

Pudd'nhead wilson and the question of identity essay



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Pudd'nhead Wilson and the Question of Identity 1. Introduction "The most difficult thing in life is to know yourself." -Thales The role of identity and is related to various other themes in Mark Twain's "Pudd'nhead Wilson" and therefore functions as the main focus in this paper. Basically every major theme in the book somewhat emerges from the question of identity. The first part of the paper deals with the switching of identities and can be considered as a starting point for the development of the novel. Secondly, it leads to the question of nature and nurture and tries to examine the impact of values and upbringing as well as skin color in the formation of character.

Another aspect dealing with the issue of identity is honor and reputation because personal standing is a big concern to the characters in the book. The purpose of this paper is not to come up with a definite answer to all the questions dealt with. The main idea is to investigate how Twain describes the importance of identity for the characters and for the society in general. One can make a lot of assumptions about the characters, their looks, their heritage and their actions but there is one thing that has to be told: Nothing is as it appears to be.

2. Thesis Statement Identity is a constantly occurring aspect in this paper. By giving examples of several passages in the book I try to find out in what ways identity is depicted and how it relates to the main characters. 3. The Switching of Identities The switching of identities is the central aspect around which the whole story of this novel evolves. Roxy, the female and probably most memorable main character in "Pudd'nhead Wilson" leads her life in slavery and once gets threatened by her master about getting "sold down the river".

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In order to avoid that her son, Chambers, has to meet the same fate she decides to switch her son with the child of her master, named Tom, which is about the same age as her son. Her son should be able to live the life of a normal white man. No one notices the switching of the babies because Roxy is only one sixteenth black and her child only one thirty-second. Due to this small amount of black blood, both Roxy and her son are considered as slaves.

Furthermore, Roxy's manner of speech and other accessories such as her head rag are signs of her black heritage. The fact that even Tom's father, Percy Driscoll, is not able to keep them apart except for their clothing shows that, from a superficial perspective, both babies are considered as white. However, that does not prevent them from being slaves. Linda A. Morris states that during this exchange of identities the real Tom got "stripped of everything", "his name, his identity, his inheritance, his paternity and his freedom" and thus becomes a slave "in everyone's eyes".

Morris, 386) From this point on, Roxy's biological child is now known as Tom and her master's child is known as Valet de Chambre. Both are living the life of the other without being aware of it. As a consequence of Roxy's action, the fake Tom becomes a spoiled child that gets everything he wants whereas 'Chambers' is leading the life of a slave without any privileges "Tom got all the delicacies, Chambers got mush and milk, and clabber" p. 25 Roxy treats Tom like a king even though he is anything but grateful "He was her darling, her master, and her deity all in one..." p. 5 This way of upbringing makes Tom a fairly weak and sickly child for whom Chambers has to be the

bodyguard and also has to fight classmates or other children whom Tom does not get along with.

Tom is a character that seems to think that he is better than anybody else. In contrast to Tom, Chambers is being described as being very strong and having a thick skin because of hard labor and the things he has to deal with because of Tom. 4. Nature versus Nurture Later on in the story, Tom becomes a cowardly and cocky man who more or less lives at the expense of his rich uncle, Judge Driscoll who also has to take care of Tom's gambling debts.

After years his mother Roxy visits him and tells Tom the truth about his heritage which is a shock for him. Tom discovers his real identity which changes his life drastically. He is finally aware of the fact that he is not white and it become noticeable in various ways. " It was the ' nigger' in him asserting its humility, and he blushed and was abashed. And the ' nigger' in him was surprised when the white friend put out his hand for a shake with him" P. 56 Tom's behavior is innate and raises the question of nature and nurture, and racial heritage.

Even though Tom is now aware of his origin it does not ultimately change all of his behavior and attitude or as it is described in the book " In several ways his opinions were totally changed,..., but the main structure of his character was not changed and could not be changed". This condition only lasted for a certain period of time until he " dropped gradually back into his old frivolous and easy-going ways..." p. 57 A similar thing happens to Chambers by the end of the story after Tom has gotten convicted to murder and Pudd'nhead

Wilson has found out about the real identities of Tom and Chambers. Being a free man, the original Tom does not know how to deal with this situation because "his manners were the manners of a slave". He did not learn how to write or to read, nor did he spend much time somewhere else but in the kitchen.

In terms of education and manners, it is more likely that Tom has been able to make a step forward than it was for the fake Tom who was supposed to make a step backwards. It may seem that the upbringing had more impact on the real Tom than his inborn qualities. Mark Twain leaves it to the reader's imagination about the fate of "the real heir" explaining that the story would be too long. P.

