

## **The “Trial” of Mark Twain (and in defence of a person’s Innate Racial Identity by one Puddn’head Wilson)**

As we paint the picture of the events of the day, we must take into account the time and place in which they occurred. It is 1962, following a few years after the scandal of Valet de Chambre. Our scene begins and ends in court. Racial identity is a debate that has begun in earnest after the heir to the Driscoll fortune turned out to be an imposter, and with the beginning of the American Civil War. The fine gentleman Mark Twain sits on the stand, in defence of his own honour, as Attorney at Law Mr. Puddn’head Wilson begins his accusations.

Wilson rises from his seat and crosses the room towards the stand:

“Ladies and gentlemen of the jury, this gentleman before you, stands accused of postulating that the subject of race is an idea which is constructed socially.” He motions towards the man on the stand, who sits calm and composed. “I will attempt to prove today that race however, is one that is an aspect which is unalterable in a person’s identity. I beg the indulgence of the court as I begin my proceedings.”

As he says this, Mr. Wilson walks to and fro, passing the prosecutors and defence table, facing the jury every time he mentions the defendant. As he approaches the bench, he begins his case:

“Mr Twain, I shall begin my arguments today with a point I have already proven to be fact in this very court of law. You yourself wrote that I, Puddn’head Wilson, proved the fact that the fingerprints of a person, much like their race are a signature of sorts.

This autograph cannot be counterfeited, nor can he disguise it or hide it away. (136)” Mr Twain scoffs at this from the witness stand, a display that agitates one Puddn’head Wilson. The attorney continues, heated slightly.

“I will attempt to prove this fact to be transferable to multiple proceedings, and to be used as an argument to prove the fact that race is an inherent part of a person’s identity. Much like a fingerprint, the racial identity of a person is dictated by their own body, and it is a fact that is irrefutable. A black man cannot disguise or hide away his complexion or innate tendencies, just as a white man cannot hide his, as proven by the murder of Judge Driscoll by the man believed to be his nephew, Valet de Chambre. So I ask you Mr. Twain, how is it that you can state that race is in fact a construct dictated by society, when race is a physical part of a person?”

Mark Twain turns to the jury and pauses for a moment. He then turns back to his opponent and stares at him with intensity:

“Well, Mr. Pudd'nhead Wilson, I will tell you how. As you used your proceedings in the trial of Valet de Chambre, otherwise known as Thomas à Becket Driscoll, so shall I. You presented the evidence of the fingerprints of the two children as follows, using these facts to propose the way in which they assumed one another's identities. [Child] A was put in B's nursery; B was transferred to the kitchen and became a negro and a slave (142).” Twain pauses here for impact, as the court bristles with the confrontation that is about to transpire. Wilson's feeling of agitation grows further in the palpable silence.

“By definition, the ability to become something relies on the perception of others. This is strictly a societal standard, and is completely separate from a person's identity. By being put in the cradle, did Chambers immediately become white? If so, why was he sent down the river as a slave after he was charged and not jailed? Furthermore, upon your arrival in town, Mr. Wilson, a similar state of ‘becoming’ transpired. After the debacle with the ‘half of a dog’, citizens of the town began to state that they ain't going too far as to say [you are] a Puddn'head (9). Do you then immediately identify as such? Or is this title of puddn'head simply that, a title and an identity which has been societally constructed for you by others?”

With this distinction of Mr. Wilson's title as Puddn'head, the courtroom erupts in laughter. Wilson's face turns a red the colour of beets, and he must turn away from his opponent for a moment to hide his embarrassment and rage. Twain sits back smugly in his chair on the stand, arms crossed in contentment.

“Order I say!” The judge calls from his stand, trying his best to hide the slight smile that has spread across his lips. “Order in the court! Mr Wilson, you may continue.”

“Thank you, your honour.” Wilson says curtly, also attempting to hide his true feelings, which in his case is contempt. “I shall continue with my proceedings, and will be disregarding what Mr. Twain said which slandered my person. I believe this next subject will be harder for the witness to refute.”

Wilson walks straight towards Twain, who still sits with his arms cross and with a slight smile on his face, and begins again:

“As you stated in your last remark, Valet de Chambre was found to be an imposter, and was indeed pardoned, as to shut up a slave for life (145) was a shame and a waste. So creditors sold him down the river (145) after he was deemed too valuable a body to be imprisoned. As a black man this was the case, as he was better to be working in the fields then waste away in a cell. Due to his negro blood and his physical skill, and despite his inexperience with manual labour, those with authority still deemed him a good and valuable slave. This being said, it is provable that one's slave ability is dictated by their physical body, and even in secret, the inherent part of their identity. Even living his life in hiding as a white man, Chambers could not escape his identity as a slave. You cannot refuse this fact, Mr. Twain, as it was substantiated in a court of law. I rest my case.”

As he finishes, Wilson turns to face the courtroom. As he does, it begins to bubble with conversation again, in agreement with the prosecutors latest statement. The deception of Valet de Chambre had left a stain on the town's memory. Yet Mark Twain continues to sit on the witness stand with the same content posture as before.

“Ah, Mr. Wilson, but that is where you are wrong.” The witness replies slyly. Wilson spins on his heels in surprise and agitation once again, his opponent already under his skin once again.

“I shall use the example of, at the insistence of the prosecutor to use his most famous legal win in this court against me, Valet de Chambre and his mother Roxy. Roxy was a negro woman by distinction alone, and was stated to be as white as anyone. (13) Yet due to the one-sixteenth of her blood that was black, she was called a slave and forced to be confined to that way of life. Her son was the same, at thirty-one parts white and one part black by blood, Valet de Chambre was by a fiction of law and custom, a negro. (13) He was by this reasoning, able to live undetected as a white man of stature, a Driscoll none the less, for the majority of his life.”

Twain pauses again after this statement, as the courtroom starts again to discuss his admission. At the instance of his Puddn'headedness being proven once again, Mr. Wilson sits down at the prosecutors table.

“Would you not agree then Mr. Wilson, that by this reasoning, the distinction of a person's race is dictated not by their identity or even blood, but by the way in which they appear to others? And by definition the way their person is interpreted and their identity is socially constructed by those around them? I do think so.” Mr. Twain finishes with a flourish of the hand, and the courtroom

erupts for a second time in laughter and awe. The Attorney at Law Mr. Wilson is once again made a fool!

“Order in the court!” The judge calls again. “As Mr. Wilson has rested his case, the jury will now decide the verdict of this trial.”

After three hours the jury returns with the verdict, as a man stands staunchly to read it before the court.

“We the jury, after some deliberation and after considering all of the facts presented in court, have unanimously voted in favour of Mr. Mark Twain’s hypothesis, in that race is not an inherent part of identity but is in fact a construct which is societally attached to a person at birth.”

Mr. Twain rises and bows toward the courtroom and finally towards his opponent, Pudd’nhead Wilson. The only recently revered man hangs his head in shame once again, his identity now again societally constructed as a fool and a Pudd’nhead.

## **Works Cited**

Twain, Mark. Pudd'nhead Wilson ; Those Extraordinary Twins ; The Man That Corrupted Hadleyburg. R. D. Gooder. Oxford University Press, 2009.