

Introduction

Rumors of *Pudd'nhead Wilson* as an “unreadable” novel were not always greatly exaggerated.¹ What are now regarded as its leading critical features were once dismissed as the signs of its failure: we read the incoherence in Twain’s narrative not as aesthetic failure but as political symptom, the irruption into this narrative about mistaken racial identity of materials from the nineteenth-century political unconscious. Instead of searching for a hidden unifying structure, as did a previous generation of New Critics, the scholars in this volume are after what Myra Jehlen calls “the novel’s most basic and unacknowledged issues.” We do thus share the earlier critical passion for detection, although we are not similarly inclined to dismiss evidence of authorial intention. Most of the essays in this volume are subtextual studies which seize upon the text’s inconsistencies and contradictions as windows on the world of late-nineteenth-century American culture. The collection as a whole seeks to make the strata of Mark Twain’s political unconscious available for critical scrutiny.

Mark Twain’s novel about mistaken identities is manifestly uncertain of its own. The textual history of *Pudd'nhead Wilson* gives evidence that Twain was unsure whether to regard his errant creation as the farce, *Those Extraordinary Twins*, that first took shape in his imagination, or to settle instead for the somber tale that later overtook him. How indeed should we refer to this work, originally published by the American Publishing Company in 1894 as *The Tragedy of Pudd'nhead Wilson and the Comedy Those Extraordinary Twins*? Most of the essays in this volume use *Pudd'nhead Wilson* to refer to both texts, thus joining the comedy and tragedy together even more closely than they were in the first American edition. For most of us, moreover, Twain’s ambivalent relationship to his book points to related ambivalences toward apparently unrelated matters: race misrecognition, slavery, political cross-dressing, aristocratic liber-

ties, democratic freedoms, and narrative coherence, to name a few. Indeed, that final display of ambivalence—expressing itself in Twain's nervously mocking, interstitial interrogations of his "jack-leg" performance—establishes for one of us that there is a discernible "sense" running through the text's apparently hopeless disorder.

It was precisely *Pudd'nhead Wilson's* reputation for disorder, and the cultural implications of its relative critical neglect, that inspired the interdisciplinary conference, held in March 1987 at the University of California, Santa Cruz, from which this collection of essays emerged. James Cox's keynote address, with its attention to the centrifugal play of the novel's (and the novelist's) chief contradictions, captured the tone of much that followed. In focusing on the competing tendencies in Twain's character—his fascination with the liberating mechanical technology of print and his bondage as an author to preconscious fantasies, his wish to be free from political tyranny along with his consequent sense of the tyrannies of freedom—Cox correlates the ambivalences at work in Twain's autobiography with the cultural contradictions of the Reconstruction era. Similarly, the essays that follow tend to arise from the perception of divisions in the novel's constructions of race, class, and gender, and in Twain's affiliated attitudes toward political economy and theology, governance, and personal identity. Such thematic variety reflects the disciplinary range of the scholars gathered here (their fields: literary criticism, history, political science, anthropology), and the range of the novel itself, whose fragmentedness appeals to a taste for multiplicity, and invites the kind of interdisciplinary practice on display here. We hasten to add that one critic's rich multiplicity is another's hopeless muddle. Thus the volume closes with a direct challenge to the text's value—as literature, aesthetically defined, or as cultural symptom—and therefore to critical enterprises such as this one.

