"Pudd'nhead Wilson", Ambiguity, and Enslavement by Language

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PUDD'NHEAD WILSON, AMBIGUITY, AND ENSLAVEMENT BY LANGUAGE

A Thesis

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The Faculty of the Department of English
The College of William and Mary in Virginia

In Partial Fulfillment
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Master of Arts

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APPROVAL SHEET

This thesis is submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

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Approved, April 1997

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I dedicate this thesis to

Dexter Lyman, Cynthia Lyman, James Lyman & Elizabeth Smith.
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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to examine Mark Twain's *Pudd'nhead Wilson*, in an effort to disprove the common misconception that the novel is damaged by its ambiguity.

I have called upon an essay by George Marcus, in which he acknowledges that *Pudd'nhead Wilson* is ambiguous, but declares it to be purposely so. Twain, according to Marcus, creates ambiguous characters because the realistic "self" is not simplistic, it is complex, and therefore ambiguous.

I agree that the novel is deliberately ambiguous, but I do not agree that the ambiguity should be attributed to the self. Complex characters revert to base characters, suggesting (in Marcus's opinion) a limitation in the novel. But in my opinion, characters revert because Twain is showing that man, while freely admitting that things are not neatly divisible (race, into "black" or "white"), refuses to live by his assertion. I propose that the novel's ambiguity speaks instead about the ambiguous nature of language.

I show that Twain's original title for the novel (*The Tragedy of Pudd'nhead Wilson*) proves that he sees David Wilson as tragically flawed (Wilson fails to discover why Roxy's deception has been so successful: because she and her son have been unfairly labeled "black," and therefore are slaves). I also show that the doubles in the novel can be separated into types: analogous doubles, which double a noun (two babies are born), and which causes little confusion as to the definition of that which is being doubled, and antonymous doubles, which double an adjective (two babies are born: one black, the other white), and which is responsible for all of the confusion found throughout the novel. Tragically, the adjective is not as specific as that which it is trying to describe (Tom is "black," though looks "white"), and what little specificity the adjective does describe (the term "mulatto" is acknowledged, but Tom and his mother are still labeled "black") is disregarded.
PUDD’NHEAD WILSON, AMBIGUITY,
AND ENSLAVEMENT BY LANGUAGE
It is my intention to examine Mark Twain’s *Pudd’nhead Wilson*, a novel that is often dismissed as being flawed in its ambiguity. I fully acknowledge that the novel is ambiguous, but I propose that it is purposely so. To focus primarily on what is being said about justice (as Forrest G. Robinson does, in “The Sense of Disorder in *Pudd’nhead Wilson*”\(^1\)) is to miss the point; the issue of justice in *Pudd’nhead Wilson* is inconclusive: the novel’s woeful courtroom finale suggests that somehow justice both has and has not been served. And to focus primarily on what is being said about racial injustice (as Eric J. Sundquist does, in “Mark Twain and Homer Plessy”\(^2\)) is to miss the point; the issue of racial injustice, too, is inconclusive: though Twain is frank in his contempt for the slaveholder, he also hints at contempt for the slave as well. No, to hope to gain insight into Twain’s stance on these issues is to be disappointed. But I would propose that *Pudd’nhead Wilson* will only disappoint if the reader fails to recognize that Twain is not primarily concerned with the specific, subjective issues that are most commonly associated with the novel. Rather, Twain merely uses these issues as tools by which to manipulate the reader. The reader, demanding authorial decisiveness, a too-simplistic, “either/or” stance
(either "guilty" or "innocent"); either "racially tolerant" or "racially intolerant"), is justifiably frustrated and disappointed when Twain equivocates, and is forced to declare the novel to be a quagmire of ambiguity. But the reader, mistaking sincerity for sarcasm, has failed to navigate successfully Twain's dizzying use of irony, and has been neatly manipulated into agreeing with what had been the author's assertion all along. *Pudd’nhead Wilson* is indeed ambiguous, but ambiguous because it is a novel about ambiguity—legal ambiguity, racial ambiguity, the ambiguity of any subjective category that can be manipulated through linguistic dexterity. Through the use of the novel's original title (not simply *Pudd’nhead Wilson*, but *The Tragedy of Pudd’nhead Wilson*), and through what is plainly the novel's primary key, the double, the novel can be seen not as an opportunity for the author to pontificate about the evils of slavery (after all, *Pudd’nhead Wilson* was published twenty-nine years after the Civil War had ended), but as an opportunity for the author to remind the reader of man's enslavement by vague, unstable language, language that inadequately attempts to describe distinctions that are infinitely more subtle and complex.
Mark Twain begins *Pudd’nhead Wilson*, in "A Whisper to the Reader," by confessing his ignorance of courtroom procedure, and, therefore, confessing his need to consult with a man to assure legal accuracy (though a man whose legal qualifications seem to be, at best, suspicious):

[The courtroom chapters] were rewritten under the immediate eye of William Hicks, who studied law part of a while in south-west Missouri thirty-five years ago and then came over here to Florence for his health and is still helping for exercise and board in Macaroni Vermicelli’s horse-feed shed... He was a little rusty on his law, but he rubbed up for this book, and those two or three legal chapters are right and straight, now. He told me so himself.º

And Twain begins "Those Extraordinary Twins" in a similarly self-deprecating manner:

A man who is not born with the novel-writing gift has a troublesome time of it when he tries to build a novel. I know this from experience. ... [The reader] has been told many a time how the born-and-trained novelist works. Won’t he let me round and complete his knowledge by telling him how the jack-leg does it? (Twain 229, 230)

