

EVIL AND SUFFERING IN THE SHORT STORIES

OF EDWARD P. JONES

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By

Richard Kermond, MS

Georgetown University  
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Richard Kermond, MS

Mentor/Chair: William O'Brien, Phd

ABSTRACT

The theological problem of evil, namely how an all-good and all-powerful God could allow evil and suffering to exist, has not been satisfactorily addressed in traditional Christian theology. This work examines the question of suffering in the short stories of Edward P. Jones to gain new insight into this ageless question. The characters of Edward P. Jones in his two short story collections *Lost in the City* and *All Aunt Hagar's Children* supply the source material. These stories abound with suffering that each of his readers can grasp. These are highly personal stories that distill the essence of family tragedy, racial indignity, and human frailty. Woven throughout these tales of joy and sadness is the constant undercurrent of suffering. God is a constant yet enigmatic feature of this landscape. Paul Tillich's method of correlation, outlined in volume one of his *Systematic Theology* provides a tailored methodology to unearth the

theological "questions" and their associated "answers." Tillich's method of correlation provides the vehicle to analyze modern situations represented in literature to derive theological questions about suffering from the text. After a review of Tillich's methodology followed by a review of the traditional Christian perspectives on suffering, this work examines Jones's stories for situations that relate to the problem of suffering. The philosophies of Victor Frankl, Paul Ricoeur, and Liberation theology, provide a broader response than the traditional Christian response to suffering encompassing personal, communal, and spiritual aspects of the question. These three lenses, the personal, the communal, and the spiritual, offer a more inclusive and therefore more consoling response than the traditional Christian response for those who suffer.

Dedication

To Cathy who made it all possible.

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## INTRODUCTION

The world of Edward P. Jones is harsh. The vivid landscapes he paints of a bygone Washington, DC speak loudly of loneliness, privation, and pain. His characters suffer physically, emotionally, and spiritually. Suffering in its purest sense relates directly to an individual's response to the trials of life. For us to grasp and empathize, suffering must have a human element that ensures we can in some way identify with the characters on a personal level. The suffering of multitudes in the face of catastrophic disasters, while tragic, does not touch us in the same way as the suffering of one person whose life we can feel and touch. This is the world that Edward P. Jones gives us. His stories abound with suffering that each of his readers can grasp, personal stories that distill the essence of family tragedy, racial indignity, and human frailty. These stories are not for the faint of heart. But murder, inhumanity, and cruelty remain balanced with grace, charity, and goodness. The old post-slavery south has moved to Washington, DC, but the city has failed to completely destroy the values and customs of this

gentler age. The cruel modern world exists side by side with the small towns of the rural south on the streets of Washington. Woven throughout these stories of both joy and sadness is the constant undercurrent of suffering. The characters Jones brings alive all suffer one way or another. Rarely does he allow a life of pure happiness. Be it emotional for dreams unfulfilled, or physical through pain and deprivation, suffering infuses Jones's work.

So where is God throughout all this suffering? God is a constant feature of this landscape. Jones told Neely Tucker in a 2009 interview for the Washington Post Magazine that "[t]he people I grew up with, almost all of them had been born and raised in the South.... And you know they didn't always go to church, but they lived their lives as if God were watching everything they did." God, regardless of shape or description, is an inseparable element of Jones's environment, as if "God sat on a streetlight up the block. Say at the corner of Florida and North Capitol." If God is a part of this backdrop, how can we make sense of this suffering?

Hugh McCann, Professor of Philosophy at Texas A and M, in his article "Divine Providence" in the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, defines the traditional problem of evil much the same as others including Epicurus, David Hume, and R.L Mackie. God created everything and all that occurs in the universe occurs under Divine Providence. God is a loving father, and therefore his acts all focus toward good. He is omniscient, omnipotent, and perfectly good. Therefore, one would expect that the world in which we live should be completely geared toward good. However, we find that this is not the case. McCann goes on to say:

The world may contain much good, but it is also a place of suffering, destruction, and death. Life is brief, and afflicted with sorrows of every kind—as often as not with no discernible purpose at all, much less a good one. And it ends for each of us in personal destruction—in death, which trumps all worldly hopes, and conceals impenetrably any experience that may lie beyond. Nor are these mere human hardships. Every living thing dies, all that is beautiful perishes, everything nature builds is destroyed. Indeed, if science is right, not an atom, not a photon will escape the cauldron of the universe's final collapse. How can all of this be, if God's nature is as tradition postulates?

From the perspective of Jones's characters, it is not the existence of God that is in question; however, the

prevalence of so much suffering begs the question "Why me?" For our purposes, I will not explore deeply the questions related to evil. Instead, this paper will focus on trying to make sense of suffering.

Edward P. Jones is not a theologian. "Well... I'm not one for believing in God" (Jones 2009, 1), Jones told me when I interviewed him in May 2009. Instead, he is an astute student of the human condition. His characters range from the nearly angelic to the deeply evil. His preferred theme is the morally ambiguous. His landscape is black Washington, DC. (There are few white characters singled out in his stories but the white presence and dominant position in Washington is laid on with a palette knife.) God is felt more than seen. Yet God and religion are ever-present backdrops in this landscape.

The story of Jesus' death on the cross, a sacrifice for the redemption of man has been central to the Christian view of suffering in the world. Yet despite the obvious physical connection to suffering, the meaning of Jesus' death on the cross is less than obvious. Suffering can be viewed either as an essential element of salvation

in a traditional Christian view or as the final tragic chapter in the exemplary model life of Jesus Christ, but not essential for salvation. In any case, there is certainly room for further discussion regarding suffering's role.

The characters of Edward P. Jones in his two short story collections *Lost in the City* and *All Aunt Hagar's Children* are the vehicles for examining the question of suffering, with the hope of gaining new insight into this ageless question. Jones portrays multiple levels of suffering through his characters:

- They suffer first and foremost because they are black in America.

- They suffer because they have been uprooted from their traditional southern roots, their close-knit, well-ordered family focused society.

- They suffer because they have become disillusioned by the modern world that no longer cherishes the individual, a world where traditional Christian values are easily set aside in favor of expediency.

- They suffer because they are lost in a world where crime and drugs are the norm. In Jones's own words they are literally "Lost in the City."

God in this world is a constant presence in the background, in conversation, in music, in the black

community culture, in church. Through the fictional Marie Delaveaux Jones captures the essence of what Washington was thought to represent to the black émigrés from the old south (Jones 1992, 229-243). An eighty-six year old widow who has sailed the seas of uncertainty in the strange white bureaucracy of Washington, Marie has lived in the transition from the rural south to urban Washington.

Recounting her life she says:

... My mother had this idea that anything could be done in Washington, that a human being could take all they troubles to Washington and things would be set right. I think that was all wrapped up with her notion of the govment, the Supreme Court and the President and the like. "Up there" she would say, "things can be made right." "Up there" was her only words for Washington. All them other cities had names, but Washington didn't need a name. It was just called "up there." I was real small and I didn't know any better, so somehow I got to thinking since things were on the perfect side in Washington, that maybe God lived there. God and his people.... When I went back home to visit home that first time and told my mama all about my livin in Washington, she fell into such a cry, like maybe I had managed to make it to heaven without dyin. Thas how people was back in those days. . . . (Ibid., 242)

How Jones views these issues, while relevant to his stories, is not exactly aligned with the world his characters inhabit. He has deep issues with God and

religion. His mother was one of those lost souls who struggled to make a life in Washington, dying of cancer at a very early age. "My mother had lung cancer and she suffered and there was no reason, because she was a good person, and if there was this God that they all talk about, why didn't he step in" (Jones 2009, 3)? While not explicitly asked by his characters, Jones himself asks where God was when he should have been helping his mother and her generation.

This exploration will address these theological issues and questions raised by Jones, a man who no longer subscribes to the religion he writes about, and his characters. Paul Tillich's method of correlation, outlined in Volume One of his *Systematic Theology* provides a tailored methodology to find the theological "questions" and their associated "answers" in modern life (Tillich 1951, 59-66).

As Tillich notes, for theology to be relevant, it must address questions derived from our own times. The issues and questions can be drawn from various sources. Jones's stories provide just the context for a timely

topical source of information to develop these questions. The questions then must be answered in a theological context. They are not directly answered but correlated to build understanding. Tillich's theology is Christian in its intent and execution but always runs the risk that the answers may not be found in Christian theology. While that is a risk for a theologian, it is not the focus of this paper because the teachings of other faiths or political groups may be relevant.

As Neely Tucker noted in her insightful 2009 *Washington Post* piece on Jones, the two sets of stories are deeply intertwined. ". . . [T]he two collections are a matched set: There are 14 stories in "Lost" ordered from the youngest to the oldest character, and there are 14 stories in "Hagar's" also ordered from youngest to oldest. The first story in the first book is connected to the first story in the second book, and so on." The stories are not necessarily chronological or directly related. However, the care with which Jones paints his picture and peoples it with a broad range of three-dimensional, related characters clearly indicates his intent. "I don't

really think about any large subject," he told me. "I'm basically just telling a story" (Jones 2009, 1). He does tell a story, but as Neely Tucker notes, it is in the stream of consciousness Faulknerian tradition of southern story telling. He does not merely tell the story; he creates a world.

Using Tillich's method of correlation, I will analyze Jones's stories to derive theological questions about suffering from the text. To be consistent with Tillich, these themes must beg questions regarding our ultimate concern. The ultimate concern for mankind must be our relationship with God in some form. The question of theodicy, namely how a just and loving God could allow the suffering so prevalent in the world to exist, points directly to our relationship with God.

Before examining the stories, I will review Tillich's methodology, followed by a review of the traditional perspectives on the reasons for suffering. Using the philosophies of Victor Frankl, Paul Ricoeur, and Liberation theology, I will examine a broader response to suffering encompassing personal, communal, and spiritual

aspects of the question. In this way, I will lay the foundation for the deeper analysis of the stories. The analysis of Jones's stories will focus on some similar themes. These are issues with coming of age, issues of race, and finally issues with God. Following the analysis, I will review possible theological answers to the questions derived from Jones's stories, and attempt to provide a new insight into the problem of suffering through the lenses of Victor Frankl, Paul Ricoeur, and liberation theology.

