The aspects of history that improved my understanding of the novel and the character were mainly the following three: the different categories of slaves, the status of the free black man and the structure of a slave family.

Larry Koger discusses in *Black Slaveowners* the importance of what role the slave had and how this affected his/her opinion and attitude towards his/her master. Slaves were divided into three categories, field slaves, house slaves and artisan slaves (42-44).

According to Stanley Feldstein the field slave

represented the majority of the slaves and they seldom accepted their enslavement as legitimate. Since the overwhelming majority of slaves worked in the fields, they were less accessible to the culture of the slave owners. Furthermore the field hands saw slavery in a very different light than the house servants. For example, the field slaves were forced to till the soil from sunup until sundown, working themselves to a state of exhaustion. Also life in the fields could be quite hellish because the slaves were under close supervision from their overseers or slave drivers and thus subject to beatings. (*Once A Slave: The Slave's View of Slavery*, 1971, 49-50, qtd. in Koger 43)

Because of the field slaves' view of slavery as an oppressive system, Koger concluded that field slaves were less likely when manumitted to buy slaves for their own benefit. However, this was not the case with the house slaves who were taught to consider themselves superior to the slaves working in the fields. This conception of superiority was reinforced by the way they dressed, their housing and the food they ate. Many house slaves identified with their owners because of their close interaction with the white Southern culture. House slaves occasionally saw slavery as a justified institution and accepted the values of their slave

owners. Because of this, when manumitted some tried to obtain a prosperous life with the help of slaves (42-43).

The third category of slaves was the artisan slaves (the category Henry's father Augustus belonged to, the significance of which will be discussed later). Artisan slaves were to some extent close in their connections with the white population and occasionally absorbed the culture of their master. However, many artisan slaves lived outside of the household of their master and enjoyed a greater degree of movement than the house servants and the field slaves. Some artisan slaves could keep a small portion of their earnings and with this money buy their freedom. Koger concluded that former artisan slaves "occasionally purchased slaves, thus aligning themselves with their former masters by accepting certain aspects of the slaveowning system" (43).

Many restrictions and laws decreased the freedom of the free black man. In the article "A Slave Family in the Ante Bellum South", Loren Schweningen describes the status of the free black man. Schweningen found in the "Revised Laws of the City of Nashville, 1850" that if a free black person travelled without his or her free papers he or she were to be treated as slaves. Free black people were for example not "permitted to walk the streets after dark, enter tippling houses, make weird noises, or gather within city limits for any purpose, except public worship, and Blacks attending church were to be supervised by whites" (42). Most of the free black people had a low economic status and lived a poor life. Many hired themselves out to work on farms, others hired a piece of land which they tried to live off. Rather few free black people had other professions than those mentioned above, but most of those who had were for example barbers, shoemakers, carpenters or blacksmiths. The typical farm owned by a free black man was a "farm home" with no commercial enterprise (Jackson 392-397). Those who were successful farm owners had the option of purchasing slaves; some bought slaves only for economic reasons, and others had reasons that were more humanitarian. Some free black people bought less fortunate relatives who they later manumitted, trusting the freed person to return the price of his freedom. The white population, who feared the increasing population of free black people, legislated in 1805 a law prohibiting free black people to stay in Virginia for more than a year after they were manumitted. A consequence of this law was that people could not manumit their relatives if they wanted to stay in the state together. Therefore, many remained as slave owners in the eyes of the law, only to keep the family safe and together. This kind of slave owner was known as the benevolent slave owner (Goldsmith et al. 239-240).

It is hard to determine the structure and status of a slave family. According to Schweninger, there are two different interpretations on the effect of slavery on the black family; one is that it destroyed the family and the other is a more optimistic view, that slavery strengthens family loyalties. The family was, if present, an important refuge from the horrors of slavery (29). Herbert G. Gutman writes that the structure of the slave family was affected by the fact that slave owners did not care about the family ties of the slaves as long as their numbers increased. The reproduction of “the slave labor force required only the simple *biological dyad* ‘mother and child’. The *social dyads* ‘husband and wife’ and ‘father and child’ were not essential. Neither was the completed nuclear family” (79). Our knowledge of the structure of the slave family is useful when we study the Townsends.

