

# The Misunderstood Conclusion of Mark Twain's *Pudd'nhead Wilson*

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Since its publication in 1894, Mark Twain's last American novel has experienced a reception consisting of both admiration and disdain, a strange reception that continues unabated to this day. Mark Twain himself seemed assured of the future of *The Tragedy of Pudd'nhead Wilson* in the popular market, and hoped that the sales might significantly help his strained finances and even pull him out of bankruptcy. Yet sales were weak, and criticism was either very strong or silent. William Dean Howells never wrote about this novel, even though he wrote extensively about Mark Twain, his books, and about Twain's literary views and his political and even his personal relationship with blacks. One contemporary critic immediately jumped on a problem of the switched babies in the novel, namely that Mark Twain is forced to condemn the example of the black race which he seems to want to promote. Yet the switched 'Tom' who is so light in pigmentation that he easily passes for white, and has been switched by his enslaved mother, is presented in the novel as a thief, a coward, a heavy drinker, gambler and murderer, in short, the opprobrium of the race (Williams 1894: 3). *The Tragedy of Pudd'nhead Wilson* has never been placed high in the canon among the works of Mark Twain, and neither have the Czechs regarded it differently for that matter, since no Czech scholar has ever treated this novel in any critical essay that I could find, and *Pudd'nhead Wilson* has never been translated into Czech (Arbeit 2000). In the most recent university-level survey of American literary history published in Prague, this novel is never mentioned at all (Procházka et al. 2002).

In the United States, the novel has been condemned for poorly planned 'eruptions [which] mar the texture [...] and testify to a loss of inspiration' (Morris 1964: xii) and making 'extended use of stock melodramatic situations and stereotypes' (Brodwin 1993: 598) by some detractors. In the mid-1980s Hershel Parker made careful evaluations of the manuscript and denounced the novel as 'gaudy' and flawed with 'unreconciled contradictions' (Parker 1978: 109). Yet it has been praised to the skies by Leslie Fiedler as, for example, superior to *Huckleberry Finn* because it is 'morally [...] one of the most honest books in our literature' (Fiedler 1980 [1955]: 53) and designated 'the masterly work of a great writer [...] an unrecognized classic', by one of the leading British critics (Leavis 1955: 9), and 'one of Mark Twain's greatest accomplishments [...] which faces up to the dilemma of American politics most squarely' (Regan 1966: 209) by a current scholar in 19<sup>th</sup> century American literature.

Some critics have appeared to respond to this novel according to the times and manners in which America confronts (or fails to confront) the problem of race. In the 1960s Langston Hughes wrote in his 'Introduction' to the Bantam Classics edition that 'it is this treatment of race that makes *Pudd'nhead Wilson* as contemporary as Little Rock, and Mark Twain as modern as Faulkner [...]' (Hughes 1959: xii). In short, the criticism and the tale provide, especially in relation to what Clemens said (and continues to say), exceptionally intimate materials for the study of American cultural history. What is the cause of this history

of contradictory reception and, on the whole, the failure of *Pudd'nhead Wilson* to be included in the canon? What caused this exciting little detective novel to be by and large ignored and remain what F. R. Leavis termed 'an unrecognized classic'?

There are, to be sure, legitimate flaws to contend with, and critics always had a bone to pick with Mark Twain about structure, unity and character development in many of his longer works. Certainly, none of the multifaceted ammunition Twain offers these critics helps lift the status of the novel into the canon. Characters often appear and behave implausibly, as for example the Yankee lawyer settling in a small southern town even after the local population regards him with disdain. Why does David Wilson stay in Dawson's Landing? (Mark Twain's autobiography indicates that Wilson's professional failure in law may reflect his father, John Marshall Clemens, and his unsuccessful effort in law.)