## CHAPTER 1

### METHODOLOGY

As Paul Tillich notes, a systematic theology must follow a method. While this work makes no claim to outline a theological system, systematic or otherwise, Tillich's method remains a useful tool to formulate existential questions from the stories of Edward P. Jones and correlate them with answers from theology.

According to Tillich, a theological system must satisfy two essential needs. It must provide a statement of truth about the Christian message, and it must interpret this truth for each new generation (Tillich 1951, 3). This definition unites the timeless message with the exigencies of the present. For the message to mean anything it must be relevant to its audience. Relevance therefore is temporal. Even the Bible is historical and must be viewed through historical eyes to ensure its true meaning is not lost to the current generation.

For Tillich, theology is not pastoral. "'Situation' ...refers to the scientific and artistic, the economic, political, and ethical forms in which they express their

interpretation of existence" (Tillich 1951, 3-4). There is no wonder, as Tillich notes, that fundamental theology is popular during times of personal crisis. However, popularity does not equate to theological truth, merely expediency. Tillich chastises American fundamentalists and European orthodox theologians for pointing out how eagerly their flocks welcome their message in response to the desperate state of disillusionment in the western world (Ibid., 3). They have confused the 'situation' with the 'message'. The timeless message does not change; only the exigencies of the present (the situation) change.

"The 'situation' theology must consider is the creative interpretation of existence, an interpretation that is carried on in every period of history under all kinds of psychological and sociological conditions.... The 'situation' to which theology must respond is the totality of man's creative self-interpretation in a special period" (Ibid., 4). While the interpretation of theology is temporal, the fundamental truth underlying theology is not.

Apologetic theology, also called answering theology by Tillich, answers the questions derived from the "situation" (Tillich 1951, 6). He notes that these 'apologetics' are not looking for places to insert God in the cracks between science and rationality. Apologetic theology must use the whole of human existence as the situation within which to find the questions that must be answered by the divine message. This is an essential point. "Kerygmatic" theology, with its focus on the eternal, unchanging divine message, is not enough. The immutability of the kerygma, defined in Merriam-Webster as "the apostolic proclamation of salvation through Jesus Christ," is an essential element of all Christian theology. However, the relevance of the message of salvation must reach the audience of each new age interpreted through their specific experience. Tillich notes, "[e]ven kerygmatic theology must use the conceptual tools of its period. It cannot simply repeat Biblical passages" (Ibid., 7). Apologetic or answering theology can provide the explanations required to keep the message alive. But apologetic theology must be careful to avoid

theological relativism if it strays too far from the kerygma. Uniting the two is the goal of Tillich's Systematic Theology and that is the purpose of the method of correlation. "It tries to correlate the questions implied in the situation with the answers implied in the message" (Tillich 1951, 8). There is both an independence and interdependence between question and answer. "It correlates questions and answer, situation and message, human existence and divine manifestation" (Ibid., 9).

As I stated earlier, for Tillich two basic needs must be met in theology: it must provide a statement concerning the Christian message and it must interpret that message for each new generation. But what does that really mean? Tillich claims that there are two formal criteria for every theology. First, "[t]he object of theology is what concerns us ultimately. Only those propositions are theological which deal with their object in so far as it can be a matter of ultimate concern for us" (Ibid., 12) This removes the theologian from the morass of preliminary concerns that are the stuff of daily existence. "Pictures, poems, and music can become objects of theology, not from

the point of view of their aesthetic form, but from the point of view of their power of expressing some aspects of that which concerns us ultimately, in and through their aesthetic form" (Tillich 1951, 13). According to this principle we may discover aspects of ultimate concerns in the art of Jones's storytelling and they may provide a basis for examining the "situation."

The second formal criterion for theology addresses our ultimate concern. "Our ultimate concern is that which determines our being or non-being. Only those statements are theological which deal with their object in so far as it can become a matter of being or non-being for us" (Ibid., 14). This criterion reduces the scope of the theological analysis, but only in so far as we interpret being. For Tillich, being encompasses "the whole of human reality, the structure, the meaning, and the aim of existence" (Ibid, 14). With this scope in mind, the characters and events in Jones's stories provide a rich tapestry to find questions that relate to our ultimate concern.

Having provided the foundation for Tillich's method, what is the method of correlation? Tillich explains that a cognitive relationship exists between the questions and answers that requires a prior knowledge of the object of the system that it will help create (Tillich 1951, 60). No method can be divorced from the system it intends to explain. "The method of correlation explains the contents of the Christian faith through existential questions and theological answers in mutual interdependence" (Ibid., 60). Correlation for Tillich means three things: the correspondence of data sets, the interdependence of concepts, and the "real interdependence of things or events in whole structures" (Ibid., 60). Breaking down correlation to these parts ensures that all aspects of theology are addressed. However, as will be noted later, there is a distinct problem with the final definition. Correlating the relationship between God and man allows the potential for a dependent relationship between God and man. However, for Tillich, the key is to ensure that the continuum between question and answer is circular. "Theology formulates the questions implied in human

existence, and theology formulates the answers implied in divine self-manifestation under the guidance of the questions implied in human existence. This is a circle that drives man to a point where question and answer are not separated" (Tillich 1951, 61). Tillich further complicates this concept by stating that the point where question and answer are not separated is not a moment in time. It is an idea, a theological concept that ensures there is no direct relationship between question and answer. For our purposes, this may not be problematic but it must be understood that the concept is difficult to use in any practical way.

Tillich supports the use of multiple sources for the development of questions, as they reflect the human condition at a particular time. "The analysis of the human condition employs materials made available by man's creative self-interpretation in all realms of culture. Philosophy contributes, but so do poetry, drama, the novel, therapeutic psychology, and sociology" (Ibid., 63).

In using the method of correlation, there are a number of pitfalls that we must avoid or, at the least,

identify. Correlation of questions and answers is circular. From a practical perspective, where do we begin? Theologian Alexander McKelway, author of a comprehensive analysis of Tillich's Systematic Theology, noted "[f]or the theologian, the situation of man is the 'given', the place where he must begin. This situation carries with it social, political, cultural, linguistic, and religious ambiguities and questions with which the theologian must deal, if his message is to be heard" (McKelway 1964, 39). From a practical standpoint we must begin with man and the questions derived from his existential nature. We can use the interdependent theological circle to look from question to answer, but it is a more linear than the circular relationship Tillich implies. The fact that the answers affect the questions in an infinite dynamic relationship makes it difficult to differentiate between question and answer in the temporal world. McKelway notes that the method must follow a more direct relationship: the human situation is analyzed to determine the existential questions that arise from it. Then the Christian message is presented in such a way that

demonstrates its answers to those questions (McKelway 1964, 46). From a methodological perspective, this is how this study will proceed: the human condition, presented through the stories of Jones, will provide the content for the analysis of the human condition from which to develop questions relating to man's ultimate concern. The first focus will be on the questions.

Tillich warns the theologian "[if] he sees something he did not expect to see in light of the theological answer, he holds fast to what he has seen and reformulates the theological answer" (Tillich 1951, 60). He is confident that nothing can change the content of his answer because it is divine truth. As stated earlier, there is a crucial question that is implied in Tillich's method. McKelway asks "[is] the integrity of the Christian message maintained in the method of correlation when its form is dependent upon the questions of man" (McKelway 1964, 47)? Tillich addresses this issue when he states that although nothing in God's "abysmal nature" is dependent on man, his "self-manifestation to man is dependent on the way man receives his manifestation"

(Tillich 1951, 61). This leaves the door open for interpretation. Tillich noted that there is no beginning and no end to the dynamic relationship between questions and answers. All is contained within the theological circle with man's ultimate concern in an infinite interdependent relationship in the center. However, again from a practical perspective, we cannot access this non-static point. We are left with a more direct relationship between man and God, between question and answer, and an unanswered question regarding the universal applicability of the Christian message.

"It is not an exaggeration to say that today man experiences his present situation in terms of disruption, conflict, self-destruction, meaninglessness, and despair in all realms of life" (Ibid., 49). This is the Washington, DC that Edward P. Jones depicts. It is not the Washington, DC of politicians and lawyers. It is the Washington of the downtrodden black population, transplanted from the south, in which the traditional structures and norms that governed their lives have broken down. Jones's characters seek the solace of family and

tradition that gave their lives meaning in the past, but no longer seems to apply. They seek that which Tillich calls, "a reality in which self-estrangement of our existence is overcome..." (Tillich 1951, 49). If the answer cannot be found in Christian theology, as Tillich says it must, it must be sought elsewhere. The method of correlation then may only be useful up to a point. The stories of Edward P. Jones will provide a backdrop from which questions associated with our ultimate concern will be derived. The answers found in Christian theology may not satisfy us based on the current situation. Our examination of these issues may focus on traditional Christian theology, in particular liberation theology, but will try not to be constrained by them.

## CHAPTER 2

### REVIEW OF THE PROBLEM OF EVIL

To examine suffering we must start with a review of the traditional theological problem of evil that has been debated through the ages. Evil and suffering have been inextricably connected in this traditional view. Despite the efforts of centuries of esteemed scholars and theologians, the reconciliation of evil and suffering (moral evil, e.g., sin and natural evil, e.g., natural disasters) with a loving God remains elusive. The problem can be encapsulated as follows: "Either God cannot abolish evil or will not. If he cannot, then he is not all-powerful. If he will not, he is not all good" (O'Brien 1964, 306). So a Christian theology based on an omniscient, omnipotent, and all-loving God appears to have a glaring contradiction.

The Bible never clearly outlines the origin of evil, instead veiling the nature of evil's role in the world. Knowledge of good and evil, and therefore the existence of good and evil, is the purview of God. "Out of the ground the Lord God made to grow every tree that is pleasant to

the sight and good for food, the tree of life also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil" (Gen. 2:9). When the serpent tricks Eve into eating the fruit of the tree of knowledge, he does so by explaining that an understanding of good and evil would make her like God. "But the serpent said to the woman, 'You will not die; for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil'" (Gen. 3:4-5).

Once the eyes of Adam and Eve are opened, Genesis provides no further explanation about the origin of evil. However, it does give ample evidence of God's frustration. The anthropomorphic God of the Old Testament is perplexed by the evil in mankind and ultimately decides to destroy his creation. "The Lord saw that the wickedness of humankind was great in the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of their hearts was only evil continually. And the Lord was sorry that he had made humankind on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart. So the Lord said, 'I will blot out from the earth the human beings I have created—people together with animals

and creeping things and birds of the air, for I am sorry that I have made them'" (Gen. 6:5-6).