While Twain’s comments can certainly be read as charmingly self-effacing, some have been prepared to take him at his word. James Cox, for instance, in "Pudd’nhead Wilson Revisited," called *Pudd’nhead Wilson* "a novel that neither we nor Mark Twain would wish to call a masterpiece."º Malcolm Bradbury, the editor of the 1969 Penguin edition of *Pudd’nhead Wilson*, admitted in his Introduction that
Pudd’nhead Wilson is not of course a perfect novel. It has many lacunae, and a good deal of material explicable only in terms of previous versions of the story. At times, Mark Twain is obvious or gauche. Often his humor releases the pressure of the book in just those places where it most needs it ...\textsuperscript{5}

John H. Schaar, in “Some of the Ways of Freedom in Pudd’nhead Wilson,” goes further and calls the humor in Pudd’nhead Wilson “tasteless at best, morally coarse at worst, and makes a sprawl of the book besides, as the jokes get stretched past the breaking point.”\textsuperscript{6} And most famous of all, Hershel Parker wrote that “entire scenes are all but meaningless,”\textsuperscript{7} and that “the published Pudd’nhead Wilson is ... patently unreadable” (Parker 136). What is one to think of the merits of a novel when its opponents proclaim it to be “tasteless” (Schaar 213) and “unreadable” (Parker 136), and even its proponents admit that it is “obvious [and] gauche” (Bradbury 45)?

That critics have found Pudd’nhead Wilson to be problematic, if not completely unacceptable, surely comes as no surprise. After all, what does the novel say about justice? The murder has been solved, the switched identities corrected, but despite Wilson’s diligence, Luigi and Angelo, though rightfully cleared of all charges, have been humiliated and find solace only by returning to Europe. And Roxy, who switched babies in order to save her son from a
life of slavery, a life in which being sold down river was a possibility (the “equivalent to condemning [one] to hell” (Twain 68)), is broken-spirited and finds solace only in her church. And Chambers, a decent, agreeable man, who is declared white, rich, and free, becomes, as a result, a social pariah unfit to associate with either master or slave. And finally, and perhaps most disturbing of all, Tom (a man raised as gentry, as well as a man who is a confessed murderer) is sentenced to life imprisonment, but, in order to satisfy the creditors, is pardoned, and is instead sold as a slave (a decision that manages to be disturbing both legally and racially).

And, what does Pudd’nhead Wilson say about racial injustice? Twain’s opinion of the plight of the slave seems clear when he tells us that Roxy’s offer to be sold back into slavery is “making a sacrifice ... compared with which death would have been a poor and commonplace one” (Twain 175). And yet many of Twain’s descriptions of slaves are (at least on first inspection) of the worst sort of racist caricature. For instance, when Roxy and others are accused of the theft of two dollars, but Judge Driscoll deems not to sell the culprits down river, they “[flying] themselves prone, in an ecstasy of gratitude, and kiss[] his feet,
declaring that they [will] never forget his goodness and never cease to pray for him as long as they live[]" (Twain 68). And later, after losing her life’s savings, Roxy visits Tom to “fawn upon him, slave-like,” (Twain 101) in the hope that he will take pity on her:

“My lan’, how you is growed, honey! ‘Clah to goodness, I wouldn’t a-knowned you, Marse Tom! ‘deed I wouldn’t! Look at me good; does you ‘member old Roxy? – does you know yo’ old nigger mammy, honey? Well now, I kin lay down en die in peace, ‘ca’se I’se seed —” (Twain 105)

And Twain even does his part, in his depiction of Jasper, to perpetuate the racist stereotype of the black man as shiftless and lazy:

Over in the vacant lots was Jasper, young, coal-black, and of magnificent build, sitting on a wheelbarrow in the pelting sun — at work, supposably, whereas he was in fact only preparing for it by taking an hour’s rest before beginning. (Twain 63)

As difficult as it is to read these descriptions, and as easy as it is to dismiss them as being the product of a blessedly by-gone era, it can be argued that all of these descriptions can be read as further proof of Twain’s antiracist beliefs. After all, adulation and supplication, though distasteful, is a form of power for the powerless. Judge Driscoll’s slaves recognize their lack of power, recognize in whom the power lies, and his weakness: vanity. They “[fling] themselves prone” (Twain 68), but not in a
sincere ecstasy of gratitude. Rather, they are participating in a ritual that results in the influence of their oppressor. So too with Roxy's visit to Tom. Though she fawns, "slave-like" (Twain 101), she does so, after her financial ruin, in an attempt to manipulate him, in the hope that "maybe he would give her a trifle now and then — maybe a dollar, once a month, say" (Twain 101). With this attitude in mind, even Twain's derogatory description of Jasper can be seen as an example of the slave winning a minor, passive-aggressive victory against his oppressor.