144 However, as far as their characteristics and "main structures" are concerned, the real Tom might have changed as little as the fake Tom. As Gair puts it: "The displacement of the real Tom, [...], renders the concept of behavior inherent to racial whiteness" absurdly. (Gair, 190) Another example dealing with the subject of nature and nurture is the difference between Tom and Chambers. Something that emanates from the book is that Tom does everything for his own good. He does not really care about other people, which is the result of his spoiled childhood. Chambers, on the other hand, constantly proves his loyalty to people around him, especially to Tom and Roxy.

For instance, when Tom is about to drown Chambers jumps into the water and saves his life. 5. Honor and Reputation Related to identity, honor and courage also play important roles in "Pudd'nhead Wilson". One of the main

aspects is to defend his or her name, family or origin in a respectful manner. For example, when Judge Driscoll finds out that Tom went to the court after he had been attacked by one of the twins instead of challenging the man for a duel, he gets furious " A coward in my family! A Driscoll Coward! Oh, what have I done to deserve this infamy! " p. 76 This shows that the judge does not really care about if his son gets killed or not.

What matters to him is that the name of the family acquits of that disgrace. With bringing the twin to trial also shows that, like back in childhood, he is used other people doing the work for him. In the end, the judge disinherits Tom and decides to challenge the twin himself. Tom's way out does not only upset his uncle but also his mother Roxy who is ashamed of her son and blames "' de nigger" in Tom for his ethical lapses" (Gair, 200): " It's de nigger in you, dat's what it is...You has disgraced yo' birth. " (88) The importance of honor and courage is also shown when Pudd'nhead Wilson takes part at the duel as a subordinate of the judge. The duel is a cause for celebration for the townspeople.

They were so excited about this whole event that " Pudd'nhead Wilson was suddenly become a man of consequence". ' The people took more pride in the duel than in all the other events put together. P. 93 Thus, even an eccentric person as Pudd'nhead can become a sort of hero. 6. Fingerprints and Fixed Identity Pudd'nhead Wilson's hobby of collecting fingerprints is a central aspect in the novel.

The story is marked by numerous changes in terms of switched identities, clothing, names or gender. However, within all those changes there is one

thing that cannot be changed: the fingerprints of a person. Throughout the book the reader comes across elements that are deceiving and what immediately comes to one's mind is that nothing is as it seems. Right at the beginning of the book when Twain describes Dawson's Landing one might get the impression that it is a nice, ordinary, little town when Twain is talking about "a snug little collection of modest one-and two-storey frame dwellings" and "old-fashioned flowers" or "little frame shops" (1). Later on the reader finds out that there hardly any children or actual functioning families.

Roxy deludes Percy Driscoll and consequently the whole Driscoll family as everybody else in Dawson's Landing by switching her baby with her master's baby. It goes on when Roxy, dressed as a man, meets her son again after coming back from St. Louis. According to Linda A. Morris the appearance of Roxy dressed as man represents everyone, black and white as well as man and woman.

She is a "white" woman with a black face wearing clothes of a man. (Morris, 391) Also Tom dresses as a woman after he has robbed and murdered his uncle. Morris argues that "he assumes a series of disguises to mask his identity". (Morris, 389) Furthermore, Morris describes Tom's masquerade as follows: "The whiteness of his skin hides his blackness; passing for white hides his true relationship to Roxana; blacking up hides his whiteness; female clothing covers up his maleness; a veil covers his blackface. ...] Tom, aka Chambers, [...] collapses all categories of socially constructed identities.

" (Morris, 392) Finally, Pudd'nhead Wilson's collection of fingerprints makes everything clear when he convicts Tom Driscoll of murder. He compares the blood-stained fingerprints on the knife-handle with the " natal signature" of the young Tom and finds out that he killed the judge. David Wilson indicates earlier in the book that Tom is not the person he appears to be. This has more to do with Wilson's other favorite hobby, palmistry.

When he tries to read Tom's past in his palms Wilson makes a remark which leads to Tom pulling his hand away. Derek Parker Royal states that the hobbies of Pudd'nhead Wilson make it possible to " crack the code of personality" which leads to a depersonalization (Royal, 427). The fingerprints stand for fixed identity and no one " can so disguise himself that I cannot pick him out from a multitude of his fellow creatures and unerringly identify him by his hands". P.

138 This emphasizes again that nothing is as it seems. Even though twins might look exactly the same, each one of them carries " a sure identifier" that differs from the other twin. In other words, fingerprints do not lie. 7. The Twins Another identity issue arises when the Italian twins arrive in Dawson's Landing.