After the flood, God chooses a different path. "Then Noah built an altar to the Lord, and took of every clean animal and of every clean bird, and offered burnt-offerings on the altar. And when the Lord smelt the pleasing odor, the Lord said in his heart, 'I will never again curse the ground because of humankind, for the inclination of the human heart is evil from youth; nor will I ever again destroy every living creature as I have done" (Gen. 8:20-21). God will no longer punish all of mankind for the evil that man cannot escape. Man's fall from grace after Adam ate the fruit from the tree of knowledge indicates that man is either weak or willful but does not explain from where the temptation arose.

Hans Schwartz, Professor of Systematic Theology and Director of the Institute of Protestant Theology at the University of Regensburg, Germany, notes that in the Old Testament even when there are outside temptations, such as the snake in the Garden of Eden, the responsibility for choosing evil still rests with mankind (Schwarz 1995, 62).

The God of Genesis appears to come to the same conclusion. Clearly God abhors evil, but he chooses to work through mankind to address it.

The Catholic tradition based on the writings of St. Augustine assumes that God created all things good. Grossly simplified, suffering results from the human choice to fall away from God, which God allows. This is necessary to ensure that man can come to love God freely. The fall of Adam in the Garden of Eden fated mankind to an eternal struggle to reunite with God. Evil and suffering result from man's free will.

The traditional Christian focus on eschatology, defined in Merriam-Webster's On-line Dictionary as "a belief concerning death, the end of the world, or the ultimate destiny of humankind" supports this. Bruce Chilton, Executive Director of the Institute of Advanced Theology at Bard College, explains in his article "Why are Evil, Suffering, and Pain a Problem for Christianity?" that there are three elements to this eschatological focus. The first is temporal. Jesus had preached that the judgment was near so everyone should prepare: "Now after

John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news" (Mark 1:14-15). However, Jesus did not say when. The second element is transcendence. God comes from beyond our world, but is immanent in it. And finally, the third element is juridical. Mankind should suffer to emulate Christ in his suffering. Chilton captures the integration of these three elements into the final explanation of the presence of evil as follows: "The God who makes the world also redeems the world, and God redeems the world we know, as it is. That may involve waiting over time (temporal), transforming the places where we stand (transcendent), and/or entering a judgment that will change us (juridical), but in any and all cases, suffering is not the last word, but the transitional word before glory" (Chilton 1998, 78). For Chilton and the traditional Christian view, pain and suffering are turned inward as goods for the individual. Man is sinful and that is the ultimate cause of evil. We must model our lives on Jesus to free ourselves from sin (Ibid., 78). "It is our

exemplary response to evil, after the pattern of Jesus, that permits us access to God's living transformation" (Chilton 1998, 91).

The Gnostics offered an alternative to this interpretation. The concept of a fundamental dualism in the world allowed many of the Gnostic sects to avoid attributing the presence of evil to God. Physical existence to them was a sham and seen as depraved and evil. The spirit, held captive by the body, came from beyond our world and was trapped here in our physicality. In the Manichean view, a specific Gnostic sect that Augustine had followed, the omnipotent power of God was not accepted. There was a continual battle between light and darkness within the physical world. The Manichean philosophy, which Augustine rejected, must certainly have influenced how vehemently he fought against dualism. In his *Confessions* he wrote, "I still thought that it is not we who sin but some other nature that sins within us. It flattered my pride to think that I incurred no guilt and, when I did wrong, not to confess it.... I preferred to excuse myself and blame this unknown thing, which was in

me but was not part of me. The truth, of course, was that it was all my own self, and my own impiety had divided me against myself. My sin was all the more incurable because I did not think myself a sinner" (St. Augustine 2001, 103).

Augustine distinguishes between natural evil (e.g., sickness, natural disasters, etc) and moral evil (e.g., sin). Natural evil, while senseless, is beyond the understanding of humans, and will ultimately lead to good. It is moral evil that is focused in humanity because of man's estrangement from God after Adam's fall (Schwarz, 1995, 101). For Augustine evil is privative and therefore does not logically exist. It is merely the absence of good. Although God can commit no evil, he does punish evil. Punishment for evil causes suffering; therefore God can indirectly cause suffering (Ibid., 103). Through free will, mankind chooses evil. Evils deeds are the result of passions and human desire. However, for Augustine, suffering does not matter since we are incapable of truly understanding God's plan (Ibid., 105).

In the eighteenth century, philosopher and historian David Hume (1711-1776) attempted perhaps the most forward arguments against the existence of God based the problem of evil. In his "Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion," he restates Epicurus' logical syllogism quoted earlier: namely, if God were perfectly good, he would permit no evil. There is evil in the world. Therefore there is no God. Counter arguments to the logical problem of evil, that there is some greater good served by the existence of evil and that mankind is not sufficiently enlightened to understand it, allow both a perfectly good God and evil to co-exist, but do not serve to explain how or why.

Fr. Thomas Clarke, SJ, in an insightful review of John Hick's *Evil and the God of Love*, boils the Catholic tradition down to certain elements that underlie the arguments to reconcile evil with an infinitely good God.

These are:

- the goodness of creation as the work of God
- the privative nature of evil
- the origin of sin and other evils in the free choice of angels and men constituted in an initial condition of innocence and perfection

- the allowance of evil by God with a view to effecting greater good (Clarke 1967, 119)

He tempers the Augustinian analysis with a re-interpretation of Irenaeus, Bishop of Lyons (130-202 CE), who posited that man is not created in a state of grace but instead in a state of becoming. Man's sinfulness is due to man's impossible attempt to replicate God's image. Clarke explains how Hick incorporated this view into his hypothesis by outlining that:

1. There was no state of original innocence. Man was created as an already fallen, imperfect creation already distanced from God and therefore sin was inevitable;

2. God is responsible for evil because in creating the universe in this state he knew what would happen, and therefore,

3. Evil is explained as part of God's grand plan (Ibid., 119-120).

Quoting John Hick he explains the interpretation of Irenaeus:

Man was created as an imperfect, immature creature who was to undergo moral development and growth and finally be brought to the perfection intended for him by his maker. Instead of the fall of Adam being presented, as in the Augustinian tradition, as an utterly malignant and catastrophic event, completely disrupting God's plan, Irenaeus pictures it as something that occurred in the childhood of the race, an understandable lapse due to weakness and immaturity rather than an adult crime full of malice

and pregnant with perpetual guilt. And instead of the Augustinian view of life's trials as divine punishment for Adam's sin, Irenaeus sees our world of mingled good and evil as a divinely appointed environment for man's development towards the perfection that represents the fulfillment of God's purpose for him. (Clarke 1967, 120)

Despite the carefully reasoned arguments and counter-arguments, there remains no clear-cut answer for explaining the existence of evil in the world. From a Christian perspective, Scripture does not tell us, and therefore all further arguments have more bases in logical argument than in practice. For someone experiencing intense and senseless suffering, logical arguments provide little comfort.

Thus far I have emphasized the Christian theological responses to the problem of evil and suffering. Let me examine two other perspectives that may shed more light on the problem. These are the views of Victor Frankl, psychiatrist and Holocaust survivor, and Paul Ricoeur, the French philosopher noted for works centered on moral philosophy, hermeneutics, and phenomenology.

Frankl's views on suffering can be traced to his work before his imprisonment during the Holocaust. However, it

was this seminal event that clearly crystallized his theory of logotherapy or meaning-centered psychotherapy. "It is one of the basic tenets of logotherapy that man's main concern is not to gain pleasure or to avoid pain but rather to see a meaning in his life. That is why man is even ready to suffer, on the condition, to be sure, that his suffering has a meaning" (Frankl 1959, 212). In *Man's Search for Meaning* Frankl recounts the horrors of his imprisonment by the Nazis during World War II. Despite the constant threat of death, daily humiliation, and unmitigated despair, he was able to make sense of his condition by finding meaning in his suffering. The concept of logotherapy places the emphasis on an individual's response to suffering and not on the suffering itself. As he says, "But let me make it perfectly clear that in no way is suffering necessary to find meaning. I only insist that meaning is possible even in spite of suffering—provided, certainly, that the suffering is unavoidable. If it were avoidable, however, the meaningful thing to do would be to remove its cause, be it psychological,

biological or political. To suffer unnecessarily is masochistic rather than heroic" (Frankl, 212).

While Frankl does not discount the religious views on evil and suffering, they are not his focus. Religion may be useful in helping an individual find meaning in life and specifically in suffering but the focus is on the individual's ability to find meaning, not the meaning itself. "As we see, a human being is not one in pursuit of happiness but rather in search of a reason to become happy, last but not least, through actualizing the potential meaning inherent and dormant in a given situation" (Ibid., 250).

Paul Ricoeur, while never denying his Protestant roots, addresses the issues of evil and suffering from the strictly human response like Frankl without wading into the realm of theology. For Ricoeur balancing life and the knowledge of death creates the ultimate conflict and paradox that human beings mediate. "It is the . . . coincidence of infinite joy with finite sadness" (Ricoeur 2007, 9). From this conflict moral evil arises. Evil lies in the realm of human freedom, but unfortunately neither

philosophy nor theology can adequately explain it. The explanation appears to lie, as Kant noted, somewhere between man's predisposition for good and his propensity for evil.

One of Ricoeur's seminal works, *The Symbolism of Evil*, attempts to redefine the traditional views of evil by describing the roots of evil in terms of symbol and myth. He warns that myths are non-historical and that the stories of Genesis must be looked at in this light (Ricoeur 1967, 233). He outlines the story of Adam as the Adamic myth, noting that it ties all humanity together through a primordial man (Adam), separates the origin of good from evil, and then relates all other figures in relation to Adam. While a convenient story, it remains myth and perhaps for this reason neither the Old Testament nor the synoptic gospels spend much time on it. As Ricoeur states, it was "St. Paul [who] rescued the Adamic myth from its lethargy" (Ibid., 238). Hardly the foundation for Judeo-Christian notions of sin and evil, Ricoeur refers to the Adamic myth as a mere "flying buttress." Jewish tradition eliminated the other myths relating to evil,

namely the theogony and tragic God myths, which encompassed the conflict ridden creation stories of earlier societies and the "bad gods" of the classical cultures. Jewish ethical monotheism replaced all those stories with a righteous ethical God – a God who proclaimed and it became so. While evil was the purview of man, it was man's vanity that was its source (Ricoeur, 239-240). This remains the ambiguity of man, taking me once again back to Kant. Man was created good and became evil. Man has a predisposition for good and a propensity for evil.

