



## The Recurrent Trope of the Indivisible Body: Mark Twain's Postmodern View of Identity and the Body

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### I

In writing such works as “What Is Man?” in his later years, Mark Twain revealed his larger philosophical interest in human affairs. Even though he was less a systematic theorist than a humorist, Twain’s philosophical thinking provided his novels with a piercing insight that transformed his humor into something more than a joke. In this essay I consider selected humorous remarks and episodes that reference the indivisible body in Twain’s novels in order to show how his persistent interest in the body was ahead of his time, even approaching postmodern understandings of the body as social construct. Twain’s ideological exploration into fundamental questions of the human condition serves as a platform for the critical reassessment of Twain’s later works, many of which were left unfinished or are yet to be mined for their inspired ideas.

In *Pudd’nhead Wilson* (1894), David Wilson’s enigmatic remark about a troublesome barking dog earns him his disgraceful nickname because of its apparent meaninglessness: “I wish I owned half of that dog... Because I would kill my half” (24). Twain’s assigning such a remark to the eponymous character (who also happens to be a lawyer) becomes increasingly significant when we note Twain’s interest in the trope of the indivisible body in *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884/5) and also in *Those Extraordinary Twins* (1894). The three conceptions of “half,” “to own,” and “body” in Wilson’s remark, while otherwise unremarkable, take on more weight in novels that represent slavery.

George E. Marcus, in an essay that focuses on the “half a dog” story, considers Twain’s “treatment of race” in both *Huck Finn* and *Pudd’nhead Wilson* to be rather “half-committed” (199), claiming that race appears “as a kind of allegorical vehicle for

probing” something else (198). Marcus sees *Pudd'nhead Wilson's* reference to race “as a story through which another more profound story of self can be told” (198). He discusses such topics as “the concept of self” (191), “the coherence of the self and personal identity” (191), “the nature of consciousness and subjectivity” (192), and “the masked complexities of consciousness and self” (198) in order to argue that the novel is Mark Twain’s critique of “notions of the unified self” (204). In Marcus’s view, the “unified self” is the “culturally hegemonic” American ideology of “autonomous” and essential “individualism” (195). I share Marcus’s view that Twain’s representation of slavery in the two novels reveals more his philosophical thinking about the human race in general than his social interest in the racial problems of his age. The two novels and also *Those Extraordinary Twins*, a novel originally part of *Pudd'nhead Wilson* but later separated from it, also reflect this interest on Twain’s part, leading to his more obviously philosophical focus on the human race in his later years, from such subversive viewpoints as Satan and even a microbe.

While Marcus in his analysis of *Pudd'nhead Wilson* takes up the concept of the self from Wilson’s joking remark and discusses Twain as a cultural critic, I focus on Twain’s philosophical interest in the body and trace his persistent interest in the trope of the indivisible body over the course of three novels: *Huck Finn*, *Pudd'nhead Wilson* and *Those Extraordinary Twins*. Marcus’s criticism of “Twain’s restraint from going beyond” the dualistic thinking of his time “even when he saw beyond them” (209) is in sharp contrast with my own contention that Twain recognized the body as a social construct well ahead of his time.<sup>1</sup>

## II

In Chapter XIV, Huck and Jim discuss a Frenchman’s foreign language. In order to convince Jim that a Frenchman speaks a different language than they do, Huck gives examples of a cat and a cow, saying that just as these animals talk differently from them so does a Frenchman: “Well, then, why ain’t it natural and right for a *Frenchman* to talk different from us?” But Jim refutes Huck’s argument: “Is a cat a man, Huck? Is a Frenchman a man? *Well*, den! Dad blame it, why doan he *talk* like a man?” (102-03). Jim’s argument is comical but also surprisingly convincing.

In Huck's argument, differences among people are equated with those between animals and human beings. If we were to substitute "African" for "Frenchman" and "chattel" for "a cat and a cow" Huck's comments could be seen to reflect the view that the difference between white and black people is as natural as the difference between humans and chattel. Jim's argument, on the other hand, emphasizes the oneness of all people. In *Pudd'nhead Wilson*, the humaneness of Judge Driscoll's character is described ironically by using an analogy similar to Huck's above: "He was a fairly humane man toward slaves and other animals; he was an exceedingly humane man toward the erring of his own race"(66). The reader cannot accept Jim's argument in *Huck Finn* because he refuses to accept the fact that a Frenchman is a man even if he talks differently from an American; nonetheless, Jim's unique perspective serves as a counterargument to the presumption that the difference between "slaves" and one's "own race" is as natural as that between animals and "real" men (that is, human beings).

