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Gender Complexities and Constriction in Dawson's Landing

Today, the online Oxford Dictionary defines gender as "either of the two sexes" ("Definition of Gender in English"), adding that it is either "male" or "female" ("Definition of Gender in English"). Societies across the world have long insisted that gender is strictly binary despite the myriad of examples—both in literature and in the real world—proving otherwise. Whether people purposefully ignore these examples of the distortion of the gender-separating line or never notice them in the first place is representative of the world's resistance to ideological change; since there are no immediately-perceivable benefits to recognizing more than two genders, people limited their understanding of gender to the most basic form, which consequently limited them. Therefore, an authority figure must demonstrate that it is in the society's interest to expand their understanding of gender in order to galvanize that ideological change. In his novella *Pudd'nhead Wilson*, Mark Twain recognizes that more than merely two genders exist, and by contrasting traditional characters with the non-conforming Tom and unfolding scenes of deception and drama before his audience, he provides his readers with concise reasons to notice and embrace the idea that gender is non-binary; if people will not change their opinions for others' sake, they will certainly change them for their own well-being. Twain discloses the porousness of gender boundaries and portrays gender as a performance to posit that gender fluidity allows for the manipulation of social norms as well as the evolution

away from traditional gender roles. Through these revelations, Twain indicates the inadequacy of gender's binary classification and questions the worth of masculinity itself.

Tom's passing as a woman creates a deception that emphasizes the ease with which gender's fluid nature can deceive society and distort gender preconceptions, hinting that two genders are not encompassing. Twain convinces his audience that—for its own well-being—it needs to recognize the existence of passing and new gender variations that could arise from the passing. Without having been previously acquainted with Tom's tendency to pass, the audience takes Twain's every word literally as he claims that in Tom's bedroom there "was a young woman" (Twain 36) and that "she was very much involved in her work" (36). The reader is wholly convinced that the unknown figure is a girl, and with good reason; at the moment, "she" (36) is literally female. Yet, there is no utilization of the pronoun 'she' the next time the girl—or Tom—appears. Twain asserts that "Pudd'nhead had caught a glimpse of him" (54) dressed as a girl in his room. The stark contrast in the usage of the pronouns 'she' and 'him' portrays Tom as someone who adeptly crosses back and forth between genders, and the ease with which he does so serves as a message to the audience that passing has the ability to disrupt the inner-workings of traditional society and enable those who pass to accomplish what was once impossible. Twain's message is not so much a warning as it is a suggestion for his audience to expand their minds; a person is no longer either a 'man' or a 'woman.' If he or she wants to be a man, he will be a man for as he long as he wants, and vice versa. Blake reinforces this concept with his assertion that the thief is "'a woman,'" (77), a phrase that suggests the completeness with which Tom has become a girl. During Tom's thieving adventures, being a man "[has] become irrelevant" (Halberstam 3), and he is willing to temporarily transform himself wholly into a woman in order to achieve his aims. The completeness with which Tom passes is reinforced in

his assessment of Wilson's odds at convicting the murderer. Tom jokes about the "'woman who doesn't exist any longer'" (Twain 124), indicating that the woman was—at one point—thoroughly real. At a point in time, Tom's existence as a man momentarily terminated, and he reassumed his gender with the simple act of changing outfits. Twain advises his audience that—as always—times are changing, and the traditionally rigid, impenetrable gender boundaries that have existed for centuries are changing as well, transforming into porous sponges through which men and women can pass back and forth they please. This societal change, Twain posits, has massive repercussions for how genders are traditionally preconceived. Women have long played the role of 'nurturers' in society; they have always been regarded as less violent, less physical, and more law-abiding than men. When society-wide gender passing occurs, however, the implications for how each gender is perceived are enormous. Whereas Southern men were traditionally expected to treat women with as much gentleness and courtesy as they could muster, Blake assumes a hostile tone as he declares that he's "'going to get her—she can make herself sure of that'" (Twain 77). Blake's attitude towards catching the woman seems akin to that of catching a dangerous, violent man. He shows no reservation, and for the time period this is wholly unusual. To Wilson, although he may not have previously considered women as potential murderers, the stereotype that women are gentle is suddenly put into question; "there wasn't any girl that would want to take this old man's life for revenge" (118)—or was there? Twain hints that the actions of men passing as women—and vice versa—may create profound, everlasting changes in gender dynamics and may permanently change how genders are perceived. Therefore, it is to the audience's benefit that it has been made aware of gender passing and its many implications so that it may identify and understand gender passing's substantial impact on society. Twain's portrayal of passing also has another ramification: It is impossible to categorize

everyone into binary genders. If Tom was truly a woman at one point and is now a man, it is logical to classify him neither as a man nor a woman, as he switches between the two to achieve his aims. Instead, society must recognize the "productive nature of gender variance" (Halberstam 2) and "[detach] gender from the sexed body" (2), accepting the idea that it may be more advantageous to expand the genders and grant people the opportunity to identify themselves in genders that may be a better fit.

