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Enforcing Binaries: Racial Epithets in Mark Twain's *Pudd'nhead Wilson*

Racially charged language has always been harmful to the race being negatively acknowledged by the terminology. Discourse often surrounds whether racial epithets should be used conversationally and in the American literary canon, and if so, who is able to use the language. In a society moving toward inclusivity, the language is becoming increasingly awkward to maneuver. Racial epithets became a part of African American literature in a likely effort to redefine the terms' meanings. Contrastingly, white authors like Mark Twain use racially charged language throughout their works for a variety of reasons, and many factors play into discussions of whether racial epithets are appropriate to discuss — or read in literature. Mark Twain relies on the use of racial epithets in *Pudd'nhead Wilson* to reinforce racial binaries, which influences individual identities; however, his intentions are ambiguous.

When looking into Twain's use of racial epithets, his background is an important factor to consider. Mark Twain, born Samuel Langhorne Clemens, was raised in a family that enslaved others. Twain had a relationship with the enslaved people different from his parents because he loathed slavery after an incident with his father exhibiting violence toward a slave, but he mistakenly thought his family treated their enslaved well (Rasmussen 16). Although Twain was against slavery, he regularly used racial epithets. His literary works regularly focused on race and racial language. According to Angela Tharp and David E. E. Sloane's analysis of Twain's use of racial terms, Twain was an avid user of racial epithets. He used the word "n-----" a total of 212 times in his famous work *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, and he used it 75 times in *Pudd'nhead Wilson*, along with using the word "slave" 42 times and "negro" 15 times (Tharp

and Sloane 86). Twain's motives to use the words so frequently cannot be fully determined, but when exploring *Pudd'nhead Wilson*, some theories can be developed.

"Nature vs. nurture" is a central theme in *Pudd'nhead Wilson* and enforces the text's racial binaries. Twain uses racial epithets to reinforce the concept that behavior can depend on either the genealogy of the person or the environment in which they are raised and establish a racial division in the novel. When enslaved person Roxy switches her baby Valet de Chambers with her enslaver's baby Thomas à Beckett Driscoll to keep her child safe from being sold down the river, the babies' lives are permanently shifted. Roxy's child, now *Tom*, grows up to be a vile, immoral man, while the now-Chambers becomes an uneducated enslaved man — all because of their upbringings. With Tom and Chambers both being "white-passing," truly dividing them into the categories of *enslaver* and *enslaved* is achieved, in part, by the use of racially charged language. Roxy's language changes depending on whether she speaks to Tom or Chambers (names referencing them after the babies were switched). When speaking to Chambers, Roxy uses way more harsh language than with Tom. When needing to reinforce racial segregation, Twain has Roxy call out Chambers' blackness, such as when Roxy retorted when Chambers told her Judge Driscoll disinherited Tom: "He wouldn't *ever* treat him so! Take it back, you mis'able imitation n----- dat I bore in sorrow en tribbilation" (103). This comment brings attention to Chambers' blackness and the irony in him actually being the white child. The same language continues after Roxy tells Tom that he's actually Chambers, specifically when Roxy talks to Tom about his cowardice in not dueling Luigi. "It's de n----- in you, dat's what it is. Thirty-one parts o' you is white, en on'y one part n-----, en dat po' little one part is yo' soul" (Twain 157). Roxy was able to switch the babies, proving that Tom essentially *is* white, but she reinforces stereotypes that indicate that the enslaved are cowards and weak-minded, since that's

the part of Tom that avoided the duel. That part of Tom also allows him to question his identity later in the novel. By using the racial epithet, Twain also reinforces the era's negative definition of the word as the term for weak-minded slaves. Racial segregation and slavery as an establishment fit the "fiction of law and custom" as described by Twain when referring to Chambers being enslaved because he's 1/32 black and "one drop of black blood" is all it takes to enslave someone (64). Racial segregation is this arbitrary "fiction" because had it not been for the difference between how Tom and Chambers were raised, they would be way more similar in demeanor.

The nature vs. nurture concept applies to Tom and Chambers as babies. Tom is depicted as bad immediately after his "usurpation"; he would cry and have temper tantrums for no reason and hold his breath until he got his way (Twain 75). Putting Tom in a powerful position allowed Roxy to (accidentally) dictate Tom being raised as a spoiled child. The fixed nature of Tom's identity reinforces the binaries of behavior between black and white Americans. According to Dorothy Berkson, "Tom's evil is so deeply imbedded in his character that he seems to stand as a type of original sin" (312). Tom lies, steals, cheats, gambles, sells his mother down the river, and later kills Judge Driscoll. Twain's intentions for making Tom live up to the stereotypes for the enslaved black male, which he learns them through whiteness, though he is actually black, are ambiguous. Chambers, who was raised to be enslaved and is intended to fit those stereotypes, does not fit the mold. He is introspective and seems to also associate racial epithets with their negative connotations. Chambers calls attention to his own whiteness when he says to Roxy, "If I's imitation, what is you? Bofe of us is imitation *white* — dat's what we is — en pow'ful good imitation too — yah-yah-yah! — we don't 'mount to noth'n' as imitation n-----s" (Twain 103). In this, Chambers addresses his ability to pass as white. Twain likely intentionally coupled the

word “white” with the racial epithet to emphasize the difference of severity, therefore also enforcing racial binaries that associate whiteness (and white-passing) as a good thing and blackness as a negative.