Critic Carmen Subryan is offended by Twain's representation of Jim in this scene:

Unable to answer Jim's logic, Huck dismisses it: "I see it warn't no use wasting words—you can't learn a nigger to argue. So I quit" (Chap.14). Huck's statement, despite the irony of Jim's actually having bested him in the argument, is damaging because it portrays Jim as a fool and, at least superficially, supports a broader misconception of black people as incapable of reason (and thus not fully human). (97)

Subryan recognizes the effect of Jim's rebuttal on Huck, but in the end is more impressed by Huck's behavior in response to Jim's comment. Yet, if we take Jim not as a representative of "black people," as Subryan does, but rather as a representative of a more subversive view that humorously threatens the conventional thinking and values of those like Huck, it might then be possible to take Huck's final comment as merely a weak attempt to dismiss Jim's valid point out of hand by asserting racial superiority. In the end, Jim's view is one that refuses to accept that some men can be in the category of animals, instead seeing all men without exception in the same category of human race.

In order to make clear how Twain's philosophical thinking is working behind

such apparently humorous remarks and episodes, I wish to emphasize the multi-voiced structure of *Huck Finn*. In this novel no one voice is authoritative and it is possible to hear even unspoken exchanges that arise through the interaction of voices. In “*Pudd’nhead Wilson Revisited*” (1990), James M. Cox refers to the contradictory views about slavery at work in *Huck Finn*: “Huck’s narrative — written and not spoken — plays upon a secret agreement between writer and reader, the agreement that the white boy’s relation of his friendship with and aid to a runaway slave, illegal and disapproved in his own society, will be utterly legal and righteously approved in his own society of Huck’s readers” (6). Cox finds “a secret agreement” between the writer and the reader, one which, while unspoken, nonetheless enables a “double vision” toward slavery in which wrong/right and illegal/legal can coexist in the experience of reading the text.

However, this “secret agreement” is not the last word on the text, either. Because if we were to read *Huck Finn* from simply a slavery-as-wrong-and-illegal perspective, we would miss, for example, the seriousness of “the spiritual struggle of Huck Finn in deciding to help the Negro Jim to his freedom, even though he should be forever despised as a negro thief in his native town, and perhaps eternally lost through the blackness of his sin,” as William Dean Howells once commented (149). For example, how should the reader regard Aunt Sally, a good-natured character, who, hearing a Negro was killed in the steamboat accident, says: “Well, it’s lucky; because sometimes people do get hurt” (281). The reader cannot simply denounce the kindly Aunt Sally as an evil racist nor wholly sympathize with her shocking, however “unconscious,” choice of words. In *Huck Finn* we as readers must seek the multi-leveled structure of the truth in complex representations of the human condition, tracing out the truth somewhere in the interplay between three different viewpoints on slavery: the subversive one of Jim, a slave; the moderate view of Huck, a social outcast; and that of Tom, a conventional and authoritative Southerner. I read *Huck Finn* as a kind of “fable of man” for Twain, and see race in the novel represented not by a social reformer but by a philosopher. Consequently, I regard the novel’s main characters more as viewpoints than as characters plausible as real people in their own right, which eliminates some of the problems of Jim’s necessary characterization as a “real” black man.

Twain consistently makes use of Jim’s refusal to differentiate between people, as we

see above in *Huck Finn*, and as we can see also in *Tom Sawyer Abroad* (1892). Frederick Woodard and Donnaræ MacCann are justified in casting aspersions on the representation of Jim in that novel when they say, "Yet in the next published work about Huck, Tom, and Jim — *Tom Sawyer Abroad* — nothing is left of Jim but the clown (147). However, Jim's representation as a minstrel figure in *Tom Sawyer Abroad* may be said to signify something else again when we consider his language and comments intertextually to discover a more consistent "character" to his viewpoint.