The twins are described as being " the handsomest, the best dressed, the most distinguished-looking pair of young fellows the West had ever seen" p. 34. They are true gentlemen and an absolute sensation for the people of the town. Except for the fact that one twin is a little more dark-haired than the other, both look exactly the same. According to Derek Parker Royal, " the twins are the toast of the town, and their manners and talents win over

almost all of Dawson's Landing" (Royal, 418). Furthermore they seem to complement each other perfectly.

Nevertheless, throughout the book it appears that Luigi represents the dominant part of the twins and most important to the story. He is the one that saved his brother's life. He assaults Tom in the town hall and fights the duel against the judge. Compared to his brother, Angelo does not seem to play a significant role in the novel.

One might assume that the twins stand for one character or one identity that is generally represented by Luigi. In the book they never seem to argue or to have different opinions about a topic. In addition, everything they do they do together. They play piano together and when Angelo is telling the story about how his brother saved his life the reader finds out that they even share the same bed.

It is not easy to tell if the twins have their own distinct identities. Royal even describes David Wilson as " a doubl-edged figure" who represents two identities: an " outsider relegated to the margins" and an " insider giving company to the most respected citizens within the society" (Royal, 418).

Pudd'nhead lives in a house at the edge of the town only a few feet from the haunted house more or less cut off from the rest of the townspeople. Still, he and the highly respectable Judge Driscoll are close friends and both are (the only) members of The Freethinker's Society.

However, this does not change the fact that he is a " pudd'nhead" to the majority of the townspeople. " Wilson is ... a spinx-like presence whose ambiguity disturbs and even threatens the tranquil order of the town".

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(Royal, 419) To get back to the literal twins, as mentioned earlier, even though twins appear to be almost completely alike, as they are depicted in the book, they differ in their “ natal signatures”. They might share the same interests and the same looks, but from a closer view, every human being is unique. 8. Identity in Society Pudd'nhead Wilson as well as the twins choose Dawson's Landing in order to start a new stage of their lives.

The dangerous thing in small towns such as Dawson's Landing is that the ways of living, expectations and points of view are somewhat predetermined. Everyone knows what the other does and therefore, it is more or less impossible to leave an unnoticed life. Libertines and eccentrics like Pudd'nhead Wilson are considered as fools. Something Pudd'nhead Wilson has to deal with right after he has arrived in the town.

When he makes the joke about the dog the townspeople do not understand it because they take everything literally. His ironic joke about the dog marginalizes Wilson “ physically, socially and textually” (Gair, 192) It is known that people get scared of things they do not understand or they make fun of it. The inhabitants of Dawson's Landing are narrow-minded and skeptic to everything that does not match with their conventions.

Pudd'nhead Wilson's favorite hobbies are fingerprinting and palmistry which makes him appear even odder to the townspeople. In contrast to Pudd'nhead Wilson, the people get extremely excited about the arrival of the Italian twins.

The people treat the twins like celebrities since they are the first Europeans that come to this town and everyone wants to get associated with them. The

main reason why the inhabitants are impressed by the twins is rather because of the fact that the twins are no fellow citizens of the people of Dawson's Landing. In contrast, when Tom returns from Yale in this "Eastern fashion" clothes people react with incomprehension. Before the arrival of the twins, Aunt Patsy reads the twin's letter to everyone who has heard of the letter that has been "read and re-read until it was nearly worn out."

" (33) One might consider this as another sign for the superficiality of the townspeople. Pudd'nhead Wilson, on the other hand, is different in a way that does not appeal to the townspeople since they cannot really take advantage of it. The people hope to get a higher esteem if they are associated with the twins. In general, the people in Dawson's Landing judge people by superficial factors without even knowing the person.

This does not necessarily focus on race but rather on the fact of being different. Christopher Gair mentions in his article that "the presence of the "Negro" slave with "blue eyes and flaxen curls" (13), and of the Italians, provides the opportunity for mockery of Dawson's Landing's ignorance of the nature of both its own identity and of the exotic outsider". (Gair, 199)

Pudd'nhead Wilson earns the respect of the townspeople not before 20 years of living in Dawson's Landing. However, after those 20 years, according to Andrew Jay Hoffman, "the revelation of Tom's falseness, [...] destroys Wilson's nemesis, which represents identity as likeness". It results in Wilson being not longer separated from the people of Dawson's Landing. Wilson has become the mayor of Pudd'nheads and thus, "identity as likeness has won the battle, and Wilson has martyred his individuation to the cause".

(Hoffman, 380) 9. Conclusion In "Pudd'nhead Wilson" Mark Twain creates a world where the dominant race and the overall opinion play the leading role. Being different and not wanting to fit into a predetermined space does not really help a person to lead a successful life. However, Pudd'nhead Wilson does not change his attitude and behavior throughout the entire 20 years but still he gets the respect he deserves. Though for the general population adjusting to the convention of a particular society is beyond all question.

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