Mark Twain might have been amused by the expense of so much critical energy on his freakish twin creation. Academic humbug, he might have concluded (our own concluding gesture to the contrary notwithstanding). Still, it is presently our conviction that the time is right for a long, careful look at this vexed but powerful novel. The publication in 1980 of Sidney E. Berger's Norton Critical Edition of *Pudd'nhead Wilson and Those Extraordinary Twins* has provided us with a text that will remain "standard" until the California edition appears. (The Norton Critical Edition is used as the citing text throughout this volume.) At the same time, thanks to the painstaking research of Hershel Parker and others, scholars appreciate more

than ever before the so-called “aesthetic anomalies” of the texts and enjoy the opportunity—not exploited by Parker—to make sense of them. Anomalies such as the inconsistently shifting racial characterization of one of the novel’s protagonists are evidently geared to the chaotic and confusing sequence—now pretty firmly documented—in which Twain composed and revised the manuscript. This valuable new light on the text’s manifestly incomplete aesthetic development forms the occasion, seized upon here, to reformulate the questions conventionally asked of *Pudd’nhead Wilson*, especially about the halting emergence of the dark, enigmatic “tragedy” about racial twins from the “comedy” about Siamese twins.

On a broader critical front, increasing attention to the literary text as social production, and a complementary attentiveness to the textualization of such cultural categories as race, class, and gender make the present moment a particularly auspicious one for an interdisciplinary study of *Pudd’nhead Wilson*. Methodologically most relevant are efforts to situate literary texts in cultural context, and thus to reread them, both as products of the literary marketplace and as agents of cultural and political transformation. This general scholarly trend has as yet unmeasured implications for *Pudd’nhead Wilson*. But one area of exploration that strikes us as particularly promising is bordered by the treatment of race and sexuality in *Pudd’nhead Wilson*: are racial inequalities hereditary or environmental, and how does the novel trace the illicit relationship, central to its plot, between white males and their black female slaves and offspring? These questions are now being recast in the interdisciplinary context of the New Literary and Social History. Recent scholarship has tended fruitfully to pair, rather than to separate, issues of race and sex, in an attempt to articulate the often paradoxical relationships and divergences between figures for racial and sexual identity and difference. A cultural approach to the construction of racial and sexual categories in Mark Twain’s novel enables us better to assess received representations of political and social change in the late nineteenth century.

Because its true subject matter is mistaken identity, *Pudd’nhead Wilson* readily lends itself to the meditations on race, class, and gender brought together in this collection. Such a gathering of these now ultra-fashionable categories will undoubtedly appeal to those with a taste for the “new historicism,” a term we employ with the understanding that it refers broadly both to a field of study which foregrounds the issues of race, class, and gender, *and* to the production of an alternative cultural realm in which those issues can be ad-

dressed adequately. Finally, though, in order to give these issues canonical status, a prior project is enjoined upon us: to demonstrate that this neglected, almost proverbially “secondary” and “problem” text in fact merits the kind of sustained attention generally reserved for “classic” works. The canonical elevation of *Pudd’nhead Wilson*, clearly if implicitly an agenda for several of the critics represented here, is perhaps most forcefully developed when the novel is viewed as a teaching text equal in value to *Huckleberry Finn*.

In advocating *Pudd’nhead Wilson*, we advance the lesson that so-called “lesser” works are often the most telling ones – politically and aesthetically telling. Because the novel is itself problematically open-ended, for example, it raises issues in an open-ended way: issues of history and the uses of history, issues of textual authority and of the authority of the American literary canon, issues of race, class and gender. We may go further in this vein to suggest that the status “lesser” is often the sign that a text presents challenges to dominant ideologies. “Lesser,” we may find, means vital, critical, central. Thus we offer *Pudd’nhead Wilson* as a case study in contemporary methods of interpreting texts that defy older critical categories. It is a paradigmatic “new text” in that it teaches us how to teach differently.

Bearing the question of teaching in mind, we have organized the essays so that questions are opened and discussed in what appears to be the most useful sequence. Beginning with the keynote address, which is followed by a close look at the compositional history of the text, the essays move outward from late-nineteenth-century ideologies of race and gender, to the analysis of political economy and theology, governance, and personal identity. We offer the rather detailed summaries that follow as an aid to readers with specific topics in mind.