Another problem is Roxy, the light-skinned enslaved mother of a baby white boy only 1/32 parts African, who is by law also a slave. There are contradictions in the description of her appearance as the novel proceeds. Roxy's appearance at the age of 45 changes implausibly and quite suddenly. When Roxy is 35 years old she is manumitted and she consequently leaves Dawson's Landing and works on a steamboat for eight years; when she returns to Dawson's Landing at the age of 43, she has rheumatism, 'she was a pauper, and homeless. Also disabled bodily [...]' (Twain 1986 [1894]: 101). Yet, when she is later sold down the river into slavery by her own son, her appearance is so attractive to cause the plantation's Yankee mistress to be jealous. This inconsistency in Roxy's appearance bothers some critics who point to it as one of a number of examples of Twain's careless writing and editing.

The appearance of the noble, identical Italian twins also raises a few eyebrows. Of all places, why do these noble Italians go to Dawson's Landing for sightseeing in the United States? It is another implausibility. In Chapter Five the twins are described as 'exact duplicates', but then Angelo is identified as 'blonde' in Chapter 11 and Luigi as 'brown' in Chapter 14. During the fingerprinting, it is remarked that identical twins will have the same fingerprints. It remains uncertain if they are really supposed to be identical twins. In fact, Twain sometimes describes the twins as they appear in another work, namely the simultaneously published *The Comedy of Those Extraordinary Twins*. In *Pudd'nhead Wilson* they are described as 'dime-museum freaks' as if they were Siamese twins popular circus attractions because in that comedy these Italians are adjoined Siamese twins (Twain 1986 [1894]: 178). Mark Twain saw another story take over his original comical plot and, as a reader of Twain's 'A Whisper to the Reader' will notice, kept a part of the twins story in his *Pudd'nhead Wilson* plot. Combine Twain's sloppy editing practice with other structural and plot difficulties, and the flaws certainly detract from making this work as significant as it could be.

Yet more issues are involved that might have made this novel an even more compelling text than it already is. The plot turns and twists rapidly enough with Roxy's contemplated mercy killing and suicide, baby slave and heir switching, cross-dressing, stealing, gambling, near-drowning, knife attacks, passing, honor lost and regained through dueling, the mother-selling down the river, murder, trial, and finger print evidence. However, the more compelling text was eliminated through self-censorship. Throughout most of his mature fiction writing career, Mark Twain allowed his wife, Olivia Clemens, a "genteel" northerner and daughter of a judge, to read, edit and delete extensive passages from the manuscripts of his novels and texts. Verified by a number of sources including Mark Twain's daughter, Olivia edited the manuscripts for the sake of "civilizing" the texts of profanities, but she also took much of the gist out of it as well, at times at least. For example, she pulled out an incident in the manuscript of *Pudd'nhead Wilson* when Percy Driscoll sells a slave to finance a trip down south, because Sam Clemens's father made this same horrible transaction

with a slave named Charley. Keeping this incident in the novel would be disrespectful to the memory of Judge John Marshall Clemens, it was reasoned (Toles 1982: 56).

Certainly the most upsetting aspect that Mrs Clemens appeared to have taken issue with was Mark Twain's original plan to have the brothers, Percy and Judge York Driscoll as fathers for both Tom and Chambers. Judge Driscoll, whose wife could bear no children, would thus have caused his brother's attractive 20-year-old house slave, who was just 1/16 African and substantially more white than black in pigmentation, to be pregnant, simultaneously as Percy's wife conceives a child. Olivia who, like Samuel Clemens, had a father who was a judge deemed this scandalous part of the plot too repugnant. It was particularly unacceptable when the Virginia aristocrat otherwise maintains an appearance of honorable distinction in the community. Mark Twain penned this change of fatherhood in the plot quite primitively. Indeed, no close reading is necessary to easily detect the adjustment. In Chapter One, one sentence was inserted by Mark Twain to provide the slave baby Chambers with a different (but otherwise mighty similar) father. Here is the sentence/paragraph, quoted in full: 'Then there was Colonel Cecil Burleigh Essex, another F.F.V. of formidable caliber—however, with him we have no concern' (Twain 1986 [1894]: 58). His presence in the plot of this novel reappears only with his death when his funeral takes place at the same time as Roxy's master's funeral and two more scant references to him as the father.