Henry Defies His Parents’ Conviction and Legacy

Henry’s father Augustus has worked hard for several years to free his family from the bonds of slavery. One would think that a family that has gone through this much should be unified and show each other great solidarity. This is not the case with the Townsends.

On the day of Henry’s “emancipation”, the family helps, although not planned, the escape of Rita. Rita is the woman who takes care of Henry during the absence of his parents. Henry holds his tongue and never reveals anything about the escape even though it “would amaze all involved” (44). This is the only instance when Henry acts according to his parents’ beliefs and not as the law says. His parents’ conviction is that slavery is wrong and there are many signs indicating their beliefs.

A piece of evidence is their reactions towards Henry in the dinner scene, when Henry is visiting his parents. At the dinner table he reveals the secret that he has bought a slave. Because of Henry’s participation in Rita’s escape and the natural love and hope in the goodwill of one’s child, I suppose that Augustus and Mildred have no reason to doubt the moral of their son. They do not like Henry’s relationship to William Robbins, but they do not know the power of Robbins’ influence, and the revelations of Henry come as a surprise and are therefore even more painful. Augustus and Mildred take for granted that their son should share their convictions and feelings about the issue of slavery. When Henry tells them “I bought my own man” (136), they are almost dumbfounded. The silence does not last, however, and Augustus tries to comprehend but fails: “You mean to tell me you bought a man and he is yours now? You done bought him and you didn’t free that man? You *own* a man, Henry?” (137). The argument that follows proves that the parents and their child have chosen different sides in the most vital subject of their time:

Augustus slammed the stick down across Henry's shoulder and Henry crumpled to the floor. "Augustus stop now!" Mildred shouted and knelt to her son. "Thas how a slave feel!" Augustus called down to him. "Thas just how every slave every day be feelin." Henry squirmed out of his mother's arms and managed to get to his feet. He took the stick from his father. "Henry no!" Mildred said. Henry, with two tries, broke the stick over his knee. "Thas how a master feels," he said and went out the door. (138)

Henry had not expected his parents to become this angry even if "[p]art of him had been afraid to tell them about Moses" (135). After this incident, Augustus and Mildred do not accept or respect what Henry does, but they do not cut him off completely. His father goes to see him on the plantation when he is doing poorly. Nevertheless, their relationship does not recover and for the remaining ten years of Henry's life they are not close (6). There are no more altercations about the issue of slavery between Henry and his parents in the novel. The rest of the differences between Henry and his parents are mainly seen when studying the way they live their lives and when they occasionally meet.

When visiting, Augustus and Mildred refuse to sleep in Henry's house and instead they sleep "in whatever cabin [that is] available down in the quarters" (6). The reason for this must be that they do not want to align themselves with the master of the plantation but instead express solidarity with the slaves. Another example is the day after Henry's death, when Augustus and Mildred "[share] in all the work" (70) that needs to be done on the late Henry's plantation.

The most decisive evidence that Augustus and Mildred are strong opponents of slavery is the findings of Counsel Skiffington. After the murder of Mildred and the capture of Moses, Counsel finds with the help of Oden and Travis "hidden compartments in the house [...] designed to hide slaves for the Underground Railroad" (377). Augustus and Mildred have been active opponents to slavery, abolitionists, helping slaves to escape to the freedom of the North and by doing so risking their life and liberty for their conviction.

This revelation in the end of the novel made me wonder if Henry was aware of his parents' illegal, but heroic and good-hearted secret. Jones did not in any way portray Henry as aware of his parents' secret, and by studying certain events, you can conclude that he most likely was uninformed. If the compartments were constructed after Henry's purchase of his first slave, it is not likely that they would not have trusted him with this information. If Henry had known about the compartments before, he would not be surprised when his parents so strongly oppose him at the dinner scene and he would not have said, "nobody ever told me the wrong of that" (137). Augustus and Mildred certainly had the time to finish such a

construction when Henry was absent and therefore my conclusion is that he was not aware that his parents were involved in the Underground Railroad.