In Chapter 3 of *Tom Sawyer Abroad*, when Tom explains about the time difference between St. Louis, Missouri, and Tom and Jim's current location in the balloon high up in the sky, Jim refuses to accept it: "Marse Tom, who put de people out yonder in St Louis? De Lord done it. Who put de people here whah we is? De Lord done it. Ain' dey bofe His chillen? 'Cose dey is. *Well*, den! Is He gwyne to 'scriminate 'twix' 'em?" (273). In his argument Jim's use of the word "discriminate" does not simply mean "to make distinctions" but also refers to racial practices precisely because he is a black slave for whom the term is more loaded. Tom's answer finally expresses what was only implied in the logic used by Jim in the debate over the Frenchman's language in *Huck Finn*. Tom says, "There ain't no discriminating about it. When He makes you and some more of His children black, and makes the rest of us white, what do you call that?" (273). Quite literally, the humor here lies in Tom's so-called superior logical thinking, from which emerges his claim that racial difference is analogous to time differences. But if we grant Jim the upper hand here and deny Tom his "natural" superiority, we see Jim's perspective better reflects Twain's concern when he wrote *Huck Finn*, which was not so much how to represent slavery, a historical institution, as his concern for the ideological crisis that threatened egalitarian idealism and thereby justified any social inequality. Jim, like Twain, was hesitant to grant easily and clearly any "essential" differences between people, not even at the levels of nationality or race.

The Solomon passage in Chapter XIV of *Huck Finn*, which comes just before the conversation about the Frenchman's language, continues Jim's argument in a similar way as the above. Although Jim misinterprets Solomon's intention about how to identify the natural mother of the child in this scene, his viewpoint is most interesting for its literal significance. It continues to show his sensitive awareness as a slave of any concept that

presupposes differences between people. Jim here speaks about “dat chile dat [Solomon] ’uz gwyne to chop in two”:

“Dah’s de stump, dah — dat’s one er de women; heah’s you — dat’s de yuther one; I’s Sollermun; en dish-yer dollar bill’s de chile. Bofe un you claims it. What does I do? Does I shin aroun’ mongs’ de neighbors en fine out which un you de bill *do* b’long to, en han’ it over to de right one, all safe en soun’, de way dat anybody dat had any gumption would? No — I take en whack de bill in *two*, en give half un it to you, en de yuther half to de yuther woman. Dat’s de way Sollermun was gwyne to do wid de chile. Now I want to ast you: what’s de use er dat half a bill? — can’t buy noth’n wid it. En what use is a half a chile?” (100)

Jim’s reasoning cautions us that, if we believe in egalitarian principles, the whole cannot be divided into halves or shared equally by the two owners. As Jim illustrates, neither a dollar bill nor a child can be divided into two parts.<sup>2</sup> Of course the sum of a dollar can be divided into fifty cents each, and a child can belong to both parents; however, when embodied in a dollar bill or in the physical being of a child, the body must be intact as a whole, or else its meaning is completely lost. There is no equal division possible, just the whole or nothing. The situation that Jim illustrates here reappears in *Pudd’nhead Wilson* and *Those Extraordinary Twins*, showing Twain’s growing interest in philosophical conceptions of the body. However, in *Huck Finn* this situation appears to be related to the crisis of equality under the influence of Social Darwinism. Not simply a trope of the indivisible body but also one of the indivisible whole, Jim’s egalitarian language was rather common among authors of Twain’s time, often used to delineate situations in which cutting the whole into halves and also sharing equally is impossible.<sup>3</sup>

Darwinian theory suggests that nature provides more people than is needed for the survival of the species, which can be said to justify the sacrifice of the useless excess of humanity for the benefit of the superior few. In his argument about Solomon, Jim says:

“You take a man dat’s got on’y one er two chillen; is dat man gwyne to be wasful o’chillen? No, he ain’t; he can’t ‘ford it. *He* know how to value ‘em. But you take a

man dat's got 'bout five million chillen runnin' roun' de house, en it's diffunt. *He* as soon chop a chile in two as a cat. Dey's plenty mo'." (101)

Twain uses Jim as a mouthpiece here to warn against concepts that belittle the value of life based on the logic that there is always plenty more where that came from. In "The Chronicle of Young Satan," we might recall that Satan too makes little of life, saying, "we can make more" immediately after killing all the people he just created in an earthquake and storm he himself causes (52). Satan even directly commits "murder" when he crushes the life out of the little quarreling workmen he has created (49). Though the reasoning behind Satan's acts is ambiguous, it may symbolize the concept of natural selection: When applied to human beings, natural selection leads to contempt for individual life and even justifies differentiating among individuals for specific valuable traits. If all life cannot survive, choices are inevitable. In this way Twain warns against such concepts by introducing the trope of the indivisible whole. This trope shows Twain's alarm at the idea that egalitarian principles could be scientifically or popularly renounced as irrelevant merely because of a mistaken belief that taking the part at the expense of the whole is inevitable or expedient. Such a mentality reveals human egoism above all.