Fortunately, the suspicion of an unsavory racial attitude on the part of the author seems to be unfounded. And in fact, Twain explicitly states his feelings about the struggle for power between the races when he justifies incidents of petty theft by slaves against their masters:

> They had an unfair show in the battle of life, and they held it no sin to take military advantage of the enemy — in a small way; in a small way, but not in a large one. They would smouch provisions from the pantry whenever they got a chance; or a brass thimble, or a cake of wax, or an emery-bag, or a paper of needles, or a silver spoon, or a dollar bill, or small articles of clothing, or any other property of light value ...
> (Twain 67)

In this, Twain's stance seems irreproachable — but as stated, *Pudd'nhead Wilson* is an ambiguous novel, an exasperatingly ambiguous novel in which authorial
decisiveness is (seemingly) absent. Twain is not content to categorically define incidents of petty theft as minor acts of justice. Instead, he subtly insinuates that the thefts are at least partly motivated by petty corruption, and rationalized by hypocrisy. The above-quoted passage continues:

... and so far were they from considering such reprisals sinful, that they would go to church and shout and pray their loudest and sincerest with their plunder in their pockets. A farm smoke-house had to be heavily padlocked, for even the coloured deacon himself could not resist a ham when Providence showed him in a dream, or otherwise, where such a thing hung lonesome and longed for someone to love. But with a hundred hanging before him the deacon would not take two — that is, on the same night. On frosty nights the humane negro prowler would warm the end of a plank and put it up under the cold claws of chickens roosting in a tree; a drowsy hen would step on to the comfortable board, softly clucking her gratitude, and the prowler would dump her into his bag, and later into his stomach ... (Twain 67)

Twain has cunningly led the reader a distance from his initial assertion — a short distance, granted, but just enough of a distance to cause suspicion. Observe how Twain gradually escalates the value of the items, though never escalating them so much as to cause the reader to object (“a brass thimble, ... a silver spoon, ... a dollar bill [the amount that Roxy, when destitute, hoped Tom would give her once a month], ... a ham” (Twain 67)). Observe also how Twain subtly casts doubt, though never becoming so snide as
to cause the reader to object ("when Providence showed him in a dream, or otherwise" (Twain 67, emphasis mine); "the deacon would not take two — that is, on the same night" (Twain 67, emphasis mine); "the humane negro prowler" (Twain 67, emphasis mine)). By the end, when reintroduced to the initial assertion ("... perfectly sure that in taking this trifle from the man who robbed him of an inestimable treasure — his liberty — he was not committing any sin that God would remember against him in the Last Great Day" (Twain 67-68)), one is left slightly unbalanced, uncertain of Twain’s sincerity, uncertain if the thefts are meant to be seen either as acts of justice, or acts of petty larceny.

Why would Twain, a regionalist, be unable to write successfully, with any degree of conviction, a novel set in the nineteenth-century Mississippi Valley, one concerned with the injustice of slavery and one that makes use of the device of the switching of identities of the powerful and the powerless, when he had already successfully written two novels that were thematically similar? Twelve years prior to the publication of Pudd’nhead Wilson, in 1882, Twain published The Prince and the Pauper, set in sixteenth-century England and with a strong interest in injustice and slavery (in this case, class slavery), and which, like
Pudd’nhead Wilson, examines the repercussions when the high-born and the low-born switch identities. And seven years later, in 1889, Twain published A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court, predominantly set in sixth-century England, again with a strong interest in injustice and class slavery, and which, in Chapters 27-38 (in which King Arthur and Hank Morgan don peasants’ clothing), examines the repercussions when the high-born infiltrate the world of the low-born. Surely if Twain could write, successfully, these novels, set in a remote country and in a remote century, he could write, at least as successfully, a thematically similar novel, set in his own country and in his own century.

Has justice been served in Pudd’nhead Wilson, or has it not? Is Twain sympathetic to slaves, or is he contemptuous? Pudd’nhead Wilson supplies an abundance of material to prove either argument, as well as an abundance of material to undermine either argument. However, one critic, George Marcus, has chosen an interesting approach to the novel that very nearly, but not entirely, allows him to escape the novel’s quagmire of ambiguity. With some modification, though, Marcus’s argument can be used as a springboard for insight into Pudd’nhead Wilson that not only allows for the novel’s ambiguity, but embraces it as an essential part of
its message.

George Marcus calls race, in *Pudd’nhead Wilson*, merely "a story through which another more profound story ... can be told." He has chosen, instead, as his focus what the novel says about the self. According to Marcus, late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century writers "shared the insight that consciousness or the self had no essential unity, an insight that was a direct and potentially subversive contradiction to the ideology of autonomous individualism ..." (Marcus 192). Writers of Twain’s era rebelled against the idea of rigid, antithetical societal categories, of “black and white labeling under a regime of slavery” (Marcus 191). In *Pudd’nhead Wilson*, for instance, the half-dog incident concisely illustrates the way in which the citizens of Dawson’s Landing unfairly impose a simplistic, categorical label on David Wilson ("pudd’nhead"), and even more unfairly impose a simplistic, categorical label (literally a black-or-white label) on Roxy and Tom ("black," and thus "slave"), and see “social categories ... as a god-given, natural set of distinctions, rather than a fuzzy, negotiated set” (Marcus 191). George Marcus illustrates his argument through the use of three tactics by which Twain represents the existence of the
nonautonomous self: through the use of the divided self, the doubled self, and the crossed selves. Of these three tactics, neither the first nor the second proves to be particularly germane to this essay and will be mentioned only briefly. The third tactic, however, that of the crossed selves, is more relevant and will be discussed in greater detail.

The first tactic, the tactic "least challenging to autonomous individualism, is that of the divided self ... Fully rounded characters are developed by the exposure of their internal thought processes, prominently figured as internal voices speaking to oneself" (Marcus 193). Roxy (unlike Aunt Patsy) would be an example of a divided self, a complex character with an unfixed moral center. When it occurs to Roxy to switch her child with the rightful heir, she is torn, she vacillates, exhibiting signs of self-consciousness, of a self examining yet another self, even talking to herself as if she were not one person, but two: "I's so glad I 'member 'bout dat!" (Twain 73). But of the divided self, Marcus emphasizes: "While the self is divided and made complex ..., the fundamental coherence, autonomy, and boundedness of the self is not challenged" (Marcus 193).

