

The ruse of race: problematizing binaries



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Mark Twain's *Pudd'nhead Wilson* and Charles Chesnutt's *The House Behind the Cedars* both problematize the concept of race by demonstrating to the reader that subscriptions to stereotypes warranted by skin color are ambiguous and consequently not at all as concrete, nor as correct, as comfortably believed. Both authors dramatize the destruction of the socially constructed binary system of black and white by introducing to the reader the ambiguously raced character: the mulatto. While Chesnutt gives us Rena and John, Twain gives us Roxy and "Tom." Both authors, through their depictions of these characters, illustrate the constructed and not at all biological foundation from which racism sprouts; thus, deconstructing the cultural binaries of what black and white presumably mean. In the antebellum South, a person's perceived identity predicated first and foremost, neither from merit nor achievement but rather, from lineage—from race. The racial composition of an individual's blood was believed to determine their social worth and, consequently, their overall value. This is evidenced through Twain's Roxy and Chambers. Both appear white and have very little black blood, but are treated like sub-humans and are slaves. "For all intents and purposes Roxy was a white as anybody, but the one sixteenth of her which was black outvoted the other fifteen parts, and made her a Negro. She was a slave and salable as such. Her child was thirty-one parts white, and he, too, was a slave, and by a fiction of law and custom a Negro." Twain lays down the foundation of his criticism for, he, here, illustrates the illogical labeling of race. He shows how artificial and how much of a ruse the idea of racial superiority really is. And later, through Roxy's act of deception, demonstrates how easily interchangeable both races are—Chambers becomes Tom, and Tom becomes Chambers. This single act elegantly

dramatizes the idea that racial difference is just a societal fabrication that attempts to categorize people by making distinctions that have no palpable, or real, warrant behind them. And yet, here a potential problem emerges. The idea of interchangeability and subsequent equality is insidiously undermined by the “black” Tom’s, “natural viciousness.” “Tom” is abusive, dishonest, and cowardly, implying that his character is the result of some deeply entrenched “blackness.” And it is not just whites that subscribe to this ideology, Roxy does it too. She blames “Tom’s” disagreeable character on his biology. But it is important to remember that she is not a reliable commentator of the issues of race, rather, she too is has been infected with the racist paradigm. She has been conditioned, and thus has internalized the negative stereotypes attributed to blacks. She genuinely believes whites can do no wrong. The narrator argues otherwise, for even though Roxy effectually robbed the real Tom of his freedom he remains loyal to her. And while it is argued that this is because of the benevolence inherent in his “whiteness” an alternative, and more accurate assertion, would be that his kindness is the result of a widely divergent upbringing. It’s because “Tom” was spoiled as a child that he is the way he is—the inverse can be said for “Chambers.” Furthermore, the conclusion of the novel speaks to the notion of individuality. Dramatized through the use of fingerprints, Twain reveals to the reader that just like their owners all fingerprints are different. Indicating, once more, that even biology can’t be grouped into categories—everyone is unique. While Twain explores the construction of race and the effect of environment on the individual by exchanging two nearly identical infants, one “white” and the other “black,” Chesnutt, in *The House Behind the Cedars*, similarly, moves Rena, a young “black” woman (physically

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indistinguishable from a white woman) from a hometown in which she is inextricably perceived as “black” and places her in an environment in which her Anglo features cause others to perceive her as white. This illustrates the same point; race is a socially constructed and unfairly arbitrary application of classification, it’s not real. Once Rena leaves Patesville she is free to no longer acquiesce to a self perception that predicates off of racial stereotypes. She becomes undoubtedly white in the eyes around her. But, upon her return to Patesville the reader sees her turn once more into, “a cullud ‘oman.” These constant reminders of racial interchangeability remind the reader of the powerful potency environment, not genetics, have on race and perceptions of race. Furthermore, after deciding to fully embrace her black identity the reader sees that often Rena has to explain to people around her that the reason she is so deeply entrenched within—and so deeply concerned about—the black community is because she is in fact a part of it. When traveling outside of Patesville Rena’s ethnic origins must be explained to people who see her with black people but assume, from her appearance, she is white. This constant (re)clarification problematizes the stereotypical notions of race and reinforce Chesnutt’s message of the racial-ruse. Rena isn’t “black,” Rena isn’t “white.” Rena is an individual. Both Pudd’n head Wilson, and The House Behind the Cedars illustrate the problematization of the ideology behind the “one drop rule.” The rule which ordains that one drop of black blood undoubtedly, permanently, and irrevocably categorizes the individual as black. Chesnutt directly challenges this rule by asking readers to reevaluate the delimiters of racial categories while Twain employs it in a satirical fashion to prompt readers to think of character as individually determined rather than racially determined. In his <https://assignbuster.com/the-ruse-of-race-problematizing-binaries/>

portrayal of Rena Walden, Chesnutt illustrates the way in which environment alone determines racial identity. Literally once she changes environment, she moves from “black” to “white.” In his portrayal of “Tom,” Twain illustrates a similar point—a person’s biology doesn’t yield one of two outcomes (i. e. the black, or the white); rather, it holds the potential for much more. Like each individual fingerprint—absolutely everyone is different, absolutely everyone is shaped by their environment. Skin color, should be and, is irrelevant. Goodbye binaries!

Bibliography
Twain, Mark. *Pudd’nhead Wilson*. Mineola, NY: Dover, 1999.
Chesnutt, Charles W. *The House Behind the Cedars*. New York: Houghton Mifflin & Co., 1900. Reprint, Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2000.