Critic Robert Sattelmeyer emphasizes the importance of Jim's opinion of Solomon: "Jim's anger, unusual for him, is well founded, for he knows from experience what it means to be wasteful of children, living as he does in a society where black children, like the legions of Solomon's progeny, were of no particular value except as chattel. Conversely, Jim knows how to value children...." (362). Though Jim appears too ignorant to understand the point of Solomon's judgment, and his opinion as offered is admittedly minstrel-like in its dialects and attitudes, if we focus our attention solely on this ideological aspect, we miss the ways in which Jim's humanitarianism is historically viable for an African American character.

The trope of the indivisible whole, though in somewhat altered form, also appears in Twain's "The War-Prayer" (1904-5). The war cannot be regarded as something whole per se, but it does present a situation where people cannot enjoy egalitarian principles because victory for both sides is impossible and only either one or the other can win. In this short story Twain introduces an old man who enters a church and finds the people there praying

for victory in wartime. The old man points out that their prayer means a wish for death and misery to people on the opposite side of the war. In this way Twain uses the binary opposition of victor and loser to denounce war as a fundamentally blind and selfish act conceived in zero-sum terms by means of splitting a whole into halves.

### III

In *Pudd'nhead Wilson*, Wilson's strange remark about a dog incorporates the two elements discussed above from *Huck Finn* and *Tom Sawyer Abroad*: It describes a situation in which division is impossible (Jim's Solomon example) and refers to wholeness or the body as a whole (Jim's reference to the dollar bill and the child). Twain obviously continued to explore both these philosophical concepts further in *Pudd'nhead Wilson*, but his interest focused on the body. Wilson's joke may appear virtually meaningless, but it expresses a key concept that drove Twain to write this novel. As Twain explains in the beginning of *Pudd'nhead Wilson*, he began to write it as a story about twins, but it soon became quite another tale. The trope of the indivisible body appears here in the figure of the conjoined twins — signifying both subject matter and fictional structure — to connect two otherwise very different stories: the “farce,” *Those Extraordinary Twins*, and the “tragedy,” *Pudd'nhead Wilson*.

The trope of the indivisible body in *Pudd'nhead Wilson* is certainly related to slavery. In *Huck Finn* it works to signify indivisible wholeness, appealing to the crisis in equality that slavery posed in the historical context of Social Darwinism. In *Pudd'nhead Wilson* the trope raises questions about the identity of the mulatto body in slave-holding society in the post-Reconstruction era, when the United States began to institutionalize the “separate but equal” principle for the races.

In *The Prince and the Pauper*, wearing the right clothes settles the boys' identities; in the slaveholding town of Dawson's Landing, however, the matter of identity is more complex. The exchange of clothes is the first action taken in *Pudd'nhead Wilson*, but when the secret of the switched babies is revealed at the end with the aid of fingerprint technology, it still fails to give the reader cathartic satisfaction. Identity defined merely as appearance or style in clothes is easy to change. In *The Prince and the Pauper*, identity



was still regarded as something stable despite changing clothes, while in *Pudd'nhead Wilson*, once clothes are switched, the appearance of the body underneath them becomes destabilized since the identity of slaves was not decided by skin color alone but also by invisible "black" blood. The simple method of identification in *The Prince and the Pauper* where appearance = identity is replaced by the more complex one of the white body of a "black" mulatto slave in *Pudd'nhead Wilson*.

Eric J. Sundquist contends that Twain's choice of a white mulatto for this novel has to be considered in the context of the 1892 legal controversy over Homer Adolph Plessy. *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896) was the court case that established the "separate but equal" principle of Jim Crow laws that would prevail throughout the first half of the twentieth century. As Twain's narrator explains in *Pudd'nhead Wilson*, a mulatto's racial identity is determined by "a fiction of law and custom," rather than by real bodies or even blood:

To all intents and purposes Roxy was as white as anybody, but the one sixteenth of her which was black outvoted the other fifteen parts and made her a negro. She was a slave, and saleable as such. Her child was thirty-one parts white, and he, too, was a slave and, by a fiction of law and custom, a negro. (32-3)

Roxana looked white, but was not regarded as white, even though her blood meant she was more white than black. Neither blood nor skin color as defining traits of her body determines Roxana's racial identity. As the narrator's words, "a fiction of law and custom," indicate, Twain recognizes that the racial identity of a mulatto is wholly a social construction.

