

# New historic criticism of pudd'nhead wilson

Literature



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The striking lack of agreement about the merits of Mark Twain's *Pudd'nhead Wilson*, is undoubtedly related to the equally striking disagreements over the interpretations and analysis of the novel. In a crucial sense, related to all the thematic analysis presented so far, leave important aspects of the novel unaccounted for. As a result, those who are inclined to praise the novel dismiss certain parts as finally inconsequential evidence of Twain's predictably careless technique. On the other hand those who have serious reservations about its merits stress its lack of coherence, lack of an action suitable to embody what appear to be the author's chief concerns.

Although the interpretations vary widely, ranging from the view that its theme is the conflict between reality and appearance to the assertion that it has no clear meaning, two interpretative emphases are most common. First, there are critics who stress upon racial themes, especially slavery and miscegenation or marriages between different races. And second those who argue for the centrality of the theme of environmental determinism and see slavery as simply a metaphor for Twain's more general concern, with the influence of training of the individual. While both these approaches give valuable insight, both are unsatisfactory because they leave too many questions unanswered.

It was once considered that the integrity of imagination was violated by interpretation, considerations of race, class and sex have not entered into the most formalist readings. In *Pudd'nhead Wilson*, Twain presents a critique of slavery and race relations in the American South. He highlights the arbitrariness of racial distinctions and classifications by showing how easily Roxana, a slave is able to switch her own son with the offspring of her

master. The young usurper grows among the whites without suspicion, and Twain is able to demonstrate how artificial and constructed racial distinctions actually are.

The recently increased interest in Mark Twain's "Pudd'nhead Wilson" is a text that turns the misapprehension of gender and race in a mid-nineteenth century Southern town into a complicated spoof of the "fiction of law and customs" in the United States. Pudd'nhead Wilson depicting race and custom identity within legal and scientific discourses lends itself readily to the new kind of historic readings related to "Race, Conflict and Culture."

A white skinned man, robs and murders and he subsequently discovers, through the science of fingerprinting, that he is actually a descendent of African race and a slave. In his infancy, he was changed with his young master, Valet de Chamber or (Chambers), alias Tom Driscoll, seems almost to be tailor-made for the audience of 1990's. This book is considered as an intriguing depiction of complexities and constructions of race in the late nineteenth century United States.

Recent attention to racial issues, and renewed interest of literary criticism in history, has helped define the precise nature of cultural tragedy which is presented in the novel. The traditional plot of European comedy in which confusion over identity disrupts a hierarchical order that is restored when true identity is revealed, does not seem to work in democratic America, especially not when the confusion involves race. As in Pudd'nhead Wilson, Roxy tries to justify her act of cradle exchange of her son for her master's and reasons with herself, "white folks has done it." But her efforts as a

mother to have her son defy the fate allotted a slave in racist America, ends in futility.

The new historical criticism of the text certifies the different ways of reading narrative incoherence and different ways in formulating relationship between culture and literature. Some critics argue that Twain was unaware of Pudd'nhead Wilson's penetrating indictment of race slavery and that the discontinuities of the text mark a retreat to the illusion when none has occurred. While Myra Jehlen (1990) sees more ambivalence than outright evasion and manifests a familiar dilemma in Twain as a stalemate, between racial criticism and implicit conservatism. David Wilson stands in for the author, who recognizes competing rights that render incompatible social order and social justice.

Carolyn Porter (1990) sees similar ambivalence in Roxana's powerfully subversive, and David Wilson's repressive plots. She also argues that the novel does not resolve, but only plays out the tension between them. Some read a more deliberate authorial strategy into the text's disjunctions. Through David Wilson as a businessman, Twain meditates on the speculative postwar economy as an outgrowth rather than rejection of the slave economy. If the new historicism performs a textual reading of culture, they have not ceased to read the literary text as a special entity. When the critics analyze a fictional character or episode, there is no way the analysis can be proven wrong and all take satisfaction in being right. But whether Pudd'nhead Wilson is an extension, a reflection or a critique of cultural dynamics remains a matter of debate.

