Power and Identity in *Pudd’nhead Wilson*

At first, it sounds like a riddle: Two children born on the same day, in the same house, and nearly identical in appearance, are granted two vastly different positions in the same society; one will become master and one his slave—*Why?* Unfortunately, this is not a riddle. This is the enigma with which Dawson’s Landing must contend, a paradoxical consequence bred from generations of tracing and reaffirming blurred lines. For a riddle to work, the answer must be hidden somewhere in the information presented, so that a careful reader might expose it through reason and deduction. But luck does not lend itself to reason and deduction. For all their formal education, the townpeople of Dawson’s Landing could not articulate what Roxy, a poor, uneducated slave, could: “What has my po’ baby done, dat he couldn’t have yo’ luck? He hain’t done nuth’n. God was good to you; why warn’t He good to him? Dey can’t sell you down de river” (Twain 17).

In Mark Twain’s *Pudd’nhead Wilson*, Roxy, one of the most powerless and disenfranchised inhabitants of Dawson’s Landing, becomes the catalyst for a major shakeup in its power dynamics. By appropriating and subverting the power strategies of a birth-right, appearance-based system, Roxy inadvertently exposes its flaws to the townspeople, who are, in turn, forced to either adapt to the change, adopt new structures, or redefines the rules within.

Prior to the moment *Pudd’nhead Wilson* exposes the true identities of Tom and Chambers, social conditioning operated as the primary enforcer of Dawson’s Landing’s genealogically based power structure. Whereas appearance identification was starting to fail, even white slaves were marked by their upbringing—their performance of the social norms of their caste marked their place in society where the color of their skin could not. Because of this conditioning, Roxy could pass as a black man—the genotypic opposite of what she was—but she would never be able to pass as a white woman. She was
uneducated, illiterate, and her mannerisms, voice, and vernacular were like that of a slave (9). Despite her white appearance, her black identity, constructed by the system she was born into, marked her place in society where biology could not.

To Michel Foucault, the creation and enforcement of social norms is essential in a surveillance-based power system. In order for the system to function, both the powerful and the disenfranchised must actively participate in and enforce the standards on which the power structure thrives (*Discipline and Punish* 183). For Dawson’s Landing and pre-emancipation America, the creation of docile, meek slaves was essential in order to retain control of their bodies, both to reinforce the structure of power and for slave’s survival within it. In order to survive, the oppressed become enforcers of their oppression, and the system reproduces itself organically. Not only through corporal punishment and threats to life but also the indoctrination of fictions of law and custom, are both master and slave subliminally trained from birth to adhere to the roles required to inherit and promote the status quo. Twain illustrates this notion through Roxy:

[B]y the fiction created for herself, he was become her master; the necessity of recognizing this relation outwardly and of perfecting herself in the forms required to express the recognition, had mover her to such diligence and faithfulness in practicing these forms that this exercise soon concerted itself into habit; it became automatic and unconscious; then a natural result followed: deceptions intended solely for others gradually grew practically into self-deception as well; [. . .] the little counterfeit rift of separation between imitation-slave and imitation-master widened and widened, and became an abyss, and a very real one—and on one side stood Roxy, the dupe of her own deceptions, and on the other side stood her child, no longer a usurper to her, but her accepted and recognized master. (Twain 23-24)

Roxy, who is herself a product of her slavery, raises her son to be her oppressor by treating him like her master. Roxy becomes an instrument of her own oppression, a notion she more passionately accepts following the switch. Through her actions, her slavery becomes an expression of maternal love, giving
purpose and meaning to something that is otherwise unjustifiable—a force that propels her participation in a system she had only moments earlier subverted.

According to Foucault, in order to subvert structures of power and oppression, the oppressed must identify and appropriate the strategies of their dominators (136). A “black” man—Chambers—was only able to usurp and oppress a white man—Tom—because of the existence of “the fiction of law and custom” (Twain 9) that can condemn a man for something that cannot be precisely identified and measured. If a person’s social exaltation or condemnation was based on the tangible and measurable actions of an individual, Roxy’s technique for transgressing the system would never have worked. But because of the invention and propagation of arbitrary rules by its benefactors, the entire system was subverted with a costume change by one of its most powerless and disenfranchised subjects.

Similar to Foucault’s surveillance-based power system, it was ironically “Tom’s” individuality that was used to condemn him by exposing the subversion. Through the use of fingerprinting, Wilson establishes Chambers’s individuality in order to revoke his identity, which then allows him to be objectified and sold on the basis of generalization and categorization. Rather than recognizing the technology as a reinforcement of individuality and Tom/Chambers as confirmation of racial variation, Pudd’nhead Wilson, a man previously condemned by a town blind to its own irony, utilizes his knowledge to reinforce the traditional structural barriers, which, only days earlier, had caged him. To the sleepy town of Dawson’s Landing, Wilson offered a convenient and comfortable solution to an uncomfortable reality, solidifying his place of power within the now safely reaffirmed system.
Works Cited