If we consider Mark Twain's original intent of the two blue-eyed babies, one a slave, the other the heir to the plantation, then we need to reconsider their identity. When they are switched, the white baby Tom becomes a slave, and the 1/32 black, 31/32 white baby, Chambers, becomes the new heir in the family, and is called 'Tom'. At first only their cribs and clothes mark their identities, but they quickly acquire distinct features. Though substantial pampering for 'Tom' and harsh discipline for 'Chambers', the children learn to play their slave and master roles at a very early age, and their identities become learned. 'Chambers', who is described as all white, becomes the slave in attitude, language, and habit. Chambers plays the traditional role of a slave and the new Tom takes his imagined place and race, which comprise clothes, language, posture, and other innumerable aspects of conduct.

The switched boys grow up in a master-servant relationship to one another and their names are designated by Mark Twain to match their switched, new, and false roles. The white slave, 'Chambers', is described as 'strong beyond his years and a good fighter; strong because he was coarsely fed and hard worked' (Twain 1986 [1894]: 78). The heir apparent, 'Tom', orders Chambers to fight with white boys who tease him; Tom grows to be scared and cowardly. When Chambers saves Tom from drowning, his reward is three stabs from Tom's pocket knife after Tom's white friends joke that Chambers is Tom's 'nigger-pappy,—to signify that he had had a second birth into this life, and that Chambers was the author of his new being' (Twain 1986 [1894]: 80). This white slave thus acquires those ostensible attributes of blacks embraced by white society of the time—Chambers is physically superior to his "Negro" master, Tom, he has a meek disposition toward whites, and he speaks 'the basest dialect of the negro quarter. His gait, his attitudes, his gestures, his bearing, his laugh—all were vulgar and uncouth [...]' (Twain 1986 [1894]: 225). The environment and slave conditions create the "African-American" differences which the nineteenth-century social order regarded as "racial traits", traits which the "real white", now named Chambers, possesses.

Up to now, we have followed Mark Twain in his published version of *Pudd'nhead Wilson*. However, now we need to take up his original conception of the two brothers as fathers for both the children who were born on the same day, instead of unrelated fathers who died on the same day. As Lawrence Howe revealed, Mark Twain had planned the 'miscegenate relationship of master/father to slave/son [...] for Judge Driscoll and Tom in an early draft' (Howe 1992: 500). Had Judge York Driscoll (instead of Colonel Cecil Burleigh

Essex) remained the slave's father in the novel, this situation would have made the passer and the white slave first cousins, adding not only a new dimension to the children's rivalry but resulting in one cousin eventually becoming the "owner" of the other.

At first sight this "white slave" related to the slave master may appear to be a senseless ploy on the part of Mark Twain, just another of his tall tales. Yet the contrary is true. Many autobiographies by prominent African-American writers, for example, attest to this appalling sort of interracial background during slavery as a part of their common racial heritage. In most slave narratives, accounts of "miscegenation", including the pioneering slave narrative by Frederick Douglass, pointed either to the plantation overseer or the slave-master as the fathers of infants of mixed racial heritage (Douglass 1982 [1845]: 48ff). Zora Neale Hurston and Malcolm X both had white grandfathers. Richard Wright's very light-skinned grandmother is described as 'the illegitimate child of a union between a white man of Irish-Scottish ancestry' and a slave woman (Gayle 1980: 3-4). Chester Himes illustrates the plausibility of Mark Twain's original concept for switched half-cousins. In his autobiography, *The Quality of Hurt*, Himes describes a photograph he possessed of his blond-bearded grandfather as slave property of his half-brother, who served as a confederate soldier in the Civil War (Himes 1972: 4ff).

In numerous speeches, Malcolm X made interracial sexual attacks and rape of black women a crying point for this largely ignored or forgotten racial degradation experienced by enslaved black women. After describing his mother's humiliation at being the product of rape, he implores his black audience to recall these crimes of the past.