Chris Shilling explains our contemporary social constructionist view of the body that replaced more "naturalistic" views in the latter half of the 1960's in this way: "Social constructionist views are united in their opposition to the notion that the body can be analysed adequately purely as a biological phenomenon. They also share an approach which holds that instead of being the foundation of society, the character and meanings attributed to the body, and the boundaries which exist between the bodies of different groups of people, are social products"(62). In Jim's argument against Solomon's decision, the view of the body in the figures of the child and the dollar bill is "naturalistic." The

image of the body's solid wholeness is the fundamental premise on which the rhetoric works. In *Pudd'nhead Wilson*, however, Twain expounds a social constructionist view of the body rather more often than a naturalistic view. We can apply Shilling's explanation of the social constructionist view of the body to this novel, for "the character and meanings attributed to the body" of Roxana as a slave are determined by an unreasonable law, and "the boundaries which exist between the bodies of different groups of people," such as black and white people, are certainly quite arbitrary. Twain's body in *Huck Finn* is more a conventional one, but with *Pudd'nhead Wilson* he obviously begins to explore the complex politics of the body, moving from a critique of the bizarre calculus of racial blood to approach aspects of identity politics some one hundred years in his future.

Wilson's dog joke, which at first appears merely comical and absurd, not unlike Jim's remark about the child and the dollar bill in *Huck Finn*, may in fact serve as a critique of Twain's contemporary society in implying "the one drop rule." This rule determined who was Negro based on the amount of their black blood — only "one drop" was necessary — with no regard for skin color. Obviously, the body of a mostly white man who had both white and black blood would be impossible to divide under any reasonable law. In this way, we can see that Wilson's ambiguous remark subtly and effectively critiques a society ruled by such unreasonable laws as "the one drop rule." At the end of the novel, Twain writes: "Everybody granted that if 'Tom' were white and free it would be unquestionably right to punish him — it would be no loss to anybody; but to shut up a valuable slave for life — that was quite another matter" (303). Wilson's dog joke at the start of the novel, then, might be rewritten in light of the novel's ending: "I wish I owned the white half of the man... Because I would rightfully punish my half." The logic of "partiality" that governs the one-drop rule can be said to provide the humorous edge to Wilson's dog joke while here in Twain's concluding joke, it gets the last laugh by dividing Tom into two parts, one part slave and one part white criminal.

After Tom finds out about his black blood, his life becomes one of "passing." And passing, as a means of crossing boundaries both racial and sexual, dramatically exposes the ways in which identity is determined or assigned. As Valerie Rohy explains:

In matters of race as well as sexuality, passing both invokes and unravels the logic

of primary and secondary, authenticity and inauthenticity, candor and duplicity, by placing in question the priority of what is claimed as 'true' identity. The discourse of racial passing reveals the arbitrary foundation of the categories 'black' and 'white,' just as passing across gender and sexuality places in question the meaning of 'masculine' and 'feminine,' 'straight' and 'gay.' Racial passing is thus subject to an epistemological ambiguity; from the beginning the discourse of passing contains an implicit critique of 'identity' precisely because what constitutes 'the beginning' of identity remains in question. (227)

Twain recognizes the factors that reveal the arbitrariness of racial identity when he writes in detail about what goes on in Tom's mind and attitude once he knows his "true" racial identity. At first, Tom's perspective on the moral landscape reverses. Even though he himself is the same, now that the dominant society's view of him has changed, it affects his self-identity, too: "For days he wandered in lonely places, thinking, thinking, thinking — *trying to get his bearings. It was new work*" (emphasis mine, 123). Now he has to redefine himself and find out how to behave according to his new identity as a slave-disguised-as-white; he has to perform and masquerade his white identity self-consciously. On the other hand, this racial identity affects Tom's life-long sense of white identity in that he himself begins to feel he is a Negro and involuntarily behaves according to such social norms, exactly as though he himself believed in his own internal essential identity as a Negro.