In ante-bellum South, the abolitionists Augustus and Mildred and the slave master Henry are poles apart. Nevertheless, this is not determined only by the fact that Henry is a slave owner, because there are different kinds of slave owners. It is important to distinguish what sort of slave owner Henry is. In the eyes of the law, Henry's father is also a slave owner although his and Henry's attitude and purpose of owning slaves differ. Augustus is a slave owner because he cannot manumit Henry and Mildred, since the law did not allow them to stay, if freed, in Virginia for more than twelve months. Consequently, he remains the owner of his child and wife in order to keep the family together and safe. This kind of slave owner is, as already mentioned, known as the benevolent slave master (Goldsmith et al. 339-340). If Henry would have the same reasons as his father for owning slaves, his parents would still accept him. It is therefore interesting to look at the reasons Henry has to own slaves. Henry's initial intentions are good; he talks "about [his wish to] be a master different from any other, the kind of shepherd master God had intended" (180). He plans that the life of his slaves should be pleasant with "good food [...], no whippings, [and] short and happy days in the fields" (180). Sadly, he fails in becoming this different master:

Henry had been a good master his widow decided, *as good as they come*. Yes, he sometimes had to ration the food he gave them. But this was not his fault - had God sent down more food. Henry would certainly have given it to them. Henry was only the middleman in that particular transaction. Yes, he had to have some slaves beaten, but those were the ones who would not do what was right and proper. (181, emphasis added)

There are several examples of the sort of master Henry is; when his rebellious slave Elias wants to marry the limping Celeste, Henry gladly approves since this "was better than chains" because "he had them together, bound one strong man to a woman with a twisted leg" (102). The incident of the death of Luke is one example of both Henry's mastering and his reasons for his slave owning. Henry's slave Luke is hired "out for \$2 a week" to a plantation owned by Shavis Merle. Henry, knowing that Merle's slaves have to work extremely hard, agrees to hire the boy out in order to make a profit. The young boy Luke dies in the fields, but Henry is paid a compensation of \$100 (102-103).

With the presented evidence above, I can conclude that Henry's slave owning is not benevolent even if his initial intention perhaps was. His reasons are instead the same as all

the other slave owners, except the benevolent slave owners, namely economical. I can also conclude that Henry defies his parents' convictions and their legacy.

Henry's Adolescence: The Absence of a Family

In the previous paragraph, I concluded that Henry defies the convictions and legacy of his parents, which inevitably leads to the question, why? My aim is to understand why Henry defies his parents and becomes a slave master. To do this I will start by looking at his adolescence.

The adolescence is the most important period concerning a person's development, both morally and when it comes to create an identity. This period made Henry the man who would eventually buy slaves and become a master. During this crucial period, Henry is without his family at Robbins' plantation (15). His father Augustus, being a carpenter, belongs to the already mentioned category of slaves known as artisan slaves. As shown in the previous section Augustus is not one of those artisan slaves who according to Koger occasionally aligned themselves with their masters (43). In fact, he does not accept a single aspect of the slave owning system. He is, however, one of those artisan slaves who keep a small portion of his earnings and with Robbins' permission, he is able to save enough money to buy himself free. Augustus manages to circumvent the law and stay in Virginia because "based primarily on his skills, [he] had managed to get William Robbins and a number of other white citizens to petition the state assembly to permit him to stay" (15).

When Henry is nine years old, his father Augustus buys Henry's mother Mildred. Augustus has himself by this time been a free man for three years, which already has made an influence on the young boy. Henry can at the age of nine "no longer remember when his father was a part of that home" (15). The reason Augustus buys his wife before his son is that he believes that the family will be united sooner this way, since two adults earn more money than one. Unfortunately, Augustus has not thought of the fact that Henry is an intelligent child and consequently will be valued thereafter. Although the promise by Henry's father that "before you can turn around good, [...] you be comin home with us" (16), it will take almost ten years before Augustus and Mildred are able to buy their son.