The second, more exotic, tactic is that of the doubled
self, "the creation of distinctly separate, dual selves out of one character" (Marcus 193). Literature's most famous example of the doubled self is found in Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, though Tom Driscoll undergoes a transformation that is almost as dramatic:

If he met a friend, he found that the habit of a lifetime had in some mysterious way vanished — his arm hung limp, instead of involuntarily extending the hand for a shake. ... He found the "nigger" in him involuntarily giving the road, on the sidewalk, to the white rowdy and loafer. ... The "nigger" in him went shrinking and skulking here and there and yonder ... (Twain 118)

Though a startling transformation has certainly occurred, Marcus emphasizes that the doubled self, like the divided self, is not especially challenging to the idea of autonomous individualism. To the contrary, the doubled self can even be seen as "very much in line with the construction of autonomous individualism, since it [does], after all, preserve the construct of a sharply bounded, whole self, albeit ... a doubling out of one" (Marcus 193).

It is the third tactic, however, the tactic that is most subversive to the idea of autonomous individualism, that George Marcus finds to be the most enlightening in *Pudd'nhead Wilson*: that of the crossed selves:

The plots of novels based on this tactic involve[] the
switching of identities among characters, by acts of deception, secrecy, or mistake. As in *Pudd’nhead Wilson*, the identities of two characters, unknown to themselves, are switched; each, at the same time, inhabits the social and intimate psychological persona of the other. ... Crossing selves thoroughly blurs boundaries of selves — both individuals whose identities are switched are ambiguously each other at the same time. The reader's attempt to keep sorting out who is who is defeated at every point by the complete merging of both selves in each character simultaneously. (Marcus 194)

Crossed selves thoroughly, subliminally reenforce the idea that categories normally seen as rigid (whether legal, racial, et cetera) are actually subjective and mercurial. Twain, according to Marcus, "intentionally creat[es] a persistent confusion of identities which the reader must constantly work at keeping straight, thus profoundly challenging conventional holistic views of characters and strictly bounded individuals and selves" (Marcus 197).

Therefore, novels based on the tactic of the crossed selves are not flawed by ambiguity, they are deliberately, fundamentally ambiguous; identities are developed in an ambiguous manner because identity is not monolithic, it is complex, unfixed, and thus unknowable (and thus threatening).

George Marcus has chosen a resourceful way in which to account for the ambiguity in *Pudd’nhead Wilson* — though it should not be overlooked that there is a rather unfortunate
flaw in his argument: though Tom and Chambers do simultaneously inhabit "the social and intimate psychological persona of the other" (Marcus 194), Chambers's ordeal is virtually ignored. There is never any need for the reader to "keep sorting out who is who" (Marcus 194) because Tom and Chambers never truly "cross" (and Chambers is not even an example of a divided self). As a result, few, if any, boundaries between the two are blurred. Marcus rationalizes this inconsistency in exactly the same way as other critics who have been foiled by the novel's ambiguity: by suggesting that it is an example of a flaw in the novel:

Of course, there is one other remaining loose end that Twain chooses not to deal with - the reciprocal of Tom[]'s fate, that of Chambers[]. He remains the one contradiction and living subversion of the whole self ideology that will not go away ... Indeed, Twain's choice not to deal in any detail with Chambers[] throughout the novel ... marks the limitation and containment of Twain's radical-seeming criticism of American cultural notions about autonomous individualism. (Marcus 206-207)

Perhaps, as Marcus says, Twain's decision to ignore Chambers is a "limitation" (Marcus 207), or perhaps Marcus's argument simply would have been better illustrated with a more suitable novel. In either case, George Marcus's decision not only to accept, but to embrace, the ambiguity of the novel, the ambiguity caused by the crossed selves, deftly avoids the hazards of trying to force from the novel a too-
simplistic, "either/or" stance. After all, to declare that *Pudd'nhead Wilson* is deliberately, fundamentally ambiguous is far more satisfyingly arguable than to pretend that it is not. But eventually Marcus, too, tries to force from the novel his own brand of a too-simplistic, "either/or" stance, and is no more persuasive than other critics with their subjective areas of focus.

Marcus declares that "Twain, on the verge of a completely radical deconstruction of the American self-construct, succumbs, like many other writers of his age, to imposing unity on a fragmented self by repeatedly attributing to his creations whole selves in the form of their base and natural characters ..." (Marcus 203). For example, when Tom learns that he is a usurper, a black man, and thus a slave, he reacts as follows:

> 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. ... [A]fter a while, with the subsidence of the storm ...[h]e 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. (Twain 119-120)

Yes, Tom returns to a base character, but to fault Twain for
this, to say that Twain “seems to be yielding, ... clinging to vestiges of notions of a unified self” (Marcus 204) is to miss the point in exactly the same way — though even more spectacularly — than the citizens of Dawson’s Landing miss the point of David Wilson’s half-dog comment. Ultimately, everyone in the novel, despite knowing to the contrary, “cling[s] to vestiges of notions of a unified self” (Marcus 204). It is a repeating pattern in, and exactly the point of, *Pudd’nhead Wilson* that people freely admit that things are indivisible, and then refuse to live by their assertion. For instance, the citizens of Dawson’s Landing imprecisely divide people into categories of either “black” or “white.” But Roxy, when acknowledging her and her son’s complex ancestry, more accurately sees heritages as an amalgamation far too complex to be reduced to an absolute. When Tom asks the name of the man who was his father, Roxy responds:

> You ain’t got no ‘casion to be shame’ o’ yo’ father, I kin tell you. He was de highest quality in dis whole town — ole Virginny stock. Fust famblies, he wuz. ... Dey ain’t another nigger in dis town dat’s as high-bawn as you is. (Twain 115-116)

And later, Roxy adds:

> My great-great-great-gran’-father en yo great-great-great-gran’-father was ole Cap’n John Smith, de highest blood dat Ole Virginny ever turned out, and his great-great-gran’-mother, or somers along back dah, was Pocahontas de Injun queen, en her husbun’ was a nigger king outen Africa ... (Twain 157-158)
Though amusingly apocryphal, the tale illustrates that Roxy is not only prepared, but eager, to acknowledge a heritage that is far too complex to classify simply as either "black" or "white." But, despite her boasts of an elaborate ancestry, when Tom behaves disgracefully, when he refuses to fight a duel with Count Luigi, Roxy recants, and blames his behavior on a base heritage: "It’s the nigger in you" (Twain 157).

But Roxy is by no means the only character in the novel who, despite knowing to the contrary, is guilty of "clinging to vestiges of notions of a unified self" (Marcus 204). The most glaring example of this phenomenon can be found in the above-mentioned "half dog" incident:

[David Wilson] had just made acquaintance of a group of citizens when an invisible dog began to yelp and snarl and make himself very comprehensively disagreeable, whereupon young Wilson said, much as one who is thinking aloud —

"I wish I owned half that dog."
"Why?" someone asked.
"Because I would kill my half."

The group searched his face with curiosity, with anxiety even, but found no light there, no expression that they could read. They fell away from him as from something uncanny, and went into privacy to discuss him. One said:

"'Pears to be a fool." (Twain 59)

Wilson is saying that things can be divided. The townspeople, thinking him in earnest, heartily disagree. But of course Wilson is speaking ironically and has tricked his
listeners into agreeing with what had been his original assertion all along: that things cannot be divided. But despite the listeners' vehement agreement of the indivisibility of things, they refuse to live by their assertion. After all, as citizens of Dawson's Landing, "a slave-holding town" (Twain 57), they are daily accomplices in an institution that divides races. Wilson's reward for his effort is to be ostracized by the townspeople. But later, Wilson, too, succumbs to the temptation to "cling[] to vestiges of notions of a unified self" (Marcus 204): despite knowing to the contrary, he proves scientifically and legally that things can be divided (this time races, into "black" or "white," and justice, into "guilty" or "innocent"). Now it is the reader's turn to disagree, aided by Twain's deliberate sabotage of the novel's ending.

After the trial, we are told that

The twins were heroes of romance now, and with rehabilitated reputations. But they were weary of Western adventure, and straightway retired to Europe. (Twain 224)

But of course the twins' reaction is not particularly in keeping with their characters. Though they might have decided to return to Europe, they just as easily could have graciously forgiven their accusers. Furthermore:

Roxy's heart was broken. The young fellow upon
whom she had inflicted twenty-three years of slavery continued the false heir's pension of thirty-five dollars a month to her, but her hurts were too deep for money to heal; the spirit in her eye was quenched, her martial bearing departed with it, and the voice of her laughter ceased in the land. In her church and its affairs she found her only solace. (Twain 224-225)

"Roxy's heart was broken" (Twain 224)? Why? For having inflicted twenty-three years of slavery on Chambers? She had known she had done that for twenty-three years. Because Tom has been sold down river, just as she had initially feared? Probably — though she hates him, and has even threatened his life, ever since he sold her down river. More likely, Roxy's heart was broken simply because she has been caught. Why, then, does Twain bother to highlight it? And why, too, does Twain bother to highlight Chambers's sad fate?

The real heir suddenly found himself rich and free, but in a most embarrassing situation. He could neither read nor write, and his speech was the basest dialect of the negro quarter. His gait, his attitudes, his gestures, his bearing, his laugh — all were vulgar and uncouth; his manners were the manners of a slave. Money and fine clothes could not mend these defects or cover them up, they only made them the more glaring and the more pathetic. ... (Twain 225)

Twain has chosen an unnecessarily cruel fate for Chambers — though he could as easily have chosen to give it less attention (he had, after all, virtually ignored Chambers up to this point), or even allowed for the possibility of hope. But rather, of the prospects Twain had to chose from, he
chose the one that was the most drastic, the most objectionable, and the most uncompromisingly despairing. But even more troubling is Tom’s fate:

The false heir made a full confession and was sentenced to imprisonment for life. But now a complication came up. The Percy Driscoll estate was in such a crippled shape when its owner died that it could pay only sixty per cent of its great indebtedness, and was settled at that rate. But the creditors came forward now, and complained that inasmuch as through an error for which they were in no way to blame the false heir was not inventoried at that time with the rest of the property, great wrong and loss had thereby been inflicted upon them. They rightly claimed that “Tom” was lawfully their property and had been so for eight years. ... Everybody saw that there was reason in this. 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. As soon as the Governor understood the case, he pardoned Tom at once, and the creditors sold him down the river. (Twain 225-226)

Twain has chosen a unnecessarily peculiar fate for Tom, a fate that is legally disturbing (technically allowing Judge Driscoll’s murder to go unpunished) and even more so racially disturbing (enslaving and selling a man down river who had, for twenty-three years, been raised as white — a racist notion that implies that it would be less disturbing to enslave and sell a man down river who had not been raised as white). No, Twain deliberately mishandled the ending in order to manipulate the reader into disagreeing with it, thereby tricking the reader into agreeing with what had been
his original assertion all along: that, regardless of Wilson's scientific and legal proof that races can be divided into "black" or "white," and justice into "guilty" or innocent," things cannot be so divided. Twain's reward for his effort is to be ostracized by the critics, who conclude that Pudd'nhead Wilson is "obvious[,] gauche" (Bradbury 45), "tasteless" (Schaar 213), and "unreadable" (Parker 136), in exactly the same way that David Wilson is ostracized by the citizens of Dawson's Landing, who conclude that he is "a fool" (Twain 59), "a lummox" (Twain 60), "a labrick" (Twain 60), and "a pudd'nhead" (Twain 60).