This initial change in his behavior occurs when he becomes afraid and humiliated, and it is attributed to the "nigger in him," but it disappears after a while when "Tom" soon becomes his old self again, apparently without any effort:

For as much as a week after this, Tom imagined that his character had undergone a pretty radical change. *But that was because he did not know himself.* In several ways *his opinions were totally changed, and would never go back to what they were before, but the main structure of his character was not changed and could not be changed...* He dropped gradually back into his old frivolous and easy-going ways and conditions of feeling and manner of speech, and no familiar of his could have

detected anything in him that differentiated him from the weak and careless Tom of other days. (emphasis mine; Chapter X: 125, 126)

In this second identity shift that Tom undergoes, the narrator's explanations emphasized in the above passage show Twain's belief in the stable self or constant personality of Tom, no matter what happens to him. Citing the same passage, George E. Marcus points out the limits of Twain's critique of the unified self, saying "Twain seems to be positing a return to a truer, deeper character which is Tom's essence — one that has little to do with the social construction of selves through identities like race, class, and ethnicity" (203-4). On the contrary, however, I contend that Tom's unified self serves all the more effectively as a radical critique of the social identification of the mulatto body; after all, if "Tom" goes back to his old self, what is that "old self" that he finds his way back to so easily? What was that identity of his in the beginning? Is he a Negro or a white? If he was simply what society took him for and formed of him according to his lived social norms, then he should have been white. Or, was he a Negro unbeknownst to the people around him, and even himself? In that case, his identity as a Negro would not have been any different from his being white. The questions opened up by this episode serve as "an implicit critique of 'identity'" because, as Valerie Rohy argues, "what constitutes 'the beginning' of identity remains in question."

It is also true, as Marcus argues, that Twain did not fully explore the social construction of Tom's self. He does not delineate how Tom becomes a murderer troubled by the arbitrary definition of his racial self. Twain simply explains that Tom's cowardice or evil nature is derived from his Negro blood, or in the other version of the text, as Shelley Fisher Fishkin has pointed out, from his white blood (122-23). Twain remains somewhat conventional in his inconsistency in applying social constructionist views in *Pudd'nhead Wilson*. However, his persistent interest in the body as a vehicle for arguing the concept of wholeness against parts produces *Those Extraordinary Twins* in which he presents the problems of identity and body in the story of Siamese twins. Focusing again on the trope of the indivisible body, Twain conceptualizes in this novel one body shared by two different personalities. In *Huck Finn* the trope was not necessarily related to the body but rather to wholeness, and when the trope appears again in *Pudd'nhead Wilson*, it becomes

a metaphor for the mulatto body. Finally the trope materializes and appears as an actual human body in *Pudd'nhead Wilson*.

In this novel Twain even gives up fingerprints and blood, biological determinants grounded in the body, as constitutive elements in a person's identification. It is impossible to identify the twins separately by their biological features, such as blood or their shared legs: Angelo does not drink a drop of liquor, for example, yet he gets drunk when Luigi does, and when Luigi appears to run it is really Angelo who runs away. When Rowena finally refuses Angelo's love, it is because his drunken behavior disgusts her, even though it is really only Luigi who drinks. The shared body of the twins, which has nothing to do with the identity or desires of each individual twin, raises questions about the relationship between the body and self-identity, a debate that, according to Shilling, is "one of the most important and contentious to have stimulated writings on the body" (182). The twins' body also poses questions of the nature of bodily boundaries, because theirs are indistinguishable. Today, of course, bodily contours are considered a social construct well under social regulation and control. As Mary Douglas remarks, "the body is a model that can stand for any bounded system. Its boundaries can represent any boundaries which are threatened or precarious" (115). Technologies have made the human body partly machine, and "the options associated with virtual reality and cyber-technologies promise us the potential of exploring and even occupying bodies which differ substantially according to time and place" (Shilling 189). In everyday life, we are familiar with serious cases in which bodily boundaries are experienced in confusing and destructive ways, including versions of gender identity disorder, anorexia nervosa, or multiple personalities.