Let me return once again to a Christian perspective on suffering with a look at the modern viewpoint of Liberation Theology. Liberation Theology, with its focus on the liberating responsibility of Christianity to the oppressed of the world, does not focus on logical argument. The focus of liberation theology is pastoral. In Liberation theology the Gospel is read as the story of "messianic praxis concerned with liberation in and not from history" (Witvliet 1987, 8). The story is a summons to action. Those called to take action must do battle

against oppression. The subject of theological reflection is the community not the individual (Witvliet 1987, 8-9).

One of the stumbling blocks to liberation theology is the nature of theology itself. The Dutch theologian Theo Witvliet notes, "No theology of liberation is possible without the liberation of theology" (Ibid., 8) Theology must leave the confines of libraries and seminaries and address the problems that are pressing in our world today. Theology must be relevant for those who are in the greatest need.

Fr. Jon Sobrino, SJ, writes, "The basic locus of Christology is the place where faith and life meet" (Sobrino 1978, 34). For Sobrino, traditional theological subjects such as transubstantiation or the hypostatic union in Christ are a diversion from the real work of living the message of the Gospel, or walking in the footsteps of Jesus Christ (Ibid., 34). The starting point is the historical Jesus. Without directly condemning the development of dogma from the Councils of the early church, e.g., Chalcedon and Nicaea, Sobrino states that theology must focus on the praxis of the concrete Jesus

and not the interpreted abstract Jesus of Church Councils (Sobrinho 1978, 3). "It is reality that must be reconciled with the Kingdom of God," he writes, "and the quandary of theodicy must be resolved in praxis rather than in theory" (Ibid., 36). Liberation theology, like earlier arguments regarding the problem of evil, does not explain why there is evil in the world. It merely correlates the world in which Jesus lived with the present condition of our world. "Sinful structures," such as the Roman Empire or corrupt present day military regimes in Central America, are the result of human corruption. "Liberation theology thus focuses on the oppressive structures which are the fruits of exploitation and injustice. When human beings sin, they create structures of sin, which, in their turn make them sin" (Barreto, 2003, 110). Unlike the previous traditional Christian discussions on the problem of evil, liberation theology gives an alternative. The answer is to live the Gospel.

A particularly American version of liberation theology is Black Liberation Theology. In 1970, James H. Cone published *A Black Theology of Liberation*. This seminal

work has direct ties to Tillich. Cone states that theology "is not universal language about God" (Cone 1990, ix), mirroring the focus on relevancy that Tillich espouses in his *Systematic Theology*. Theology for Cone must be directly connected to the human experience to be of any value. There is no abstract revelation independent of human experience that theologians can draw upon to explain or interpret the Gospels. Cone defines theology as "... the rational study of the being of God in the world in light of the existential situation of the oppressed community, relating the forces of liberation to the essence of the Gospels which is Jesus Christ" (Ibid., 1). Cone bases his interpretation on the Old Testament God in the tradition of Exodus. "You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. Now therefore, if you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples" (Ex. 19:4-5). For Cone God is immanent in the world and only through praxis will a liberating God be revealed. He says, "God is decidedly involved. God is active in human history, taking sides with the oppressed.

If God is not involved in human history, then all theology is useless, and Christianity itself is a mockery, a hollow meaningless diversion" (Cone 1990, 6).

Lest there be any confusion that Cone's theology as originally published in 1970 is universal and the model for Latin American liberation theology, he makes it quite clear where he and, from his perspective, God stand. This is on the side of oppressed blacks in America. For Cone, the "Jesus event in the twentieth century is a black event" (Ibid., 5). However, in the preface to the 1986 edition, Cone clearly articulates in less combative tones what he espoused in 1970, while noting the omissions and reinterpretations of his first version. First, he says, "Blackness symbolizes oppression and liberation in any society." His later thinking identified blackness with the state of oppression. "In a society where persons are oppressed because they are black, Christian theology must be black theology, a theology that is unreservedly identified with the goals of the oppressed and seeks to interpret the divine character of their struggle for liberation" (Ibid., v).

In the preface to the 1986 edition he listed the areas where his thinking had matured since 1970. He states that he ignored issues of sexism and women's liberation, the ties to a more universal view of the oppressed particularly the third world, the destructive power of capitalism, and an over-dependence on neo-orthodox theology of Karl Barth. Despite this, Black liberation theology is unique because of the unique culture and traditions of the black experience in America. His theology is based on sources that clearly identify with the black community. They include:

- black experience (life of humiliation)
- black history (enslavement to now)
- black culture (the cultural expression of black experience and history in music, poetry, prose)
- scripture – use as inspiration and a weapon against oppression
- tradition (Cone 1990, 22-25)

Scripture and tradition must clearly connect with the black experience to ensure that they are relevant to the black community.

The problem of evil and suffering for Cone is really not a problem. With his focus on praxis and fighting oppression of the black community where ever it can be found, he is more aligned with the teachings of Malcolm X than with Martin Luther King. While Malcolm X tempered his views later in his life, he did not advocate non-violent civil disobedience like King. Cone says that turning the other cheek is not literal. Despite the obvious contradiction of not turning the other cheek while Jesus actually did, he aligns with the forces of rebellion advocated by Malcolm X. For Cone, the question remains whether the church can be true to the path of Jesus if it is officially sanctioned. Isn't the government usually the enemy of the oppressed? In fact, aren't they usually the oppressor (Cone 1990, 33-34)?

In Black Liberation Theology, it is essential to believe that God is fighting for the black community. Suffering is not God's will, it just is and Jesus is actively helping the black community against forces of oppression in the present. Black liberation theology denies any suggestion that God has anything to do with suffering

and evil. Cone's theology is based on a God who is fighting against oppression for and with the oppressed. "There is no use for a God who loves white oppressors the same as oppressed blacks" (Cone 1990, 70).

## CHAPTER 3

### JONES AND SUFFERING

He went back to Georgia where he had people.  
God's cancer took a long time killin him.  
- Edward P. Jones, "All Aunt Hagar's Children"

The protagonist of the short story "All Aunt Hagar's Children" has recently returned from his tour of duty during the Korean War. We meet him in the law offices of his friend Sam Jaffe, a Jewish lawyer, in downtown Washington DC. Three older women, his mother, his Aunt Penny, and an old family friend Miss Agatha, shatter the peaceful boredom of the dusty office. Miss Agatha, bolstered by the two other women, has a favor to ask. Can he find the murderer of her son Ike? Jones places us in a first person narrative with his unnamed main character. We hear the tales of woe and pain of all the other characters through his eyes, almost like a bystander. He plans to go to Alaska, get rich, and escape his predictable life in Washington, DC. He dreams of an easy life of money, women, and liquor. Instead, in the search for Ike's murderer, he uncovers the depth of suffering he has ignored his whole

self-centered life. He sees himself and his surroundings for the first time, and realizes he cannot run away. Looking at this background from a theological perspective can provide a fresh look at the world of Edward P. Jones in "All Aunt Hagar's Children." The theological view allows us to interpret his views in relation to the suffering of his characters. The suffering private investigator is clearly in a state of becoming. He has chosen a path that he hopes will relieve him from the obligations of his family and environment, but there really is no escape. He has tried to wish away problems of race and suffering and, in so doing, has no ability to appreciate either the joy or sadness that surrounds him. This story is his journey. Interpreting 1950s Washington, DC, in the light of Hick's interpretation of Irenaeus, we can see that each one of Jones's characters is flawed, each one in a state of becoming.

His mother, unlike many of the other characters, at first does not appear to fit into this mold. "I'm guiltless," she had once said to her son. "She lives in a sphere all her own, where few things could intrude or hurt

her anymore. She always let Freddy and me in, but she kept her eye on the door while we visited, lest we say something wrong and she had to show us out" (Jones 2006, 104). This is not a woman who appears to be on a journey. Yet we learn that this is far from the truth. When just a girl a white man in rural Choctaw, Alabama, attacked Agatha. Not only do we learn that his mother and his Aunt Penny nearly beat the attacker to death, but we find that it was his mother's idea to escape north to Washington. She is not a woman who has risen above the ills of the world but has resided in their midst. The question of evil and suffering is complicated by her presence in the story. In beating the white man in Choctaw, she and Penny saved Agatha but nearly killed the man, crippling him for life. The question remains: is it evil to harm someone in order to save another?

Race is another element of the story that complicates the clear understanding of good versus evil. These are the conditions that the narrator has tried to ignore his whole life. Like the academic arguments that attempt to dissolve the problem of evil by logic, our narrator tries to wish

away the evil of racism. Contemporary American philosopher George Dennis O'Brien argues that for mankind to attempt to understand the qualities of God is the height of hubris. Because of the vast distance between the essential positions of man and God, no qualitative leaps are possible between the two. But he also states, that "this 'answer' still provides cold comfort for those who suffer" (O'Brien 1964, 322). When our narrator tries to wish away the problems that surround him, his mother reminds him that happiness can't be trusted. "Remember," she says, "every happy birthday boy is headed for his grave" (Jones 2006, 105). There is an implicit message here that God may be present, but might have his attention elsewhere. This is once again consistent with the view that evil and suffering exist and that God allows it to be so. But more importantly her comments point to an acknowledgement that there will always be suffering and that we must not fool ourselves into believing otherwise.