George Marcus is right not to focus too intently on race. And he is right to acknowledge that the ambiguity in Pudd'nhead Wilson is not an obstacle, but rather is an essential component to insight into the novel. But, ultimately, Marcus makes the same mistake that David Wilson makes: he makes some interesting discoveries, but he does not follow the clues back far enough, and does not ask enough questions. Pudd'nhead Wilson only speaks specifically when one recognizes that the moral is about ambiguity, but not specifically the ambiguous, blurred boundaries of justice, or the ambiguous, blurred boundaries of race, or of the self, or of any number of other categories that are
patently subjective. Rather, *Pudd’nhead Wilson* speaks specifically, eloquently, about the ambiguous, blurred boundaries of language, language as an imprecise convention, inadequately used to describe distinctions that are infinitely more subtle and complex. There are two hints that prove this assertion: the first comes in the original title of the novel, and the second in the types of doubles that are found throughout the novel.

Mark Twain called the first American edition of his novel *The Tragedy of Pudd’nhead Wilson*. Malcolm Bradbury explains that what Twain meant, when he called his novel a tragedy, was that "the story was treated not as a farce but with an inexorable sense of misfortune.... Twain’s treatment is, in fact, best described as tragi-comic" (Bradbury 24). But of course Twain did not call his novel *The Tragi-Comic Misfortune of Pudd’nhead Wilson*. Bradbury further observes that "Pudd’nhead is the one person for whom the action clearly isn’t a tragedy" (Bradbury 24). In this (at least initially) there seems to be sense. After all, as the novel progresses Wilson moves from being an outcast, to securing his first legal case — and although he loses the case, and his client is fined, he is later celebrated for participating as a second in a duel, is elected Mayor, and
secures a second legal case, a sensational murder trial, which he not only wins, but by which brings to light a shocking, twenty-three-year-old injustice, thereby winning the praise and admiration of his fellow citizens. No, there is seemingly no more rationale to label David Wilson a tragic character than there was to label him a pudd'nhead.

Roxy, on the other hand, suffers a very serious decline, and is ostensibly the most deserving of the label "tragic character." In the beginning of the novel, Roxy is described as being "of majestic form and stature; her attitudes were imposing and statuesque, and her gestures and movements distinguished by a noble and stately grace" (Twain 64). At the end of the novel, however, "the spirit in her eye was quenched, her martial bearing departed with it, and the voice of her laughter ceased in the land" (Twain 224-225). Roxy's plan to save her son from a life of slavery unfortunately also means the simultaneous enslavement of the true heir, sentencing him to the same fate from which she was trying to save her son, thereby making her as guilty and despicable as her oppressors. And furthermore, it is a glaring flaw in Roxy's rationalization for switching babies that eventually leads to her downfall, and the downfall of her son:
It was dat ole nigger preacher dat tole it ... De preacher said it was jist like dey done in Englan’ one time, long time ago. De queen she lef’ her baby layin’ aroun’ one day, en went out callin’; en one o’ de niggers roun’ ’bout de place dat was ’mos’ white, she come in en see de chile layin’ aroun’, en tuck en put her own chile’s clo’es on de queen’s chile, en den lef’ her own chile layin’ aroun’ en tuck and toted de queen’s chile home to de nigger-quarter, en nobody ever foun’ out, en her chile was de king bimemby, en sole de queen’s chile down de river one time when dey had to settle up de estate. Dah, now – de preacher said it his own self, en it ain’t no sin, ‘ca’se white folks done it. (Twain 72-73)

But of course white folks did not do it. The story merely illustrates that it had previously happened to white folks, and had been perpetrated by a black woman. (The story even warns that the usurper grew to sell the true heir down river, which should have served as a caution to Roxy.) It is this flaw in Roxy’s logic that allows her to rationalize her decision to switch babies; and it is her decision to switch babies that ultimately leads to all of the suffering. All of the misery is instigated by Roxy, and worsened by Tom; therefore, when all is finally revealed, the guilty should be punished and the persecuted should be vindicated. But this does not happen because Twain has tricked the reader into embracing unsound expectations of the novel’s conclusion. After all, Roxy would never have switched babies in the first place had she not been treated so reprehensibly. Though Roxy is to some degree culpable, it is
no more possible to divide, with precision, her culpability into "guilty" or "innocent" than it is to divide, with precision, her racial identity into "black" or "white."

Contrary to what Malcolm Bradbury says, David Wilson is the one person for whom the action clearly is a tragedy (Bradbury 24, paraphrase). Because of a flaw in his character, because of his shortsightedness (hence, "dem ornery glasses o' hisn" (Twain 74)), Wilson fails to scrutinize the evidence thoroughly enough. Granted, he discovers the murderer. And he discovers the switched identities. But he does not follow the clues back far enough, and does not ask enough questions. Rather than to ask Roxy the most obvious question, "Why did you switch the babies?," he simply settles for the explanation: "For a purpose unknown to us, but probably a selfish one, somebody changed those children in the cradle" (Twain 221-222). Had Roxy been asked, she would have been forced to confess that she switched the babies in order to save her son from a life of slavery, a life in which being sold down river was a possibility. And though this explanation would have won her no sympathy (Dawson's Landing being a slaveholding town after all), Wilson would at least have been forced to acknowledge the reason Roxy's deception has been so
successful for twenty-three years: because she and her son have been unfairly labeled "black," and thus are slaves.