Twain's humorous representation of the body in *Pudd'nhead Wilson* is very radical. The twins' body, reflecting no identity or desires in and of itself, and with no definitive boundaries or contours in time and space, has some things in common with Judith Butler's notion of the gendered body. Butler, a radical constructivist, renounces even the "ontological status" of the body, as Samira Kawash explicates:

The matter of the body... is not a neutral, autonomous site or surface but, as Butler puts it, "a process of materialization that stabilizes over time to produce the effect of boundary, fixity, and surface we call matter." "Matter," the reality effect of embodied

social identities, is created through time as “a sedimented effect of a reiterative or ritual practice.” (Kawash 212).<sup>4</sup>

Butler’s theory has been useful in disability studies, where her gender-inflected terms are substituted for disability-centered language, for example, “able-bodied” replaces “heterosexual” and “disabled” replaces “gay/lesbian.” In *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature*, Rosemarie Garland Thompson writes: “Both the female and the disabled bodies are cast as deviant and inferior; both are excluded from full participation in public as well as economic life; both are defined in opposition to a norm that is assumed to possess natural physical superiority” (19). This critique of the prevalent politics of the body from the perspective of the minority, be it in the area of gender, race or ability, reveals how norms relating to the body have been socially constructed. Twain’s interest in this issue — not to mention the choice he made to use the body of Siamese twins — enabled him to approach a rather radical notion of the body.

Why did Mark Twain become interested in such sophisticated questions of identity and body in the late nineteenth century? Siobhan B. Somerville refers to two important court cases: *Plessy v. Ferguson* in 1896, and in 1892, “the highly publicized trial of Alice Mitchell, who had murdered her female lover Freda Ward,” which “focused public attention on the meanings of sexual attachments between women”(2). She argues that:

The formation of notions of heterosexuality and homosexuality emerged in the United States through (and not merely parallel to) a discourse saturated with assumptions about the racialization of bodies. These assumptions and the heightened surveillance of bodies in a racially segregated culture demanded a specific kind of logic, which, as I will argue, gave coherence to the new concepts of homo- and heterosexuality”(4).

Somerville’s study locates racial and sexual discourses at the nexus of the modern concept of the gendered body, which helps us understand how Mark Twain in the nineteenth century also used the body to argue philosophical concepts of parts and wholes. We might

say that he nearly attained a postmodern conceptualization of the body in his humorous depiction of the Siamese twins. The changing landscapes in which the trope of the indivisible body persistently appears in the three novels considered throughout this study show how Twain continued a serious philosophical quest for the subversive possibilities of a humanist view of the body, often behind the humor and apparent focus of his attention, the race problem.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Marcus also considers Twain's ideological interest would have produced a postmodern tale: "The twin plus mistaken identities assemble the elements of a postmodern tale — Twain has these instincts — but beyond the assembling nothing is done..." (209).

<sup>2</sup> In Chapter VIII of *Huckleberry Finn* Jim says, "I's rich now...I owns myself, en I's wuth eight hund'd dollars. I wisht I had de money." Here Jim considers his body to be separated from himself as a subject. This duality is also pointed out by Samira Kawash in her interpretation of the body of a fugitive slave: "... As property, this removal is simultaneously theft: the fugitive steals himself, subject and object of an action that aims at the removal of this very duality. Both the agent and the object of this theft inhabit the same body..." (55).

<sup>3</sup> One example of the trope is a coat brought forth by Dostoyevsky in *Crime and Punishment* (1866). In section 5 of Part Two, Mr. Luzhin says:

"Love thy neighbour as thyself," and I did, what was the result of it? ....The result of it was that I tore my coat in half to share it with my neighbour, and both of us were left half naked. As the Russian proverb has it, "If you run after two hares, you won't catch one." But science tells us, "Love yourself before everyone else, for everything in the world is based on self-interest. If you love only yourself, you'll transact your business as it ought to be transacted, and your coat will remain whole. (167)

In situations in which sharing is impossible and the only choice is between the whole and

nothing at all, human selfishness is exposed. In this passage Luzhin refers to “science” as the justification for self-interest. Darwinism as an element of scientific thought influenced both *Huckleberry Finn* and *Crime and Punishment*. Raskolnikov, hearing Luzhin’s argument, makes this comment: “Well, if the principles you’ve just been advocating are pushed to their logical conclusion, you’ll soon be justifying murder” (170).

Another example of the trope of the indivisible whole is Ambrose Bierce’s ship in the definition of “friendship” in *Devil’s Dictionary* (1911). It also presents the unique condition where equal division is impossible: “A ship big enough to carry two in fair weather, but only one in foul” (58). Bierce’s use of the trope as a small ship exposes human selfishness in their severe struggle for survival.

<sup>4</sup> Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter*, 9, 10.

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