When addressing the question of race, Jones evokes the world of the post reconstruction south. In this world of open hostility to blacks, the questions of evil and

suffering become more relevant. Jones raises the questions of right and wrong in the context of this perverted, explosive reality. This does not align well with the traditional Christian view of the problem of evil and suffering. Instead we are faced with a story of a beleaguered people more akin to the Hebrews exiled in Egypt than to the familiar New Testament stories. Paul Nelson, Assistant Professor of Religion at Wittenburg University, writes, "Christians would do better to face up to the pointlessness, taking a lesson from the Hebrew Scriptures. The psalms of lament...make no attempt to explain or palliate. Instead they give the voice of human anguish, rage, and despair on the apparent assumption that the God of Israel is strong enough to take it" (Nelson 1991, 491). This is a far more ancient and accepting view than the more modern view that seeks a full explanation for all things in a scientifically based world. The disparity between pastoral and theological notions of suffering is clearly evident in this view. Jones repeatedly returns to this theme. While God is a backdrop, there is no attempt to blame God for the suffering. The

suffering just is. However, there will be retribution in the end. Miss Agatha voices the Old Testament view of God when asking the narrator to find out who killed her son. "I have waited and done called the police.... I just wanna know who hurt my boy so I can put my mind to rest. I'll leave the punishin up to God" (Jones 2006, 106). God in this view is still a far away figure who will lift up the righteous in the end, but who should still be feared.

This world is not the world that tries to explain suffering away logically or scientifically. Theodicy, the effort to explain rationally the existence of God in the face of human suffering in the post-Enlightenment world, does not seem to hold any sway in the world view of Jones's characters. Kenneth Surin, theologian and professor of Religion and Critical Theory at Duke University, argues that theodicy itself is potentially doomed to failure as it is predicated on a God-centric worldview. In the pre-Enlightenment world, God was a constant part of the landscape, similar to the God depicted by Jones. But "[i]n a world where the voice of God is no longer to be heard, the theodacist's words can

strike no resonance; he shares the fate of his God and he too can no longer be heard" (Surin 1983, 229).

Running in tandem with the question of race in "All Aunt Hagar's Children" runs the theme of the dead white woman Miriam Sobel. Miriam Sobel died in the narrator's arms next to a streetcar on New York Avenue in broad daylight. The narrator is deeply affected by her death but cannot grasp why. Her dying words, in unknown Yiddish, resonate with him throughout the story. He has recently returned from a war zone where he has seen many dead men, but never a dead woman. He worries about questions of right and wrong and perception. Would the conductor or the people on the streetcar infer something bad about him merely because of the appearance of her, a white woman, dying in his arms? He has not matured beyond a juvenile interpretation of events seen only in relation to him. He is still the man who "was not a man to suffer the company of children" (Jones 2006, 110). The use of the term suffer is a clever double entendre referring to his own inability to engage, accept, or participate in the suffering of

others. Without engaging and therefore personally suffering, Jones implies we are unable to learn and grow.

The story of Miriam Sobel, with both her extreme personal suffering in losing her children and the broader implications of the Holocaust, is the perfect counterpoint to the story of Ike's murder. Our narrator is on a journey, without knowing where it will take him. He is unable to accept the world that he knows. He tries to ignore or run from it but the more he seeks Ike's murderer the more he must try to unravel the events around him. But just as suffering is around us it also defines us. Lisa Sowle Cahill, Professor of Theology at Boston College, gives a slightly different interpretation of suffering in the face of the epistles of Paul. This view takes the more radical view that the only way that God could accept the suffering of the human race is to be an active and willing participant in it. "The Pauline epistles, as well as the Gospels' passion and resurrection accounts, remind us that the suffering is still part of the human condition and that the rule of God must be present in suffering as well as on those rare occasions when Christians successfully

become Christ's body. The body of Christ incorporates God's pain rather than passing over it, and finds the glory of God in God's weakness, in God's full involvement in the human condition" (Cahill 1996, 166). This may be the God of Jones's world and an answer to the presence of suffering in the world.

The narrator in our story has been the foil for life's sufferings, either running from them or fighting against them, but at heart continually trying to understand what he is seeing. Each of the stories: Ike's murder, the death of Miriam Sobel, the break up with his girlfriend Sheila Larkin, and the relations with his family, become entwined in his search for understanding. Jones himself sees the end clearly, the "end of it all came rather quickly after that" (Jones 2006, 127). Enlightenment starts when Sam Jaffe's wife Dwerva explains who the dead white woman was and the tragic story surrounding her death. Our narrator makes one last attempt to avoid the burden of life at Mojo's bar but the solace of alcohol cannot deny the greater truth. When Sheila Larkin passes him in the street as if he does not exist,

he is at the turning point. Symbolically he pulls out the crown of his watch, stopping time for a moment. Then, perhaps for the first time he chooses to take responsibility for his actions, accepting his part in the fabric of life. From the perspective of Victor Frankl, he has been able to ascribe meaning to his story. His acceptance and understanding of "what is" allows him to move forward. With personal understanding, he is able to appreciate and accept the communal responsibility to fight against evil.

Jones has created a narrative that built conflict into the basic ideals of good and evil. So once again we must return to the question of God's role. God plays a part but it is not a part that can be clearly articulated or understood. We call this the mystery of God but he paints it as more a part of acceptance. God will do what God will do, but we can be assured that God will play his role. The African American theologian Thomas Hoyt, quoted in Lisa Sowle Cahill's 1996 article "Kingdom and Cross", captures a black notion of God suffering on behalf of humanity compared to a white idea of Jesus. "For blacks,

Jesus is human and identifies with the suffering on their behalf. He is the same Jesus who is the risen Christ and is the present and coming judge. This Jesus is present in solidarity with those seeking to eradicate injustices and gives courage and motivation to those who know that Jesus' eschatological promise is to judge all humanity. By contrast, whites tend to stress the resurrection as the beginning of a triumphalist church tradition that protects the status quo" (Cahill 1996, 166).

When our unnamed lead character returns to Ike and Alona's apartment, it is as if he is there for the first time. He sees clearly that the cover up of the grisly murder was nothing more than a thin veneer. By scraping a little paint, the grisly reminders of violence left an obvious trail that leads him straight up the fire escape to Alona, Ike's wife and murderer. He wonders what could have been the final straw that pushed her to such an act. Like Moses standing before the awesome presence of God, he is afraid when he encounters Alona. She is the instrument of a judgmental God and before her he is powerless. Jones once again shows us a path of acceptance with a new twist.

When the narrator takes the hand of Alona's little girl, he breaks his pattern. He engages with the side of life that he has spent his whole life avoiding. Now he chooses. His suffering has been a virtual journey compared to the actual suffering of Alona, her stepmother, and the rest of this interwoven cast. In relaying the story to his mother, we are not privy to how much his mother knew. But it is clear that the line between good and evil is drawn distinctly. God is judge and ultimately in due time there will be retribution.

Kenneth Surin distills the problem of suffering down to two essential questions:

1) Is God relevant and intelligible in the face of suffering?

2) what does God do about it (Surin 1983, 233)?

In the worldview of Jones' characters, God is as relevant as ever. He, and only he, will judge. What is important is to participate in the mystery, to have the courage, as Paul Tillich wrote, that will create meaning through suffering (Dearing 1985, 62). The opposing views of cynicism (the narrator) and stoicism (his mother) can be resolved through hope in the beauty of the world seen

through the enlightening lens of suffering. In the beautiful final paragraph of "All Aunt Hagar's Children," the wiser narrator has turned a corner and for the first time sees the beauty around him. He still asks questions, but they focus on the connection between all of us. He has learned to accept that while there may be theological 'truths' that escape him, his focus must be on the pastoral. He sees a group of young girls walking down the street, a routine sight on the busy streets of Washington. Settling on one girl, he watches as she spreads her arms and twirls, the light of the sun full on her face. "Her long plaits swung with her in an almost miraculous way. It was good to watch her, because I'd never seen anything like that in Washington my whole life. I followed her until she disappeared. It would have been nice to know what was on her mind" (Jones 2006, 132).

The companion story to "All Aunt Hagar's Children" is "The Store." Just as in "All Aunt Hagar's Children" the protagonist is a young black man, not yet jaded by the world. After losing his job at the Atlas Printing Company, where he was "assistant chief mail clerk or something like

that" (Jones 1992, 77), he was conscious, yet still naïve about the racist reasons for his firing. He is another character who wants to pretend that the issue of race does not exist. He lives a happy go lucky life with his friends, staying out late, chasing girls. Despite his father's strong work ethic, the boy appears to have no ambition. When he takes the job at Al and Penny's Groceries, it appears to be a mere whim. Penny, the aunt of the lead character in "All Aunt Hagar's Children", has owned the store for fifteen years, with her now dead husband Al. She is a tough yet tenderhearted woman. We learn in "All Aunt Hagar's Children" of her flight from the south with her two friends after an itinerant white man attacked them when she was a girl. She has clearly put her past behind her, building a life in her neighborhood, deeply connected to all the people there. Our main character falls under the spell of the store, the responsibility Penny offers, and the ownership and inclusion into her world. He basks in the comfort of new love, success, and responsibility.

But this blissful life is short-lived. "Patricia Turner lay in the street, a small pool of blood forming around her head" (Jones 1992, 96). Penny Jenkins, an icon of the neighborhood, godmother to numerous kids and friends with all the adults, is branded "a murderin fuckin monster" (Ibid., 96) by the girl's mother for accidentally running over Patricia. In an ironic twist, the dead girl was Penny's favorite. The serene happy life of the store is over for all of them. Penny drops out of sight, and the boy must pick up the pieces.

Kenneth Surin's questions (e.g., is God relevant and intelligible in the face of suffering? And what does God do about it?) are especially relevant in this context. Suffering in this story comes in various forms. The most obvious is physical. Patricia Turner is hit by a car, suffers physical pain for no reason, and dies. Her suffering is senseless, appearing even greater because of her age and happy nature. Her family suffers while trying to make sense of her death. Her family is faced with the essential question of how a loving God could allow this to happen. In response to this, they transfer the blame from

an inattentive or evil God to the perpetrator of the crime, Penny Jenkins. The fact that Penny loved Patricia Turner above all the other children does not seem to change her mother's response. There is no forgiveness, signaling the real tragedy of the story. Penny Jenkins' life is ruined by Patricia Turner's death. She drops from sight, leaving all affairs of the store to the narrator. As he takes on more and more of the responsibility for the store, he is forced to grow up. With maturity, he begins to see the larger issues that he ignored growing up. His mother's caution, "I hope you know what you doin" (Jones 1992, 94), could be a reflection on his whole life. In truth, he never thought about what he was doing. When he takes responsibility for the store, and in the process loses his girlfriend, he is really losing his innocence. After his last meeting with Penny, he enrolls in Georgetown "sitting in classes at Georgetown with glad-handing white boys who looked as if they had been weaned only the week before" (Ibid., 104). The reality of the world, the brutal fact of segregated Washington, DC, and his previously naïve happy life is brought clearly home

when he stops to think about his time at the store. "I could, without trying very hard, see myself eating my lunch the way I did before I knew Kentucky, before Pat was killed.... I sat on the stone wall and watched myself as I ate my lunch and checked out the fine girls parading past the store, parading past as if for me and me alone" (Jones 1992, 104).