How was this absence significant for the young Henry? As mentioned in the historical background, Schwenger concluded that according to the optimistic interpretation, the slave family was, if present, an important refuge (29). Henry's refuge is if not completely destroyed most certainly damaged by his family's absence. The absence of his mother was perhaps not as important on the young boy as the absence of his father, because of her role

being filled by his “second mother Rita” (89). The absence of a father in the young Henry’s life has, as will be proved later, a profound effect. According to Gutman, when a father was absent, “other kin - maternal parents and the mother’s sisters and brothers - probably played significant roles in the daily lives of a mother and her children” (137). Augustus and Mildred do not seem to have any relatives on Master Robbins’ plantation, nor does Rita. Therefore, there is no one to fill the role as Henry’s father, at least not until he seeks and obtains the position as Robbins’ groom, the significance of which will be discussed later.

From the day when Mildred leaves her nine-year-old son, we as readers are not informed much about Henry’s daily life, but still we almost know more of Henry’s adolescence than his parents do. Certainly, we are introduced to other aspects of Henry’s childhood, aspects that his parents are not fully aware of. Their only contact with Henry is on Sunday visits, which often pass in silence. In the beginning, Henry anxiously shows them little things he has carved (18) and this probably makes his father, a carpenter, proud. Augustus probably believes that Henry with his teaching will assume his role as a carpenter. However, Henry soon concludes that other people and things are more important than his parents are: “The winter visits were short ones because the boy often complained of the cold. Sometimes Henry did not show up, even if the cold was bearable for a visit of a few minutes” (18).

During this period, Augustus feels that his son is out of reach, meaning that he cannot discipline him the way he would like to do (18). The fact that Henry is another man’s property is perhaps never clearer than when Augustus and Mildred are banned from visiting their son after Augustus had pushed Henry and therefore hurt Master Robbins’ boy and hence damaged his property (19-20). You are not sure of how Robbins learns of the incident, if it is by Henry directly, or if someone passes the information on after hearing it from Henry. Most likely, the information comes from Henry himself, because other slaves would more fully understand the probable consequences of it. Nevertheless, would not Henry at the age of ten know not to enlighten his master about an incident like this? Augustus and Mildred think that this issue is implied and that they do not have to address Henry about it. In their mind, you do not confess to your Master. You get the impression that this is an intentional punishment by Henry of his parents and that this is the first time he more or less openly acts in a way not according to their convictions. Another defiant act is that Henry has not told his parents that he is Robbins’ personal groom. This is not something forced upon him, nor is it something he is randomly selected for. Instead, Henry craves the position as Robbins’ groom and obtains it by bribes (20).

It is after Henry obtains this position he and Robbins begin their complex relationship and this is the beginning of Robbins' strong influence on Henry.

Henry's Adolescence: The Presence of Master Robbins

Henry rises in the plantation hierarchy when he becomes a groom. What we know of him before, is that he in spite of his young age, probably works in the fields. There are not many details about the slaves' conditions on Robbins' plantation. Nevertheless, by studying the adult Henry's plantations, which is founded with Robbins' plantation as a model and with Robbins' supervision, you can draw some conclusions about Robbins' own plantation. At Henry's plantation his slaves, including all but the youngest children, work in the fields all the hours the sun allows, everyday except Sundays (63). It is therefore safe to draw the conclusion that circumstances are similar on Robbins' plantation.

As discussed above in the historical background being a field slave was a tremendous burden. *The Known World* offers many examples of the hardships of field labour; the death of the young boy Luke (103) and the loss of Celeste's unborn baby (326), for instance. Therefore, this move, to become Robbins' personal groom, is possibly an attempt to be close to the man obviously controlling his fate. Henry perhaps hopes that his life will improve with this new position. Maybe he does it to upset his parents, although this is less likely since he does not inform them right away of this change in his life. Regardless these speculations about the reasons for Henry's wish and drive to become Robbins personal groom, the consequences of his new position is of a significant impact to the rest of his life.