_Pudd’nhead Wilson_ is not primarily about race because Roxy and Tom are not primarily representative of blacks. Most blacks cannot pass for white. However, Roxy and Tom are representative of the radically underdescribed. Language, a finite convention, has failed to describe adequately Roxy and Tom’s atypical lineage. And it is because language is so inadequate, so subjective, so malleable, and thus so easily manipulated, that injustices occur and are rationalized.

Take, for instance, Luigi and Angelo’s disagreement, in "Those Extraordinary Twins," over the subjective word "often":

"... The landlords often insisted that as both of us occupied the bed we ought —"

"No, they didn’t," said Angelo. "They did it only twice, and in both cases it was a double bed — a rare thing in Europe — and the double bed gave them some excuse. Be fair to the landlords; twice doesn’t constitute 'often.'"

"Well, that depends — that depends. I knew a man who fell down a well twice. He said he didn’t mind the first time, but he thought the second time was once too often." (Twain 247)

This amusing anecdote illustrates the instability of language and the ease at which it can be exploited to serve one’s own agenda. But of course it is not nearly so amusing when one recalls that this same phenomenon is responsible
for the enslavement of Roxy and Tom:

To all intents and purposes Roxy was as white as anybody, but the one sixteenth of her which was black out-voted 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 fiction of law and custom, a negro. He had blue eyes and flaxen curls ... (Twain 64)

Roxy and Tom are living proof that the distinction between "black" and "white" is as subjective and exploitable as the word "often." It is David Wilson's blindness to this fact that makes him the novel's tragic character, and which makes the title of the first American edition far more enlightening than the abbreviated title used in subsequent editions.

The second of the aforementioned hints that show that Twain is, in Pudd'nhead Wilson, primarily interested in exploring language as an ambiguous, imprecise convention can be found in the enormous amount, and types, of doubles seen throughout the novel. For instance, before Twain's "literary Caesarian operation" (Twain 230), the novel was an entanglement of two disparate stories, a farce and a tragedy (in the same way that Luigi and Angelo, in "Those Extraordinary Twins," are an entanglement of two disparate individuals who share one body). Furthermore, throughout the novel Twain makes frequent reference to the number two, when
any arbitrary number would have served as well: "Mrs. York Driscoll enjoyed two years of bliss with that prize, Tom" (Twain 84); "'It took [Luigi and Angelo] two years to get out of [their] slavery'" (Twain 91); "'ole Marse Driscoll'll sell you down de river befo' you is two days older'" (Twain 112); "'[the scheme] was all finished up shipshape by two this morning'" (Twain 150); Roxy "'uz at de river in two minutes ... [and then] paddled mo'n two hours'" (Twain 183, 184). More subtly, though, Twain begins Pudd'nhead Wilson by describing the town of Dawson's Landing with a string of hyphenated words and compound words (some words even hyphenated incorrectly):

In 1830 [Dawson's Landing] was a snug little collection of one- and two-storey frame dwellings whose white-washed exteriors were almost concealed from sight by climbing tangles of rose-vines, honeysuckles, and morning-glories. Each of these pretty homes had a garden in front, fenced with white palings and opulently stocked with hollyhocks, marigolds, touch-me-nots, prince's-feathers and other old-fashioned flowers; while on the window-sills of the houses stood wooden boxes containing moss-rose plants and terracotta pots in which grew a breed of geranium whose spread of intensely red blossoms accented the prevailing pink tint of the rose-clad house-front like an explosion of flame. (Twain 55, emphasis mine)

There are far too many doubles strewn throughout Pudd'nhead Wilson for them to be dismissed as inconsequential, or simply atmospheric (so many doubles are strewn throughout the novel that the author's choice of pen name also stands
as good advice: a concisely worded set of instructions). But the presence of so many doubles makes it easy to be overwhelmed, to be dazzled, to be numb to their significance. It is helpful, then, to classify the doubles in *Pudd'nhead Wilson* into two basic categories: those that are analogous and those that are antonymous.

Analogous doubles are instances in which a relationship of clarity is created between two distinctly separate, but thematically linked, individuals or events. For instance: two babies are born on the same day; two stabbings occur; two rewards are offered for the twins' stolen knife; two duels are scheduled; and two trials occur. But because the author, in these instances, is simply doubling a noun, analogous doubles emphasize the definition of that which is being doubled: two babies; two stabbings; two rewards; two duels; two trials. However, the analogous doubles' relationship of clarity fades once one elaborates: two babies are born on the same day (one black, the other white); two stabbings occur (one harmless, the other harmful); two rewards are offered for the twins' stolen knife (one public, the other private); two duels are scheduled (one honorable, the other dishonorable); and two trials occur (one insignificant, the other significant).
Once one elaborates, the clarity of the noun becomes complicated by the ambiguity of the adjective—which leads to the second of the above-mentioned category of doubles.