These two stories are coming of age tales for the two young black Washington men who tell them. Both men still have an adolescent view regarding their role and place in the world. Yet at the same time, both characters rise to the occasion in the face of suffering. The tragic circumstances surrounding Ike's murder, Miriam Sobel's death and her tragic story, and finally the repercussions of the death of Patricia Turner, all point to Kenneth Surin's questions. Is God relevant in the face of these tragedies and if so, what is he doing about it?

However, we see in both stories how each of the main characters addresses some aspect of conflict and changes. They have each found meaning, and therefore accepted their roles in the fabric of the world around them. Their

futures remain unwritten. In Ricoeur's lens, they now have the tools to respond to the events around them.

Going back to Tillich's method of correlation, the theological questions raised here focus on the role of God in tragedy and suffering. It is the basic question of theodicy, how a loving omnipotent God could allow this to be? For Jones, the only logical answer is that there is no God. "Well, I don't believe, but I have to write characters who do believe, that's just the people that I write about. I can't see myself sitting down and writing about an atheist, even though I've been in that camp for a long, long time, because I think I'm influenced by the people that I grew up with, the people who were there every day when I started discovering life and almost to a person they all believe in God and all the rest of it, even though, again, they might not have gone to church every Sunday" (Jones 2009, 4).

But despite Jones's personal view, whether or not God exists is not the question that his characters ask. As he noted above, they believe in God. The issue for them is

what sort of God is it? Their God lives by tough rules; their world is harsh and God is immanent in that world.

The question of being or not being for Paul Tillich must be mankind's ultimate concern. Dr. Carlyle Fielding Stewart, scholar, theologian and pastor of Hope United Methodist Church in Southfield, Michigan, analyzing how James H. Cone uses Tillich's method of correlation, provides a different understanding. Cone, the father of Black Liberation Theology, outlined a similar theology to Latin American Liberation Theology. Not only does God take sides, he always takes the side of oppressed blacks. Although Jones may not believe in the God about whom he writes, Jones's characters and the world he creates in his stories beg to understand how God permits such suffering to exist. Dr. Stewart argues that Cone uses the method of correlation and the historical context of the bible to relate traditional theological method to his theology. "Cone...is specifically concerned with that segment of humanity whose being has yet to be recognized as legitimate by the larger society, and whose struggle for being is a daily toil" (Stewart 1983/4, 31). The question

of being is the "suffering and dehumanization" of all black people. The theological answer must alleviate the suffering and oppression that keeps them from truly being. Instead of mankind being the question and God the answer, Fielding asserts that Cone's theology asks, "If oppressed humanity is the question, then a liberating God is the answer" (Stewart 1983/4, 35).

The place of God in the world is perhaps most strikingly portrayed in the first story in *All Aunt Hagar's Children*, "A Blink of God's Eye". Set in 1901, we get a rare glimpse into the world that forms the past for most of Jones's other stories. "A Blink of God's Eye" is the story of Ruth and Aubrey Patterson, a young couple from rural northern Virginia, who move to Washington, DC hoping for opportunity. Aubrey has no more ties to Virginia. His father is dead and his mother a pariah, having left his consumptive father for a disreputable man near their home. The story opens with Ruth walking into the dark night of Washington, DC. She observes a world far from her roots in rural Virginia. She had heard that there were wolves in Washington and is prepared with a knife and

a pistol. But the world of Washington, DC brings stranger sights than wolves. First, she sees a lone drunken woman collapse in the street. She wonders whether to venture into the no-man's land of the street to help her, a simple act she would have done without thinking in Virginia. But this is the city, with wolves and other strange creatures inhabiting the night. Next she sees, "hanging from an apple tree that hadn't borne fruit in more than ten years..." a child wrapped in a bundle. "So this is Washington, she thought as she reached up on her tip toes and cut the two pieces of rope that held the bundle to the tree's branch and unwrapped first one blanket and then another. So this is the Washington her Aubrey had brought her across the Potomac River to – a city where they hung babies in night trees" (Jones 2006, 3).

For both Ruth and Aubrey this is a seminal event. Ruth, young but mature beyond her years, treats the child as a gift from God. She names him Miles for Aubrey's father, and loves him as her own. But Aubrey cannot accept the child. He is cut off from his roots and desperately trying to find something to identify himself with his

past, and his father in particular. This child is not his and he does not have the ability to accept its reality like his wife. She has both the wisdom and the courage to accept what is. Jones describes how Ruth clearly grasped the full dimensions of her world at the funeral of Mrs. Halley Stafford. As she dropped dirt on the grave, she "began to feel as though she could count each grain as it fell from her" (Jones 2006, 5) She understood the history of her family and accepts her finitude. She understands that there is evil and suffering in the world and always will be. Her response is not despair, but hope.

Aubrey, unlike Ruth, does not know where he fits. He suffers disassociation from his surroundings and lacks an understanding of who he is. His suffering is naïve yet profound; he has nothing to hold him against the tide of events that threaten to engulf him. When they were first married, Aubrey confessed that he had once stolen a chicken. The chicken had followed him and would not go home. Then God began to talk to him, saying that it would be all right to steal the chicken. Ruth at the point "found it endearing that Aubrey could not tell the

difference between God's counsel and the why-the-heck-not advice of the Devil" (Jones 2006, 8). Aubrey's inability to understand the clear delineation between right and wrong will shake the foundations of their new world.

This story lays the groundwork for much of what Jones will write about in further stories. He describes Ruth and Aubrey as "children of once-upon-a-time slaves, born into a kind of freedom, but they had travelled down through the wombs with what all their kind had been born with – the knowledge God had promised next week to everyone but themselves" (Ibid., 10). Ruth seems to understand this about herself, and is able to draw strength from her past and her family. She also draws close to the members of the household where they live, including Earl and Blind Willie. Perhaps God is not as harsh as Jones describes, but the world they live in is. It is a world where puppies fall from the sky, where babies are hung in dead trees, where drunken women fall alone in the street. It is a harsh hopeless world. For Aubrey, this is the world of his father. It is the world in which "the sky goes way up to God napping on his throne...and you can get much before he

wakes up" (Jones 2006, 3). But Aubrey grew up with his father's memory of how "angry God must have been after he had awakened from his nap when the family was in Kansas" (Ibid., 4)

The preacher in this story gives a profound sermon about the harshness of the world that illuminates Jones's perspective in this story and also raises the question that we can draw forth from these events. The young preacher was back in the South, burying his mother, having buried his father three years before. He stands in the graveyard, wondering if there is any point in returning to Washington. Why not just stay in South Carolina and wait until it's his turn to die? But he has a revelation. "I tell ya I just blinked and God asked me what I was so afraid of" (Ibid., 26)? This is akin to Ruth's revelation at Halley Stafford's funeral. It is a realization that the world is harsh, but that for them God is standing with them. For the preacher, it is the meaning associated with God. For Ruth, who finds solace in family, it is the meaning associated with tending for the newborn child. As Victor Frankl noted, "Once an individual's search for a

meaning is successful, it not only renders him happy but also gives him the capability to cope with suffering" (Frankl 1959, 251). Ruth seems to grasp this central tenet of logotherapy while Aubrey does not. When Earl, a man plagued by guilt for killing his wife's lover, asks Ruth if a man with a great sin deserves any happiness, Ruth replies, "Every last one of us is a sinner, Earl, but we all got some right to peace and happiness till the day we die" (Jones 2006, 29).

Aubrey cannot escape his suffering because he cannot put the child Miles into the context of his life. He is not wise enough to grasp the meaning behind the child, to see the hope and the future that are there for him to reach out and touch. As the story closes and Aubrey looks across the river at Washington, he knows that he is forever leaving behind the old world. He has grown up, realizing that the world is not as black and white as he thought. But he has yet to find the meaning in his world that could bring his suffering to an end and give him peace.

While Frankl provides a vehicle to discover the personal meaning of suffering, Paul Ricoeur's philosophy provides a communal aspect. In the context of this story, Ricoeur's views and Liberation theology merge for the communal response. Both Ruth and the preacher have a deep unquestioning faith. They do not look for answers, but have chosen praxis, the pastoral response. For them, God is standing on the side of the oppressed. They do not ask how evil and suffering came to be but find solace in the idea that God is standing beside them on their journey. Life is painful and full of suffering, but there are gifts if only you reach out and take them.

Miles Patterson, the child Ruth found hanging in a tree, grows up to be a barber. At fifty-six years old, he is unmarried, childless, and unworldly. He loves pigeons. We have jumped to 1957 in "The Girl Who Raised Pigeons," the first story in Jones's 1992 *Lost in the City* collection. Once again, Jones paints the bleakness of life in disturbingly vivid color.

There does not seem to be any respite from life for the protagonist Robert Morgan. Unknown to him, his wife

Clara is dying of a brain tumor even as they blissfully get married. As their daughter is born Clara dies, leaving Robert adrift in Washington caring for an infant. Even as he heads out on a Sunday with his new daughter, a child down the street warns him "Don't get lost in the City" (Jones 1992, 9).

Jones seems to be telling us and his characters not to lose our roots, for we will lose our values, our minds, our souls. Life is hard enough without losing oneself in the process. This remains a central theme of many of Jones's stories. In "The Girl Who Raised Pigeons," Jones drives home this point on multiple levels. In the story itself, the threat to community is real. Myrtle Street where they live will soon be empty, razed in the name of progress and urban renewal. The sense of connection and community will be lost as the residents scatter across Washington, DC. The younger generation, represented by Robert's daughter Betsy Ann, is harder, meaner, less softened by the values of their elders. Perhaps they are more in tune with the harsh reality of the black Washington of the 1960s and 1970s. The children seem

adrift. The shoplifting scene with Darlene Greenley is a minor incident, but portrays the beginning of a widening gulf between father and daughter. Another child, Betsy Ann's cousin Ralph, demonstrates the wide divide between the older generation and the new. He realizes at six years old that he can get whatever he wants by playing on his mother's fears.