Robbins has no impression of Henry at all before the boy becomes his groom. On the day when Augustus bought Mildred, which is only a year before Henry becomes Robbins' personal groom, Robbins does not know the boy's name (17). Henry is so far only a property to Robbins valued only by the work his small hands can do.

The relationship between Robbins and Henry is able to grow because of Robbins' trips to and from his mistress. Robbins loves his black mistress Philomena and their two children so much that he thinks God is punishing him with a very heavy pain in his head, which he refers to as storms (21). The storms often occur during his rides to and from Philomena in town. Henry is not "afraid to rise long before the sun to do his duties" (20) as a groom and is always waiting for Robbins to return from his visits to Philomena. Henry is "trying to prove himself to Robbins" (20) and "no matter what weather God gave Manchester County, Henry [is] waiting" (27). Robbins soon notices Henry's deeds and his affection for the boy starts to grow:

Robbins came to depend on seeing the boy waving from his place in front of the mansion, came to know that the sight of Henry meant the storm was over and that he was safe from bad men disguised as angels, 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 son. (27-28)

The relationship is hence bad for his parents and their dream of a family in freedom but Henry soon benefits from it when Robbins tells “the servants who [run] his mansion that Henry [is] to eat in the kitchen with them and forever be clothed the right way just the same as they [are] clothed” (27). This means that Henry in fact has shifted from being a field slave to a house slave. As mentioned earlier, Koger claims that a house slave often had a different view of slavery and relationship to his master than an artisan slave like Augustus or a field slave like Mildred would have. From this moment, Henry aged ten, starts to experience a life in slavery that neither of his parents has experienced. This is a life much closer to the slave owner and a life that provides a more generous image of the slavery institution, and this life, I believe, is also a part of the answer to my main question.

With the basis of Henry’s work as a groom, the relationship between the slave and the master continues to develop. Henry, in addition to being a groom, becomes an apprentice to the shoemaker at Robbins’ plantation. He becomes very skilled and soon he makes boots and shoes for Robbins and his family. He develops and is before long “better than the man who taught him” (111). Henry is not only smart and loved by his master but he is also a skilled artisan. These three combined obviously makes his value increase and this is the reason that he has to stay as a slave for almost ten years without his family. William Warren Rogers gives in *Ante-bellum Thomas County 1825-1861* examples of how the values of different slaves shifted in various appraisals. Rogers says that slaves were “valued according to age, sex, health and skill” (62) and in the *Annual Returns Thomas County 1845-1849* Rogers has found, for example, that “unskilled [...] field hands [...] were valued from \$350 to \$600” while according to the “Thomasville Southern Enterprise, June 12, 1855” “a bootmaker [...] sold at auction for \$1,810” (63). A man in the same social position as Henry is most likely valued even higher since he is very young and has many working years ahead of him. It is therefore not difficult to understand that his parents have a hard time raising the money necessary for his emancipation.

Henry and Robbins have during these years developed a strong relationship and when the day of Henry’s freedom comes nearer Robbins is “surprised to know that he would

miss the boy” and that he “had not been so surprised about his feelings for a black human being since realizing that he loved Philomena” (112). I believe that Robbins has served as the father figure Henry lacked. The foundation of their relationship during all those years is Henry’s work as a groom:

[Robbins] had gotten used to seeing Henry standing in the lane, waiting as Robbins came back from some business or from visiting Philomena and their children. The boy had a calming way about him and stood with all the patience in the world as Robbins, often recovering from an episode of a storm in the head, made his slow way from the road to the lane and up to the house. Fathers waited that way for prodigal sons, Robbins once thought. (112)

This once again proves that Henry is important to his master and stands out from the rest of the slaves. Robbins is, if not more, at least equally important to Henry during his adolescence. Robbins, “the white man who had come to mean so much to him” (117), becomes the influential male figure discussed earlier, who plays an important role in the daily life of Henry.