Roxana or Roxy in Pudd'nhead Wilson is cited as an exceptional woman, "her gestures and movements distinguished by a noble and stately grace," is the rarest of beings depicted in Twain's work, though the white women characters in his work tend to be static and stereotypical. She is a passionate and an attractive woman and according to Fishkin (1995) is cunning, physically possessing, enterprising and genuinely interesting and engaging. She is conceived by Twain as something other than matronly old ladies or prepubescent schoolgirls. Roxy is also more complex of the stereotypes which were most commonly used by white authors to portray women of her race and status.

David Wilson, "Pudd'nhead Wilson," is a character that gained its name from the book but many critics have ignore, denied, or belittled his significance to the story. The result is that Wilson role is considered that of a mere lever, or someone who moves the plot along but has no intrinsic importance. Though Wilson is referred to as an ass in the opening chapters, but like a donkey he has a number of admirable attributes. He is intelligent, courteous and diligent and it's only Roxy who describes his as "de smartes' man in dis town." His hobbies though they seem odd to the average towns person, demonstrate his sharp and meticulous mind.

Thomas a Beckett Driscoll (Tom) is the name given by Percy Driscoll to his child and after Roxy switches the babies, the slave usurper is referred to as "Tom." From the beginning, Tom turns out to be a bad boy and his bad behavior continues to grow with age and is described by Roxy as "fractious." He is cruel towards Chambers and rude towards Roxy's affection, viewing his mother as "merely a slave and chattel." Valet de Chambers,

(Roxy's son) on the other hand is raised as a slave and grows up to be docile and meek but a strong fighter and a good swimmer. Tom not only forces Chambers to be his bodyguard but is also cruel and jealous of the slave's natural physical abilities. But even upon discovering that he is the real Tom Driscoll and is rich and free, Chambers still feels uncomfortable in the company of whites because of his slave upbringing.

According to Jehlen (1990), Mark Twain while associating the black race with the female sex, represents racism in the unconventionally loathsome form of slavery. Roxana's status as a mulatta (feminine) is clearly crucial to Twain's story. Roxana as a mulatta most certainly exposes the covert tradition of miscegenation, but her serial ordeal as a mulatta mother intent on saving her son exposes much more (Porter, 1990). The ideologies of race and sex Mark Twain used in the novel Pudd'nhead Wilson were not controllable through literary form, because the writing posed problems that the history of racial and sexual thinking in America, impossible to resolve.

Percy Driscoll on having some money stolen threatens to sell the guilty servant "down the river" which shows that life for the slaves on large cotton plantations was far harsher than for the Missouri slaves. To be sold "down the river" was equivalent to be condemned to hell, with old slaves being sold away to be replaced by the new slaves. Dawson's Landing is a highly stratified hierarchical society and at the apex of this social order were the first descendants of Virginia, represented by Judge Driscoll down to the lowest rung of the social ladder-the slaves.

And so powerful is this social hierarchy, that those on the bottom were forbidden from eating or sitting with citizens of higher status. This

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segregation was visible in the layout of the town structure where the snug houses for the white population were situated up front while the portion for the slaves was hidden in the backcountry. Through constructing this social framework, Twain delivers a stinging critique of slavery and in the South of America. Pudd'nhead Wilson is unique to its time in portraying the slave characters as dishonest, lazy and at times dangerous. But in Roxy's views, slavery is a crime committed by the whites against her race.

## **Conclusion**

Critics seem intent on challenging the new directions in literary analysis and laying down the terms of debate as to what standard has the literary works been classified to up to this point and the terms by which we read literature and by analyzing the relationship of literature to the larger question by which we govern our lives. Today the problems of race and sex have become vastly complicated than when a literary work was thought to invent its own sufficient language.

The task of the critics then was to show how all parts worked together to reveal coherence. But today, with no available assurance no one can be certain that in a particular work the history is internally coherent or that the issues it treats finally hang together. Though not simple, but the task of literary criticism is to analyze works, not to dismantle them. In the light of these questions, Twain's Pudd'nhead Wilson contributes not only to Twain's single work, but also adds to the growing number of works both participating in and questioning new directions in the study of literature.