On a much deeper level, the pigeons in this story represent the widening gulf between the old world and the new. When Betsy Ann first gets her pigeons from Miles Patterson, she has to retrieve them from Miles's house every day. She thinks they hate her, but Miles knows the real answer. "Thas all they know to do.... Right now this is all the home they know for sure. It ain't got nothing to do with you, child. They just know to fly back here" (Jones 1992, 10). The parallel to the older generation of black Washingtonians is clear. Their roots are deeply entrenched in the South. Their values, sense of community, family ties, religion, and sense of themselves is still in the South. Soon the pigeons stay with Betsy Ann. They have accepted their new life, breaking ties with their past,

establishing a new rapport with their surroundings. They have built a community, taking in strays, and breeding the next generation.

But in these new surroundings, evil still lurks. An old stray pigeon appeared one day. "His entire body, what little was left of it, was a witness to misery" (Jones 1992, 13). He was dead a week later. Betsy Ann's response is harsh. She buries the bird without fanfare. She even warns Miss Jenny not to tell her father about the dead bird. "You know how he is; he'll think it's the end of the world or something" (Ibid, 14). The old pigeon is testament to the severity of life. He may be the bridge between the generations because his suffering represents the suffering of everyone. Once again, Jones appears to be asking why. But his tough young character does not. She appears to embody the repressed street-smart attitude that ignores the emotional depths of the suffering all around them. Her father is not immune to suffering. He searches for meaning, while protecting his daughter, to no avail.

As the houses slowly empty on Myrtle Street, the two levels of the story converge. Rats, living in the empty

house next door, come across the roof and savage the pigeon coop. Robert finds the pigeon coop devastated. He hopes to spare his daughter the sight, but the slaughter is too immense to hide. Like the emptying of Myrtle Street, it represents the end of an era. The dislocation of modern life and the cruel reality of the city cannot be stopped. The values of the South no longer provide comfort.

In a 1985 lecture to the Faculty of Theology of Lausanne University, Paul Ricoeur specifically addressed the question of evil and suffering, a lecture ultimately published in 2007 in English under the title *Evil: A Challenge to Philosophy and Theology*, two years after his death. Ricoeur, departing from the Christian tradition of linking evil and suffering, clearly delineates one from the other. Evil is an active force which in religion we call sin, while suffering is passive. Evil must be perpetrated while suffering happens. "Strictly speaking, suffering differs from sin in that it has contrary features. Suffering emphasizes that the imputation that centres moral evil on a responsible agent is essentially

something that is undergone: we do not make it happen, but it affects us.... Finally and above all, suffering sets lamentation against reprimand, for if misdeeds make people guilty, suffering makes them victims" (Ricoeur 2007, 36). While it is essential to find meaning in suffering following in the footsteps of Frankl, to combat evil and alleviate suffering takes a more active, outward role. Ricoeur states that the problem of evil calls for a convergence of thinking, acting, and feeling (Ibid., 64).

Thinking is not enough to make sense of this problem. Looking at the characters from Jones's stories that we have reviewed thus far, we understand that intellectualizing their pain provides no comfort. Thinking must formulate the questions to which action and spirituality need to respond, not answer (Ibid., 65). The response of action follows the same logic as liberation theology. It is not to ask from where evil comes, but to ask what is to be done about it (Ibid., 66). Ricoeur openly states that he has no definitive insight into the origin of evil. However, he provides a framework for

renouncing the practical problems with evil. For Ricoeur evil must be battled wherever it may be.

For those deeply immersed in suffering, the "renunciation of complaint" can provide an answer. This requires fighting against evil, while at the same time not assigning the blame to God. Despite the enigma of random suffering, our response must be active, focusing on the victims whether they are the result of evil acts or natural calamities. Once again, the focus must be on praxis as a redeeming act.

The final element for Ricoeur, feeling, can help the victims of evil and suffering get beyond lamentation, beyond the age old plea "Why me?" Ricoeur hopes that wisdom and spirituality will conquer lamentation and complaint. Regardless of evil's origin, there are three stages in feeling that we can go through to achieve greater understanding and peace. The first is to separate evil and suffering from any notion of guilt. God did not want it, so we should not feel guilty. The second is to allow outbursts against God. We must accept that God is tough enough to take it. And finally, realize that the

reasons for believing in God have nothing to do with the need to explain suffering (Ricoeur 2007, 65-72). This last element aligns with the theology of the cross, which states that God through Christ suffered on the cross for all of us. Like the liberation theologians, we must take God down from the cross and arm ourselves to work against evil.

Evil and suffering are intertwined in the world of Edward P. Jones. That evil leads to suffering is clear. That evil may also lead to redemption may not always be so clear. However, Jones provides enough evidence to allow hope for the future for his suffering characters.

As noted earlier, Jones has paired his stories in his two collections *Lost in the City* and *All Aunt Hagar's Children*. The pairings usually allow for the development of a new story line from a minor character in an earlier story. Jones departed from this strategy only once in these two collections but to great effect. "Young Lions" tells the story of Caesar Matthews as a young man. It follows his casual descent into evil, his separation from his family, and finally the loss of himself. "Old Boys,

Old Girls" picks up Caesar's story six years later when he is sentenced to Lorton Prison for second-degree murder. As Jones notes, "The world had done things to Caesar after he'd left his father's house for good at sixteen, nearly fourteen years before, but he had done far more to himself" (Jones 1992, 75).

Caesar is a young man in search of identity. Jones describes a young man caught between adolescence and manhood. He loves the trappings of power and prestige. He wears "expensive pants," an "opulent" leather jacket, and carries a Berretta handgun. He wants the world to believe that he is somebody. He likes remembering the occasions when he had used the Berretta; the power it gave him over another human being bolstered his vision of his self-made tough persona. Yet he cannot start his day without milk, just like a little boy. In the morning when we meet him, he is standing naked "at the bathroom door wondering if he wanted a shower. 'These are the times,' Carol would have joked, 'when we miss our mothers most'" (Ibid., 56). He cannot bear to be in his apartment by himself, as if the emptiness penetrates the thin veneer of his adopted

character. "There was nothing like an empty apartment to bring down the soul" (Jones 1992, 55). Caesar is another of Jones's characters in a state of becoming.

Caesar's story is not a new one. After his mother died, he fastened onto a shady character named Sherman because Sherman gave him the attention that he desperately sought but did not get from his father. To an adolescent, Sherman represented the world beyond home. For Caesar, knowing that Sherman led a life of crime was not enough to make him run back to his family. "Caesar was seventeen, and for the first time in his life, he was living his days without the cocoon of family, and beyond that cocoon, he was learning, anything was possible" (Ibid., 69).

Sherman is a true representation of evil for Jones. Though he is not the Devil in any traditional sense, he subtly steals Caesar's soul. He allows Caesar to fall into an easy life of crime, to become fascinated with the power that comes with guns and toughness, and to abandon the values that his home life represents. Sherman is an ambiguous character, and that is a consistent theme regarding the nature of evil for Jones. Sherman has two

children with a woman in his building, but does not live with them. He listens to recordings of his children, but cannot bear to listen to them crying. He lives a life of crime but abhors guns. He is a junkie, but hides it to all but the knowing. Sherman is a true representation of the passive evil within all of us. Caesar, without choosing evil, falls into it headlong because he lacks the maturity to choose the alternative.

Caesar is similar to Aubrey Patterson in "A Blink of God's Eye." He is a naïve soul unable to differentiate right from wrong. When his mother died, his cousin Angelo Billings stole flowers for Caesar's mother's funeral. His family represents the status quo and is shocked by Angelo's actions. "There are some things that God would not tolerate and stealing flowers for the dead was one of them" (Jones 1992, 67). But Caesar admires Angelo for loving his mother. Angelo is the conduit to Sherman, who causes his estrangement from his father. His father enables Caesar's descent, despite trying not to be an evil man. His father does not understand that Caesar is still a boy at the crossroads between childhood and manhood.

Caesar realizes, when his father throws him out at three am, that he had never been awake at that time before. "For all of his life he had been Lemuel Matthews's son, and even now, standing in the dark outside the walls of his father's house, he was still his son and he knew he could not be a bad boy at such a place at such a time in the morning" (Jones 1992, 68).

Without the structure of his father's house and the guidance from his mother, Caesar flounders seeking an anchor for his life. "First thing we do," Sherman said one day, "is get all your shit from your daddy's place. You gotta have an identity. Get you out in the world so you can stop all that mopin" (Ibid., 69). When he gets his belongings, he reluctantly leaves the house, touching all sorts of incidental objects, reminders of his former life. Is he really ready to leave? He expects his father to appear at any moment. But when he sees the pile of letters he'd sent his father with only the first one opened he is ready. He leaves to spite his father, not because he is an evil boy.

Caesar's real decision to follow evil comes with his decision to steal from Anna, a mentally handicapped woman. His plan was for his girlfriend Carol to lead Anna to the bank and con her out of her savings with a hard luck story about a sick son. It is not a complex plan, but clearly morally depraved. Carol finally agrees to help, but only for him. Carol does not have the moral backbone to stand up to Caesar and say no because she loves him. But having conned the woman, Carol is changed forever. She can no longer ignore Caesar's evil ways. "There was no surprise in her face, and there was no fear. He realized that if he beat her with the pistol, that, too, would not surprise her. And had he shot her, in the face or through the heart, she would not have been surprised at that either" (Jones 1992, 75). Caesar's power over Carol is gone and she walks away. He is left alone.

When "Old Boy, Old Girls" opens, Caesar is on trial for killing Antwoine Stoddard. Caesar is nearly out of his mind, "That's you, baby, so very near insanity it can touch you" (Jones 2006, 76). He has killed another man and cannot readily distinguish which man he is on trial for

killing. He is the product of his own choices and actions. Is he really an evil person or has he merely taken the easy path that has precipitated his destruction? Jones once again explores suffering through Caesar's character. He suffers because of his circumstances; but his life choices are the basis of his suffering. He is dislocated from his former life, from his family, from clearly knowing who he is. His toughness and brutality mask a loneliness and isolation that pervades him. He remains the young boy, thrown out of his father's house, whose pride will not allow him to say he was wrong.

