

"the awakening",
"pudd'nhead wilson",
and the wife of his
youth: exposing one's
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" This above all- to thine own self be true, /And it must follow, as the night the day, / Thou canst not then be false to any man" (Hamlet, 1. 3. 154-56). As Shakespeare so eloquently wrote, finding oneself is the key to truth. This idea is a prominent theme in Kate Chopin's " The Awakening", Mark Twain's " Pudd'nhead Wilson", and Charles Chesnutt's The Wife of My Youth through different facets of identity and society's reaction. Chopin's " The Awakening", Twain's " Pudd'nhead Wilson", and Chesnutt's The Wife of His Youth all address possibilities and limits of accepting aspects of one's gender, race, and class identity in relation to 19th century United States society.

In Chopin's " The Awakening", the main identity struggle is between sexuality and independence against traditional female roles in 19th century Louisiana. Exposed to female gender expression in Creole culture, Edna Pontellier realizes that expression and identity are not limited by social rules. Edna has suppressed her true self, conforming to the identity expected of her since childhood. " Even as a child she had lived her own small life all within herself. At a very early period she had apprehended instinctively the dual life—that outward existence which conforms, the inward life which questions"(Chopin, 35). While spending the summer with the Creoles, Edna begins to see herself as an individual, instead of just a part of society or a possession of her husband.

Edna begins to defy her husband, even denying him sex, while pursuing her own interests. Her happiness grows with her independence. " In short, Mrs. Pontellier was beginning to realize her position in the universe as a human being, and to recognize her relations as an individual to the world within and

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about her" (Chopin, 33). However, as she continues to become more independent, she becomes more isolated from society. " Edna looked straight before her with a self-absorbed expression upon her face. She felt no interest in anything about her. The street, the children, the fruit vender, the flowers growing there under her eyes, were all part and parcel of an alien world which had suddenly become antagonistic"(Chopin, 138). Edna saw the world as alien and distant. She no longer felt interested or like a part of it. Edna could not expect that she could be accepted by the society that she simultaneously rejected. Edna's realization of her true self drove her to choose between being an unhappy insider or content but isolated. Edna made a decision outside of these two options. As she was swimming out to shore, Edna was reminded of her independence of learning to swim (Chopin, 302). She was also reminded of her comfortable family; " She thought of Léonce and the children. They were a part of her life. But they need not have thought that they could possess her, body and soul"(Chopin, 302). Instead of choosing family or liberation, Edna chose death.

Twain's " Pudd'nhead Wilson" explores the boundaries of race, with the main conflict being the switched identities of Tom and Chambers, who are two different races. Tom is raised as White, and Chambers is raised as black, even though Tom is black and Chambers is white. When the boys' true identities are discovered toward the end of the novel, both face the reality of their true selves. While in jail, Tom reacts badly to the realization: " Then [Tom] laid himself heavily down again, with a groan and the muttered words, " A n—[sic]! I am a n—[sic]! Oh, I wish I was dead!"(Twain, 76.) Tom has been black his whole life, he believes it is a fate worse than death. On the

other hand, Chambers is liberated from slavery and has the privileges of being white, but still acts according to his former identity.

[Chambers] could neither read nor write, and his speech was the basest dialect of the negro quarter. His gait, his attitudes, his gestures, his bearing, his laugh—all were vulgar and uncouth; his manners were the manners of a slave. Money and fine clothes could not mend these defects or cover them up; they only made them the more glaring and the more pathetic (Twain, 202).

Despite being identified as white, he did not act white or fit into white society. These depictions of a racially white man who is ethnically black and a racially black man who is ethnically white may serve to contradict racial perceptions at the time. Chambers was capable of being intelligent, and Tom still made bad decisions despite his upbringing. Realizing their true selves did not change their personalities, but changed their social class.

In Chesnutt's *The Wife Of His Youth* Mr. Ryder is forced to confront his humble beginnings. Mr. Ryder has a good life; he is financially well-off and part of the Blue Vein Society, which has black members of the lightest skin. He is an eligible bachelor, but has strangely resisted being married for 25 years. He believes the success of the black race lies in being completely intermixed with whites through breeding. "I have no race prejudice," he would say, "but we people of mixed blood are ground between the upper and the nether millstone. Our fate lies between absorption by the white race and extinction in the black." He intends to marry an educated white-skinned black woman. However, his former wife comes to look for him, and he is

faced with the decision to acknowledge their marriage or marry Mrs. Dixon. Mr. Ryder had refrained from marrying for 25 years, perhaps due to the fact that he still thought of his previous marriage as valid and would feel marriage would not be ethical. In the end, he chooses to acknowledge his marriage to his wife, even quoting Shakespeare's "To thine own self be true". Mr. Ryder asks his guests (society) if he should acknowledge his wife. Despite him belonging in the Blue Vein Society, he accepts his darker, older, uneducated wife, and the hidden, past part of his identity.

Chopin's "The Awakening", Twain's "Pudd'nhead Wilson", and Chesnut's The Wife of His Youth all address possibilities and limits of accepting aspects of one's gender, race, and class identity in relation to 19th century United States society. In each of the works, the character eventually came to terms with his or her true self, with each character being drastically and permanently changed in effect. In each work, the effect was negative to varying degrees and often included rejection from society; Edna chose death, Tom was jailed and Chambers did not fit into white society, and Mr. Ryder was confronted by his past life after his hard work to distance himself. Despite the negative consequences, characters were liberated by their choices. Edna became independent, Chambers was innocent, and Mr. Ryder resolved his past. By becoming their real selves, the truth finally set them free.