Twain compares Tom's behavior with that of his fellows to emphasize gender's performative nature and the idea that it is inherently not comprehensive. Upon noticing that Wilson is watching her, Tom "[entertains] Wilson with some airs and graces and attitudes for a while" (Twain 54). Having the appearance of a girl, Twain suggests, is not enough to make one a girl; to say otherwise would be akin to believing that a mannequin outfitted in garments is a human being. Instead, Twain advises his audience that changes between genders are completely possible and that mannerisms are the catalysts that transform people from one gender to another; performing the gender is the only way to fully realize it. When Tom and Wilson are discussing this enigmatic girl later on, Tom pretends to be "struck, and also much interested" (120) in her, which acts as yet another performance—this time, however, Tom performs a variation of masculinity to preserve his safety and evade suspicion. He plays the part of a self-interested man oblivious to all the goings-on in Dawson's Landing, and he feigns interest in crime and justice as do the other men. Tom's "graceful gestural vocabularies, both in disguise and out" (McMillan 69) become the "performance art" (69) that allows him to successfully pass as one gender or the other. Twain's demonstration that gender is performative opens up new ways of thought concerning how "the transgendered body is (and can be) inhabited" (Halberstam 1); Tom's body is inhabited by both a man and a woman, and neither can appear unless Tom passes. After

assuming both identities, he no longer has a default masculine identity on which to fall back because he is no longer just a man. Tom has lost his identity and has become akin to a "'canvas,' light sensitive 'frame' or 'screen'" (McMillan 75) on which he must project his appearance. Through Tom's performances of gender, Twain informs his audience that everyone's image—whether it is of a man or a woman—is entirely self-fabricated. And if masculinity and femininity is a performance, he hints, then it must be possible to fabricate new genders, or—at the very least—combinations of genders. This is further proven through the comparison Twain draws between Tom and the other prominent male figures. Judge Driscoll's insistence that Tom must duel with Luigi is met with an outburst of "'I'm afraid of him!'" (Twain 72), reinforcing the idea that Tom is no longer a man—he must perform masculinity just as he must perform femininity, and he has forgotten to perform as the manly figure that will ultimately secure Judge Driscoll's will. In contrast to Tom's meekness, the Judge calls him "'cur!'" (71) and "'vermin!'" (71) in a show of masculine domination. Whereas Tom has completely forgotten to perform masculinity, the Judge automatically performs it. Over time, society has subtly taught Judge Driscoll how to perform as the 'ideal' man, and Judge Driscoll—due to his indoctrination—conjectures that staging a performance as an honor-driven gentleman is the only way that he can preserve his status in society. The reader infers that Judge Driscoll has most likely never passed as a woman, and therefore he has retained a strong foundational identity of masculinity on which he can fall back in times of crisis. The twins are also quick to prove their masculinity as they agree to the duel, but Twain once more suggests gender's performative nature. During the duel, Luigi starts "'jist a-cussin' soft'" (85) after being hit, attempting to hide his pain and 'man up' by suppressing cries of pain and replacing them with whispers of suffering instead. He tries to perform the 'highest form of masculinity'—one in which there is no room for negotiation or

surrender, pain or admittance of weakness. Through Judge Driscoll and the twins, Twain emphasizes the irony of masculinity; no one wants to fight a duel, and if a man determines that he must do so in order to prove his manhood, he will conceal his fear and pain by performing the same masculinity that situated him in the mess in the first place. Tom, on the other hand, identifies the moments during which his performance of masculinity is "irrelevant" (Halberstam 3) and no longer serves his aims. He then forsakes it completely. Judge Driscoll and the twins, Twain suggests to his readers, always believe that maintaining an affront of masculinity at all times will never fail them—but it does. He illustrates masculinity's failings so that his audience have no other choice but to admit that passing is advantageous and is here to stay. To identify as a new gender—or a mixture of pre-established genders—is to gain access to opportunities that were once completely unavailable.

The unorthodox gender passing and the performances of masculinity and femininity in Dawson's Landing disrupt the balance of traditional gender roles and prompt the reader to question the worth of rigid gender boundaries. At the same time, Twain asks his audience to consider the unnecessary limitations the binary gender system imposes on society, and he puts masculinity's worth up to debate as he discloses passing's advantages. Before Twain, many people had never before concerned themselves with such issues. *Pudd'nhead Wilson*, however, portrays questions of gender, performance, and masculinity in such a way that makes it applicable to everyone not just within the United States, but around the entire world. As Wilson wrote in his calendar, "if you pick up a starving dog and make him prosperous, he will not bite you. This is the principal difference between a dog and a man" (96); humans everywhere have always been greedy and self-centered, and they'll do anything to advance their interests. Just as people around the world are recognizing how supporting LGBTQ communities can both benefit

the world and themselves, Twain's audiences comprehended that understanding and identifying examples of gender passing, performances of masculinity, and the limitations of the binary gender system would help them in the real world, either by prompting them to enact liberating change or granting them the ability to sympathize with those who pass. Yet above all, it can be inferred that Twain's hope is that his audience employs this knowledge to accept those who pass between genders, to understand the hardships they face—whether it is due to a loss of identity or a social stigma received—and to help them feel welcome in a bigoted world that often does not deserve their presence.

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