Antonymous doubles are instances in which a relationship of confusion is created between two diametrically opposed, but thematically linked, descriptions. For instance: Roxy is a black woman who looks white, and who will don the clothing and makeup necessary to disguise herself as a black man; Tom is a black man who looks white, and who will don the clothing and makeup necessary to disguise himself as a young white woman, and later as an old black woman. But because the author is no longer simply doubling a noun, he is doubling, linking, diametrically opposed adjectives, antonymous doubles thoroughly confuse the definition of that which is being doubled. As a result, categories normally seen as relatively secure ("black" or "white," "old" or "young," even "male" or "female") are shown to be highly subjective and mercurial, thereby emphasizing the exploitability of language. Language becomes so malleable, so all-inclusive, that terms even include in their definition that which they are not—"black" includes that which is "white," and "white" includes that which is "black"—appropriately reminiscent of George
Marcus's description of crossed selves: "both individuals whose identities are switched are ambiguously each other at the same time" (Marcus 194). Once language has been thoroughly exploited by being ridiculously broadened, it ceases to convey meaning and one is perhaps only fully understood through the frequent use of quotation marks: David Wilson witnesses a mysterious "woman." A "black" "man" accosts "Tom" in St. Louis. And, an "old," "black" "woman" murders Judge Driscoll — though for the crime of killing his "father," "Tom" receives a "pardon."

Mark Twain has created a paradox. He has written a novel in which he has successfully communicated the idea that successful communication is impossible. In Pudd'nhed Wilson, it is no more possible to label, with precision, Roxy's racial identity (and thereby her freedom) than it is to determine, with precision, her degree of culpability (and thereby, again, her freedom). It is the adjective that is the problem. Twain's cursory solution (as voiced by David Wilson, in his calender), "As to the Adjective: when in doubt, strike it out" (Twain 123), is well meaning, but simplistic, and hardly practical. His more insightful solution, if there is a solution, lies in an understanding of the problem.
The adjective fails because it is not as specific as that which it is trying to describe, and what little specificity the adjective does supply is disregarded. Take, for example, the racial classifications of "black" and "white." Though serviceable, there arises the question of how one classifies the offspring of interracial parents. A new word must be coined: "mulatto." And to classify the offspring of mulatto and Caucasian parents? "Quadroon." Quadroon and Caucasian parents? "Octofoon." But words of this variety only give the illusion of specificity. Twain, not surprisingly, places Roxy in the position of being one-sixteenth black, the first level of heritage for which there is no precise terminology. Of course, an additional word could be coined to describe Roxy's heritage (being the offspring of an octofoon mother and a Caucasian father, or Tom's heritage, being the offspring of Roxy and Colonel Cecil Burleigh Essex), but because an infinite number of distinctions can be inserted, one will, at some point, be forced to generalize, and thereby mischaracterize the racial identity of all those who lie beyond the point at which one has chosen to approximate. It is at this point of approximation that language, pushed to its maximum specificity, fails.
Language fails further because what little specificity the adjective does supply is disregarded. Though the term "mulatto" is acknowledged, there follows the tendency to ignore its meaning, to ask "Is the mulatto, then, black, or white?" In Dawson’s Landing, the question is not only asked, but answered: the mulatto is black, and a slave, as is the quadroon, the octoroon, Roxy, Tom, and anyone else with even a fractional amount of Negro blood.

The shades that exist between black and white exist along an seamless gradation. To ignore the gradation’s seamlessness, to attempt to isolate, linguistically, any point, without being infinitely specific, is to be doomed to inaccuracy. After all, achieving "whiteness" can easily be accomplished: it is simply a matter of being white in appearance, which is true of both Roxy and Tom. But this is unacceptable to the citizens of Dawson’s Landing. Therefore, rather than relying on an accurate, visual determination of whiteness, the citizens rely on an inaccurate, linguistic determination, because linguistically, achieving "whiteness" can never be accomplished: an infinite number of divisions, and thus insertions, can be added (black, mulatto, quadroon, octoroon, Roxy’s unnamed heritage, Tom’s unnamed heritage, ad infinitum). Furthermore, by disregarding what little
specificity language does supply, by accepting terms like mulatto, quadroon, octoroon, but then dismissing these heritages as still being black, the citizens of Dawson’s Landing have found an effective, linguistic way to insulate themselves racially.

Mark Twain has found, in *Pudd’nhead Wilson*, an insightful way in which to caution his readers about the failure of language (the adjective is not as specific as that which it is trying to describe), and to expose man’s tendency to capitalize on the failure of language (what little specificity the adjective does supply is disregarded). Just as David Wilson’s half-dog comment allows him to make a point, while at the same time having a joke at the expense of his listeners, Mark Twain’s *Pudd’nhead Wilson* allows him to make a point, while at the same time having a joke at the expense of his readers. Twain (by providing the conclusion that Tom is both “black” and “guilty”) is saying that things can be divided. His readers, thinking him in earnest (and aided by his deliberate sabotage of the novel’s ending), heartily disagree. But of course Twain is speaking ironically and has tricked his readers into agreeing with what had been his original assertion all along: that things cannot be divided. And just as the citizens of Dawson’s
Landing eventually recognize their gullibility ("'And this is the man the likes of us has called a pudd'nhead for more than twenty years. He has resigned from that position, friends.' ..." (Twain 224)), so too should the readers recognize theirs ("... 'Yes, but it isn't vacant — we're elected.'" (Twain 224)).
NOTES


8. George Marcus, "'What did he reckon would become of the other half if he killed his half?' Doubled, Divided, and Crossed Selves in Pudd’nhead Wilson; or, Mark Twain as Cultural Critic in His Own Times and Ours," Mark Twain’s Pudd’nhead Wilson, ed. Susan Gillman & Forrest G. Robinson (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1990), 198. Quotations
from this edition are cited parenthetically, Marcus, in the text.
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