Caesar's prison life reflects the brutal world of his choosing. To remain safe and respected, one has to maintain a façade of strength and cruelty. He takes this approach with his first cellmate, Pancho, fighting with him for three days for mastery of their "house." But toward the end of Pancho's prison term, Caesar and he have a friendly relationship. Caesar knows the names of his children and envies his desire to be with them. He once again suffers from his breach with his father. Caesar watches as his friends, the older toughs in Lorton are

either killed or go insane. The world is changing and Caesar appears to be part of the old guard. "There was nothing for Caesar to do except try to coast to the end on a reputation that was far less than it had been in his first years at Lorton" (Jones 2006, 86). That was the story of Caesar's life; he coasted from one incident to another, merely getting by, without consciously choosing a clear direction.

Caesar is released back into the world, back to the mean streets that had been his downfall. His family reaches out to him but he is unable to accept their pleas to contact them. He leads a solitary, depressing existence. "He began to believe, in his first days out of prison, that men and women were speaking a new language, and that he would never learn it" (Ibid., 89).

This story underscores the price of evil. Evil begets suffering, even for those who freely choose it. Yvonne Miller, Caesar's one-time girlfriend, personifies this. Caesar and Yvonne had a loving relationship for a few years. Caesar left the world of violence and crime, settling for the peace and serenity of the world he grew

up in with Yvonne. But one day Yvonne failed to come home. Caesar assumed that Yvonne was dead, but she had chosen the path of despair. "You can always trust unhappiness," she had said. "His face never changes. But happiness is slick, can't be trusted. It has a thousand faces, Caes, all of them just ready to re-form into unhappiness the minute it has you in its clutches" (Jones 2006, 83). When he gets out of prison, Caesar finds Yvonne in his rooming house, a broken human being, living out her last cynical days. She does not know him, but grows to trust him. For Caesar she may represent all that could have been but was not. The evil in the world had consumed her.

The two major events in this story, Caesar's failed attempt to reunite with his family and the death of Yvonne, starkly portray Caesar's failed past. The ease with which evil can insinuate itself into life destroyed any hope of a normal relationship with his family and destroyed Yvonne. Once again, suffering is the result.

The evil that Jones describes evokes the world of "disruption, conflict, self-destruction, meaninglessness, and despair" (Tillich 1951, 49) that Tillich described.

The origin of this evil is unknown but it is pervasive, sly, and destructive. If we are not careful, like Caesar we will be carried along with the tide, slowly destroying ourselves without consciously choosing. The result is suffering, spread over the conscious victims of evil through violence and crime, the unconscious victims like Yvonne, the pawns of evil like Caesar, and the innocent bystanders like Caesar's family.

The response to evil is praxis. This is a human problem that needs to be addressed in human terms. Once again Jones's characters do not raise the bigger question, whether God is a direct participant or perhaps works through mankind to fight evil. Caesar realizes that he must act. After spending all night ritualistically cleansing Yvonne and her room of the harsh reality that was her world, he chooses to become a participant in his world. "The world was going about its business, and it came to him, as it might to a man momentarily knocked senseless after a punch in the face, that he was of that world" (Jones 2006, 100). For the first time in his life, Caesar chooses his own path. A young girl witnesses his

coin toss and thereby participates in his choice. The ritual of flipping a coin, of letting fate direct him yet still forcing him to make the decision, is his first step in his new life. He has finally grown up.

Once again, we can see that Caesar has found meaning in his own suffering. Finding meaning, in the context of Frankl's work, gave Caesar the strength to respond to evil. He makes his choice after his night ritually cleansing the evil from Yvonne. He now enters the world for the first time in his adult life ready to choose, ready to respond instead of simply drifting toward the easy path. He has been given strength by finding personal meaning, and choosing a communal response. Whether he is willing or able to reach for a spiritual response remains to be seen.

## CHAPTER 4

### SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

It was like God to do that shit to a colored woman, the prisoners said – make her a doctor with one hand and make her blind with the other.

- Edward P. Jones "Blindness"

God is a constant but difficult character in Edward Jones's stories. Jones's characters certainly "fear" God, but trusting God is a different story. While never active, God is a force behind actions and beliefs in these two collections of stories. Jones's characters fear God in an Old Testament way. They fear him because he is unpredictable and petulant. He is their God but not necessarily on their side. He is not the Black God that James Cone would have us believe in. And yet they believe.

Despite Jones's own views, his characters do not question God's existence. He is a part of their backdrop, a fixture in their lives. With lives filled with suffering, instead of asking whether God exists, they merely ask "Why me?" They have their roots in the suffering of the Israelites.

Theodicy is inherently dissatisfying. To argue logically for the existence or non-existence of God based on the circumstances of our daily lives may be a fool's errand. Shackling a divine being with the constraints of limited human understanding and logic assimilates God to our reality. If God is merely us, of what use is God? None of the traditional Christian answers to the question of evil can solve the human quest for knowledge and, more importantly, understanding about the origin and purpose of evil and suffering. Tillich provides a method of correlation to provide a framework for asking questions about our ultimate concern. This ultimate concern must be our relationship to the divine. For the characters of Edward P. Jones, the question is not whether there is a God, but why does he make life so harsh and is he doing anything about the sufferings of his creation? I mentioned at the beginning of this exploration that the answers might not come from Christianity. Clearly traditional Christian answers from an Augustinian tradition provide little comfort for the downtrodden. But there are answers that may help.

First, we can look inward into our own selves to find an answer. This is the response of logotherapy advocated by Victor Frankl. For Frankl it is not enough for man to merely exist. To be satisfied, man must find meaning in his existence. Like Ricoeur, and the liberation theologians, Frankl does not answer the question "why?" Instead, he provides a mechanism to address the despair; man can suffer incomprehensible atrocities if he can find meaning for the suffering. The meaning can be found anywhere, from God to the individual. Frankl's point is that each of us has the strength to live if we can find within ourselves a meaning for our suffering.

Beyond the traditional Christian answer to the question of "why me?" is the philosophical and psychological answers represented by Paul Ricoeur and Victor Frankl. Both men accept that religion may play a role, yet their focus is different. Ricoeur, like the liberation theologians, focuses on praxis. For only in actively working against evil can we make a difference. His framework, first thinking, then acting and finally feeling, addresses the wide range of suffering affecting

all of humanity. Thinking provides the basis for action, which is not an answer but a response. There is no answer. Feeling allows us to get beyond blaming God and being consumed in lamentation.

From a spiritual perspective, Liberation theology's focus on praxis is the best start. The important question is not "why?" but "what are we doing about it?" Liberation theology does not ask God to fix it. It assumes that God is on the side of the oppressed but that it is a human problem to fix. God stated in Genesis that he would not destroy his creation again but the assumption is that he would work through mankind to fix future problems. There is only one real answer from a strictly Christian sense. We must take God down from the cross and live the gospel. Black liberation theology states the same message but in a much narrower context. To be oppressed is to be black; the question is not just "why me?" but "why us?" For the characters in Jones's world, this should fit their context, but is probably too great a leap to provide them real comfort. Theirs is a world that recognizes the deep inequality in a racially divided America. Their world,

Washington DC, is not an integrated world. There are places where only white people go, the Washington, DC along the National Mall, representing the government in all its bureaucratic glory. This is not their world; they merely accept that it is so.

In Jones's world, a blending of these three lenses on the world may provide answers to the questions of lamentation and despair that reside deep within the black community of late twentieth century Washington, DC. The traditional answers of the Christian community do not address the unique aspects of the American black community. Both Martin Luther King and Malcolm X, perhaps the two central figures in late twentieth century black culture, provided a departure from the traditional Christian views. Their differences involved methods, not sides in the long run. James Cone built on their efforts by enmeshing the political struggle for racial freedom with the Christian message in the Gospel. Cone's later growth, expanding on his original narrow theological view, is far more in line with the worldwide liberation theological movement.

The beginning of the answer to the problem of evil must start with the statement that evil and suffering simply are. No one knows evil's origins and to speculate is absurd. More importantly, to ask why is irrelevant. The real question is how will we respond. This must be answered with the bold assertion that we must respond. Using the method of correlation we have found that the characters and stories of Edward P. Jones do not ask whether God exists or whether God is responsible for evil and suffering. However, these characters do suffer from lamentation, namely "why me?" and ask "what can be done?"

A literature review has divulged that there are no satisfactory traditional "answers" to the problem of evil and suffering. But looking at evil and suffering through the three different lenses of Victor Frankl's logotherapy, Paul Ricoeur's communal praxis, and Liberation theology's focus on serving God by serving the oppressed sheds a better light on our response to evil and suffering. We must look at evil and suffering through a personal, communal, and finally a spiritual lens to have a complete response.

Viktor Frankl advises us to seek out meaning for ourselves through logotherapy. Meaning makes senseless suffering bearable by placing it in a personal human context, allowing us to make sense of our world. Jones reflects this idea in his coming of age stories. Some of his characters find meaning that allows them to bear the suffering they see around them like Ruth Patterson and the narrator of "All Aunt Hagar's Children." Others, like Aubrey Patterson fail to make the crucial leaps that could give meaning to their worlds.

The communal lens, using the work of Paul Ricoeur, focuses on how all of us together can think, act, and feel to have an appropriate response to evil and suffering. Caesar Matthews in "Old Boys, Old Girls," despite a rootless life of evil, can find personal meaning that allows him to take the next step toward a communal response. He chooses to part of the world and we are left with the hope for his redemption.

The final lens is spiritual. In this view, liberation theology, including the Black liberation theology of James H. Cone, provides a pastoral response to evil and

suffering. This response is praxis. In this view, we must live the Gospel, walk in the footsteps of Jesus, to understand God's role. In Jon Sobrino's words, we must "take God down from the cross" and accept that he participates in our suffering on the side of the oppressed just as Jesus preached nearly 2000 years ago. The key to all of these responses is praxis. We must not let evil and suffering lie unmolested. Instead we must actively work to make sense of evil and suffering for ourselves, actively fight them in our communities, and spiritually engage God in our efforts.

The characters in Jones's world can find solace in the teaching of all three of these lenses. Given their abiding faith in God, taking a spiritual leap and allowing God to participate in the suffering can provide the response to suffering that shelters them from despair. Personal meaning focused outwardly to the community and spiritually to God may provide the best "answer" to the problem of evil for these transplanted southerners.

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