During slavery, *think* of it, it was a rare one of our black grandmothers, our great-grandmothers and our great-great-grandmothers who escaped the white rapist slavemaster [...] think of that black slave man filled with fear and dread, hearing the screams of his wife, his mother, his daughter being *taken*—in the barn, the kitchen, in the bushes! (El-Shabazz 1980 [1964]: 300)

The hostility Malcolm X expresses against this multi-racial genealogy differs markedly from Mark Twain's Roxana, whose pride is shown in her claims to noble background from many races. Twain's portrait of a slave's pride in the blue-blooded background of the "master-race" has a remarkable force of irony that has not faded over the many generations of readers.

Some critics argue that the distance Mark Twain maintains in his narrative on the theme of miscegenation is upsetting. Fiedler writes that 'Twain himself refuses to be incensed about [Roxana's] seduction by a white man' (Fiedler 1966: 248). This lax attitude is reflected not only in this novel, but also in Mark Twain's *Autobiography* where he giddily reminisces of the sexual enjoyment his Hannibal friend, Wales McCormick, had with a beautiful young mulatto slave where 'by the customs of slaveholding communities it was Wales's right to make love to that girl if he wanted to'. Then he admits: 'But the girl's distress was very real' (Twain 1975 [1959]: 96). Fiedler views Roxana's situation as Twain's detached realism, as fact of life in the South where 'casually or callously Negro girls are taken in the parody of love, which is all that is possible when one partner to a sexual union is not even given the status of a person' (Fiedler 1966: 406). Wright Morris fails to see either this awful fact of life of the Southern slave society or Twain's detachment when he writes of Twain's silence: 'That a respectable white man would love a black woman Twain implies is unthinkable' (Morris 1964: xiv).

It remains debatable whether Twain originally intended Tom to learn (in advance of the murder) of his father's identity from his mother Roxy. In the original plan for Mark Twain's novel, would Tom murder his father with the knowledge that the well-bred Judge is

his real father? In the published version, Roxy caricatures the genealogical fixation of the Virginia democrats in a famous rebuke against Tom in the following lines:

Whatever has become o' yo' Essex blood? Dat's what I can't understan'. En it ain't ony jist Essex blood dat's in you, not by a long sight—deed it ain't. My great-great-great-granfather en yo' great-great-great-great-granfather was Ole Cap'n John Smith, de highest blood dat Ole Virginny ever turned out, en his great-great-granmother or somers along back dah, was Pocahontas de Injun Queen, en her husban' was a nigger King outen Africa—en yit here you is, a-slinkin' outen a duel en disgracin' our whole line like a ornery low-down hound! Yes, it's de nigger in you! (Twain 1986 [1894]: 157-8)

Whether Roxy would still be proud of the judge's blue blood as she exclaims in the famous 'it's the nigger in you' quote is pertinent to the question of intentional patricide. In the novel, intentional patricide could have made for a far more effective "black rage" revenge than Roxy's mere baby-switching. In this scenario this more commanding sense of justice in Twain's original manuscript would juxtapose the aristocratic code of honor justifying slavery. But it is unclear how Twain might have presented Roxy's secret to Tom if Twain had persisted with Judge Driscoll as the father of the switched slave, and kept the judge as the murder victim.

If we consider Mark Twain's original conception for this novel more closely, then the ideas of identity and race which have been the focus of criticism of *Pudd'nhead Wilson* are widened and extended to include biographical sources for this patricide. Sam Clemens's father, John Marshall Clemens, died defeated in business when Samuel was quite similar in age as Tom and Chambers when their fathers die in the novel (both die on the same day). Like Tom in *Pudd'nhead Wilson*, the wealthier uncle of Sam Clemens, John Quarles, played a large role, a bit like the role of step-father (but unlike the childless, Judge Driscoll, John Quarles had eight children). The uncle, who lived near Sam's birthplace of Florida, Missouri, "possessed" approximately 30 slaves on his 230-acre plantation, and the younger of these slaves were Sam's summer playmates as a young boy.