When Twain uses epithets to emphasize racial binaries, characters’ identities shift. Race is often represented through speech in the novel. The use of racially charged language assists in Twain’s efforts to bend the concepts of “black” and “white” as identities. Roxy uses racial epithets when telling Tom that he is her son to depict the severity of Tom’s new status as someone who is supposed to be enslaved, which permanently shifts his identity. She says, “You’s a n-----! —*bawn* a n----- en a *slave!* — en you’s a n----- en a slave dis minute” (Twain 112). Tom’s sense of whiteness disappears when he learns he is 1/32 black, and using the same racial epithets he used as an enslaver likely impact Tom more than if Roxy just stated that Tom is actually a slave. Twain uses the language that white racists at the time of slavery used to demean their enslaved people, which allows for Tom’s identity crisis — and the presence of whiteness and blackness as facets of identity — to be fully realized. The outlined racial difference between Tom and Chambers is flipped once Pudd’nhead Wilson reveals the switch to the courtroom. In the conclusion to the novel, Twain outlines how the return to their “correct” places impacts Tom and Chambers’ identities, emphasizing that Chambers’ (called the “real heir”) former enslaved status bars him from fitting the role of a rich white man. “He could neither read nor write, and his speech was the basest dialect of the negro quarter...He could nevermore enter into the solacing refuge of the ‘n----- gallery’ — that was closed to him for good and all” (Twain 225). Chambers, who was the enslaved black man of the novel, now is associated with racial epithets in a different light. Twain describes Chambers’ struggles with his enslaved upbringing, but the reference to the “negro quarter” and the “n----- gallery” separate Chambers from every earlier

description of his identity. These are listed as associations that Chambers no longer can be part of, but their legacies will remain with him in his lack of education and access to a life outside of servitude.

The negative connotations of Roxy's use of racial epithets are conflicted when Roxy lists the notable non-white figures in Tom's lineage, such as "Pocahontas de Injun queen" and her husband, a "n----- king outen Africa" (Twain 158). The purpose of the racially charged word isn't obvious here, considering Roxy is listing powerful figures. However, Twain could have used the word in a positive light to contradict the surrounding negative uses of the word. Using racial epithets to insight social reform and a shift in the words' definitions is not new practice for Twain. In his work *Roughing It*, character Captain Ned Blakely-Bill Noakes constantly asks whether someone "killed the n-----," which Twain includes to equate the black man to any other white crewmember on their ship, and his killer deserves the same sentence he would get had he murdered a white man (Tharp and Sloane 91). The word is used to reverse its negative definition that people at the time would be familiar with and flip the standard racial binaries to strive toward equality through linguistic change. The same applies to *Pudd'nhead Wilson*, where Roxy works to reverse the negative associations with the word because she uses it to reference an African king.

Another ambiguous depiction of race in the novel comes from twins Luigi and Angelo. The difference in skin tone of the identical twins is emphasized right when they are introduced in the novel: "One was a little fairer than the other, but otherwise they were exact duplicates" (Twain 89). The twins set up a mirror for the duality of Tom and Chambers, and the continued references to Luigi's darker complexion, e.g. referring to him as the "darker one," enforce racial difference. The twins are separated by the binary, like Tom and Chambers, where one is required

to keep the other intact. Twain establishes those boundaries for many reasons, but the use of racial epithets adds a sense of permanence to them. References to dogs help contextualize the ambiguity surrounding race in the novel. “Hound” or “dog” are used as insults when speaking to a character’s lack of morals or animalistic behavior. For Tom, being called a “hound” has a double meaning. He can be called a hound for his poor choices or consequential decisions like selling Roxy down the river (Twain 189), or “hound” could refer to the association of the enslaved as animal-like creatures. Many people in the eighteenth- and nineteenth-centuries thought the enslaved had less sensitivity to pain and were not as capable of thinking, and a medical journal report from 1817 cited by Pernick compared black women’s ability to bear pain to the “impunity” of dogs and rabbits (as cited in Plous and Williams 796). Tom calls Luigi, who bears much resemblance to him as the “darker” twin, a hound when explaining his assault and court case to Judge Driscoll (Twain 141). By using this term, Twain associates references to dogs or animal-like traits to the labeled “black” characters in the text. Calling enslaved black Americans animal-based names establishes a superiority sense and reinforces the role of the enslaved as the inferior race.

With ambiguous intentions, Mark Twain influences individual identity by using racial epithets to reinforce racial binaries in *Pudd'nhead Wilson*. Twain calls attention to nature vs. nurture, the concept of whiteness and blackness as dictated by the status characters are raised in. Tom and Chambers represent the racial binaries, and their identities become frayed once their preestablished customs of race are flipped. Twain uses racial epithets to emphasize race and its stereotypes that indicate blackness is evil and then reverses that narrative at points when the suppressed use racial epithets in positive lights. When Tom learns he’s not completely white, he questions the racial norms of society, saying, “Why were n----- and whites made? What crime

did the uncreated first n----- commit that the curse of birth was decreed for him? And why is this awful difference made between white and black?" (Twain 117). Tom critiques the rules of established racial binaries, which speaks to Twain's intention to make whiteness and blackness dynamic concepts. The use of racial epithets in *Puddin'head Wilson* allows Twain to comment on the establishment of slavery and race, also allowing readers to do the same when interacting with the text.

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