Henry after His “Emancipation”

The relationship that began during Henry’s slavery does not end with his “emancipation” and the feeling of loss is mutual. On Henry’s first day of freedom, his father asks him how he feels about being free. Henry answers that he does not feel any different and at the same time he “wonders who [is] waiting now for Robbins to come riding up on [his horse] Sir Gilderham” (49). Henry returns several times on Robbins’ request to his plantation to make boots and shoes for Robbins and his guests (112). In fact, before Henry buys his own land, he spends more than half of his time living in a cabin separated from the slaves at Robbins’ plantation. (169). Robbins starts to put out Henry’s name and this is a great help for Henry’s business, which is doing well (112). Henry is not the only benefactor of the relationship. Robbins knows how society treats its black citizens and he knows “that the world would not be very good to the children he had with Philomena, but whatever world it would be, he wanted Henry in it for them” (121).

It is also important to look at Henry’s relationship with his parents now that he is free. Augustus and Mildred are unquestionably satisfied and in high spirits because they are an united family again. However, unfortunately too many years have passed and there is an insurmountable gap mainly between the father and the son. Augustus does not understand his son’s actions and “would have preferred that his son have nothing to do with the past, aside

from visiting his slave friends at the Robbins plantation, and he certainly would have preferred he have nothing to do with the white man that once owned him” (113). There is no reference to a slave friend of Henry’s and I believe he did not have anyone who was significant to him at the plantation except the master himself. This is hard for a man like Augustus to understand because of his experience of the white master and slavery. Augustus is not the only one in the society to question the relationship between his son and Robbins. Robbins decides to pay for Henry’s education and the teacher Fern Elston questions this but believes she sees the answer in Robbins’ eyes:

She had heard from Maude, Caldonia’s mother, that there might be something unnatural between him and Henry. Why else would a white man of his stature spend so much of his life with a young man he had once owned? Now she knew the unnatural was not it. Robbins had a fear in his eyes, the same fear a man would have sending his son out into the world to hunt for bear with only a favourite gun that had failed the father once too often. (128)

Fern Elston’s observation is another hint that supports my belief that the relationship between Henry and Robbins took the shape of a father-son relationship.

The ultimate result of Robbins’ influence on Henry is when Henry buys his slaves. This is even more interesting when we look at Henry’s position in the society. Henry’s position in society as a free black man is rather difficult. As discussed in the historical background there were many laws decreasing the actual freedom of a free black man. Nevertheless, Jones lets us know that a man of Henry’s profession is rather well off compared to many other. In *The Known World* we are for example introduced to Barnum Kingsley who although he is not black is on the very bottom of the socio-economic scale (42). The characters are interesting to have in mind when looking at Jackson’s inspection of the population of free black people in a county in ante-bellum Virginia. He found that according to tax books from 1851, 1,300 were labourers and farm hands, which essentially meant that they, although free, did the same work as a field slave. In the same county, Jackson found in the “U.S. Census Bureau, Free Inhabitants (MS), 1860” only two or three shoemakers (396). Even though Jackson stated that this was perhaps a rather low figure compared to other counties this means that the artisans had an elevated position in the free black community. Jones did on a number of occasions emphasise Henry’s skills as a shoemaker and his ever growing clientele (111-113) and this would strongly imply that a man in Henry’s position could have lived a prosperous life being a shoe- and bootmaker and that becoming a slave owner was not a necessary step for his survival and well-being.

However, the most lucrative trade in the ante-bellum South was slave owning. If you were a free man, you had property rights that “included the rights to human property, and exercising that right was the surest means of gaining wealth” (Johnson and Roark 66). This right was exercised both by white and black people. Former slaves were stimulated by the economic benefits of slavery to own slaves (Koger 39). According to Koger, the former slaves did this because

[i]n spite of spending years in bondage, the freed slaves harbored no ill feelings toward their former masters and showed no signs of a deep hatred for the institution that enslaved them. The ex-slaves who owned human chattel regarded slavery not as an oppressive institution but as an economic necessity upon which their livelihood depended. (31)

This leads us again to the importance of the slave’s own experiences of slavery, mainly regarding what category the slave had belonged to. The former slaves that “acquired slaves for their own benefit often assimilated into the culture of white slave owners” (Koger 39), which was most common among house slaves (Koger 42-43). Michael P. Johnson and James L. Roark adds that besides the economic reason for owning slaves this was a way of dealing with the fear of being forced back into slavery . As a black slave owner, you “effectively demonstrated to sceptical whites that race did not define [your] loyalties” (66).