If we interpret this novel from the perspective of Mark Twain's original text, it unmistakably points to a more compelling indictment against slavery than we see in the version available since 1894. The sexual abuse (in the form of seduction) by the brother of Roxy's owner gives a new dimension to motivation of Tom's crime. Tom's murder of Judge Driscoll is foreshadowed by the victim of this abuse, Roxana, who is full of pride that Tom manages to assume a position within the community's aristocracy. She experiences gratification from this development, 'for this was her son, her nigger son [...] securely avenging their crimes against her race' (Twain 1986 [1894]: 82). Through this and other examples of mistreatment of slaves in the plantation, Mark Twain justifies the oedipal murder Tom commits against his father. This patricidal murder, if intended, was a revenge for the seduction of his slave mother, an especially plausible thesis given Mark Twain's original intent.

Tom likewise talks directly of patricide in the novel. When he hears his mother's indignation at his failure to fight in a duel of honor, he hears his father's name mentioned as a basis of bravery and pride in his white blood. Roxana claims Tom's deceased father would be ashamed of him. Tom 'said to himself that if his father were only alive and in reach of assassination his mother would soon find that he had a very clear notion of the size of his indebtedness to that man, and was willing to pay it up in full, and would do it too, even at risk of his life' (Twain 1986 [1894]: 157). In actual fact this murder is also patrimonial, for the frequently paraded F.F.V. ('First Families of Virginia') members were indisputable killers of

the red and black races themselves, and in murdering the judge, this mulatto ends the life of the exalted, mendacious incarnation of the slave law of the land and his family line.

As the son and nephew of slave owners, Mark Twain constantly struggled with his own racial prejudices throughout his life. When he looked back on his childhood in the autobiography he never published, he admitted that as a boy he had no distaste toward slavery. He explained almost apologetically,

I was not aware that there was anything wrong about it. No one arraigned it in my hearing; the local papers said nothing against it. The local pulpit taught us that God approved it, that it was a holy thing, and the doubter need only look to the Bible to settle his mind [...] and then the texts were read aloud to us to make the matter sure (Twain 1975 [1959]: 7).

He mentions befriending some of the slave children owned by his uncle, John Quarles: ‘All the Negroes were friends of ours and with those of our own age we were in effect comrades: color and condition interposed a subtle line which both parties were conscious of and which rendered complete fusion impossible’ (Twain 1975 [1959]: 6). Twain notes that these experiences in his childhood helped him to appreciate the fine qualities of the African race and certainly enabled him to depict the life of blacks realistically. He insists in a number of situations that the slaves of his family and of Hannibal in general were “content”.

Yet, one of Mark Twain’s most heartrending memories described in his autobiography was of the sad faces—‘the saddest faces I have ever seen’ (Twain 1975 [1959]: 33)—of a dozen African-American men and women, chained together on the Hannibal wharf, awaiting shipment to southern slave markets, “down the river”. The older author confronted other cruel memories from his youth in his autobiography as well. As a young man he witnessed a Hannibal slave being killed when his master hurled a lump of iron-ore at his head.

There appears to be a model for Roxana in Samuel Clemens’s youth. The slave who took care of young Sam when he was sick and who was later sold down the river by his father was named Jennie. He records watching the flogging of Jennie, who his father had inherited from his father-in-law’s estate. Jennie had been part of the Clemens’s household since before his birth. Mark Twain wrote of her in his memoirs that Jennie ‘was seen later, a [chambermaid] on a steamboat’ (Powers 2001 [1999]: 122).

As a teenager Clemens journeyed east in the 1850s. His letters home plainly expressed the bigotry he felt in his youth. He deplored the liberties blacks enjoyed in the North which were entirely unknown in Hannibal. He resented having to walk among crowded New York sidewalks with ‘negroes, mulattoes, quadroons and other trash’. In another letter to his older brother, he wrote, ‘I would like amazingly to see a good old-fashioned negro’ (cited in Foner 1958: 253). In the 1870s Twain recalled the overtly racist notions he held two decades earlier and judged that ‘ignorance, intolerance, egoism, self-assertion, opaque perception, dense & pitiful chuckle-headedness—and an almost pathetic unconsciousness of it all’ were his qualities at twenty which the average Southerners still held who were ‘60 [years old] today’ (cited in Howe 1992: 500).

Lawrence Howe spotlights Twain’s unfinished description of his mother in ‘Jane Lampton Clemens’, composed in 1890 but only published in 1989. Here Howe points out that Twain wrote of ‘her tender affection for animals and her unquestioning acceptance of slavery in such close proximity that his interjected repudiation of slavery [...] seems mitigated by his insistence that the slaves of his community and household were “content”’ (Howe 1992: 498). Howe may have strengthened his point by contrasting this passage with Twain’s portrayal in *Pudd’nhead Wilson* of Roxana’s slave-master: ‘He was a fairly humane man toward slaves and other animals’ (Twain 1986 [1894]: 66). Evidently, Twain’s complex past in reference to

blacks and slavery consists of multiple factors and for this reason Howe proclaims that the novel's 'depiction of race reflects Twain's own prejudices' (Howe 1992: 495).

Yet, in giving his novel's title to the cynical, free-thinking lawyer, Mark Twain does something that has been overlooked in the criticism about this novel. Why is the original novel entitled *The Tragedy of Pudd'nhead Wilson*? Wright Morris expressed thorough dissatisfaction with this title, going so far as to advocate the title 'Down the River' as the more suggestive and accurate title (Morris 1964: xi). Yet Morris and a few others sharing this criticism miss Mark Twain's point entirely, which points to the tragedy of the white man and, in contrast to *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, relates the white man's incapacity to change himself or act as a positive agent in southern racist society. According to most biographers, Samuel Clemens had an overwhelming guilt complex. It encompassed many issues, but for most of his adult life it included slavery. As Twain grew older, he recognized his own responsibility for slavery. When William Dean Howells came to know Clemens in the 1870s, Howells noted a "desouthernized" characteristic:

No man more perfectly sensed and more entirely abhorred slavery, and no one has ever poured such scorn upon the [...] pseudo-chivalry of the Southern ideal. He held himself responsible for the wrong which the white race had done the black race in slavery, and he explained, in paying the way of a Negro student through Yale, that he was doing it as his part of the reparation due from every white to every black man. (Howells 1950 [1910]: 903)

The tragedy of Wilson was his support, at the trial, of the prejudices of the southern racist society. The man who made a career in southern politics, the cynical free-thinker capable of finding the murderer of Judge Driscoll through fingerprinting, was also capable, as we can see in his calendars, of critical and disparaging judgments about the society he lived in. These aphorisms accompanying the months approach, to a great extent, the level of an intellectual. Yet in court, David Wilson also identifies Tom as a passer, or as he called him, 'a nigger'.

The ultimate tragedy for Wilson is something Clemens shared with his tragic hero. When Roxy fell to the floor and begged forgiveness, Wilson might well have said: 'No, get up Roxy. You should not ask for forgiveness. We put you into the position of either switching the babies or watching your child be sold down the river. Get up off the floor.' Of course, Wilson made no such intimation. Discovering the switched children gets Wilson unprecedented popularity and a secured political future as mayor of Dawson's Landing. Like Wilson, Clemens never condemned slavery when it surrounded him. He offered some excuses why he failed to act, rather flimsy excuses at that, at an old age, in his *Autobiography*. Yet he had the example of his brother Orion Clemens, an abolitionist who supported Lincoln. For whatever reason, Samuel Clemens was not as strong-minded during the era of slavery, nor was David Wilson, and that constitutes their common tragedy.

This novel, today rarely cited by Twain's original title, *The Tragedy of Pudd'nhead Wilson*, might have been better received, particularly today, but for the widely-acknowledged structure and character flaws, a result of Twain's notoriously sloppy editing. Had Twain's original intent come through stronger, not only about the identity of the father of Roxy's child thus revealing patricide—which was censored—but equally his notion of Wilson as the core of the novel's tragedy about the southern slave society, this novel would more likely have had a central position within the canon. Wilson's role as tragic hero, as the author of the often-cynical calendar, remained muddled through the melodramatic court scene and other implausible distractions in the plot. Additionally, Roxy's highly developed character and the

ultimate fate of her and her son is more compelling than Wilson's eventual "victory", a victory largely reflecting Mark Twain's own life success as well.

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