With all the above information in mind, it is easier to understand why a man like Henry buys slaves. Henry does not harbour any ill feelings towards his master. He does not toil in the fields all day, but instead he gets to learn the trade of shoemaking. He is fed well and clothed like a house slave, thereby being more aligned with his master than with the slaves. Henry fits the profile of a former slave who would be likely to purchase slaves.

We know that Henry’s intention is to be a good and kind master and that this eventually fails. Henry actually begins his career as a slave owner as a gentle and kind Master. It is not until Henry gets a lecture by Robbins on how to be a master that he changes. Robbins sees Henry and his slave Moses playing in the dirt and because of this he calls on Henry to talk to him. In the conversation, Robbins amongst other things tells Henry “the law expects you to know what is master and what is slave” (123). After this lecture, Henry returns to Moses:

“We can get in a good bit fore dark,” Moses said and lifted the saw high above his head.

“We ain’t working no more today.”

“What? But why not?”

“I said no more, Moses.”

“But we got good light here. We got good day here, Massa.”

Henry stepped to him, took the saw and slapped him once, and when the pain began to set in on Moses’s face, he slapped him again. “Why don’t you ever do what I tell you to? Why is that Moses?”

“I do. I always do what you tell me to do, Massa.”

“Nigger you don’t. You never do.”

Moses felt himself beginning to sink into the dirt. (124)

With this incident, Henry’s transformation from slave to master is completed. Henry is at this point completely under the influence of Robbins and his parents “at the far end of the county, might as well be at the end of the world” (170).

Conclusion

The reasons for Henry opposing his parent’s beliefs and not embracing his parents’ legacy are all an effect of Henry being left without his family at the Robbins plantation. Augustus does not believe that the separation between the parents and their son will last as long as it does. The cause for Henry being alone is that Augustus is able to buy himself and Mildred free. The Townsends have no relatives on the plantation and there are no males to fill an important void in Henry’s life. William Robbins fills the void when Henry eventually becomes his master’s personal groom. Henry tries hard to impress Robbins and succeeds with two significant results.

Firstly, Henry is given the life of a house slave. As a house slave, he is considered superior to the rest of the slaves. Later, when Henry becomes an apprentice, he is also a part of the category artisan slaves. Because of Henry’s favourable position, he does not experience the horrors of slavery that his parents most certainly did. This is very important to consider and this is the reason for Augustus’ inability to understand his child and vice versa. While the parents align themselves with the other slaves, Henry aligns himself with the master. They experience two extremely different sides of slavery and their different actions and convictions are a result of this. I believe that Henry sees slavery as a justified economic institution. This belief coincides with Koger’s theory that house slaves, like Henry, more often accepted the values of their master (42-43).

Secondly, Henry's and Robbins' relationship evolves to a father-son relationship. Robbins is dependent on Henry waiting for him after his "storms" and wants Henry to be a part of the life of his illegitimate children. Henry is dependent of Robbins who is the man controlling his fate and influencing his life.

During the period of Henry's adolescence, his parents are not involved in any significant way in his life. Augustus feels powerless and he has no control over his child. When Augustus is finally able to unite his family, too many years have past and he has no opportunity to mend the damaged relationship with his son. Augustus and Mildred are not given the time to pass on their legacy to their son. Henry owes everything to Robbins who has helped him to his position as a successful artisan, a landowner and a slave-owner. Robbins successfully passes on his legacy to Henry.

I would argue that my thesis that Robbins was a more influential person in Henry's life than his parents is proved. However, this was not the sole reason for Henry's choice of becoming a slave owner. Equally important was the different role Henry had as a slave compared to his parents. These two elements, the influence of Robbins and Henry's rather painless experience of slavery, helps me to better understand Henry and many of the choices he made.

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