James M. Cox sets the tone for the volume in his free-wheeling “*Pudd’nhead Wilson Revisited*,” a series of meditations on the word *race* – meditations which lead him inexorably, even slavishly, he concedes, to a sense of how culturally and morally overloaded a term it is. Cox draws attention to the contradictory dynamics and inertia of American race relations. “Race,” he observes, refers at once to the most vigorous of human activities – the race for the Pacific or the arms race – and to the inertial essence of the human species, the races of the human family. In Cox’s view, the absolute contradiction of slavery in a free country, of “race” in America, explodes into the myriad divisions of *Pudd’nhead Wilson*, particularly in its opposition between slavery and freedom, an opposition that the novel simultaneously advances and subverts. In recognizing that the first Amer-

ican revolution resulted in freedom from tyranny yet left us with slavery, Mark Twain also saw that the second American revolution brought freedom out of slavery yet left us with the tyranny of freedom, freedom “under the law.” In the course of developing his ideas, Cox bears witness to the sense of contradiction that overtook him in his return to a text which he thought he had long since mastered.²

Forrest G. Robinson finds in the novel’s notable textual confusions a key to what he calls “The Sense of Disorder in *Pudd’nhead Wilson*.” Focusing specifically on the discontinuity between the dark central chapters and the “strangely up-beat” conclusion, Robinson argues that the point is precisely the comprehensive blindness of author, book, and reader to the significance of that discontinuity. Rather than confront the full, painful implications of the race-slavery plot, they acquiesce in the tidy solution of the murder mystery. Indeed, the novel’s cultural authority lies in this process of evasion, or “bad faith,” which enables the retreat to an illusion of resolution where none has occurred. The impulse to address the bitter reality of race-slavery, as it surfaces in the disorderly order of the novel’s composition, was evidently in tension with a countering impulse to suppress the same truth. In effect, Robinson concludes, the terms of Twain’s truce with bad faith enforced the composition of two stories, one the vehicle of grave cultural analysis, the other a distracting cover. Both stories are “contained” in the published *Pudd’nhead*, forming a pattern of textual doubleness that marks what Robinson sees as a pervasive tendency to acknowledge *and* to deny the tragedy of American race relations.

In his “Mark Twain and Homer Plessy,” Eric Sundquist gives historical texture to the explosive doubleness of *Pudd’nhead*, most notably by aligning the trial at the novel’s conclusion with the most important civil rights case of its time, *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896). There is, Sundquist finds, a common legal justification for racism at work in the two cases. The notion of a citizenship rigidly divided along racial lines, as it was constitutionally authorized in the discriminatory “separate but equal” doctrine of *Plessy v. Ferguson*, was at large in a wide variety of social and cultural institutions in the decades before the turn of the century. In its preoccupation with doubling, imitation, and cross-dressing, *Pudd’nhead* is a virtual “allegory” of this dominant trend, not least in its divided sentiments on the sorry spectacle. For if Mark Twain was on one side inclined to subvert the “scientific” category of race, holding it up as a fiction of law and custom, he was also careful to conclude his own fiction with a dramatic reassertion of racial difference. *Pudd’nhead* is thus the

literary analogue to a legal system that contrived to re-enslave blacks even as it declared them free, and to the broader historical and cultural context in which that system was embedded.

Turning from the historical drama of Reconstruction, Michael Rogin ("Francis Galton and Mark Twain: The Natal Autograph in *Pudd'nhead Wilson*") gives his attention to the psychodramatics at play in the novel. He begins by observing that in drawing the tragic *Pudd'nhead* out of the farcical *Those Extraordinary Twins*, Mark Twain resolved the far-fetched legal conundrum posed by the inseparable Siamese twins, but at the same time backed into equations of innocence with white, and guilt with black. Having located the novelist at "the center of the deranged, racist culture" of his time, Rogin develops his case by turning to three of the deeply divided novel's most prominent oppositions. First, taking the rise of *Pudd'nhead* and fall of Tom as his point of departure, and the project of Francis Galton as a major point of comparison, he elaborates on the evolution of the black male stereotype, from the docile child of the antebellum paternal order to the black beast of post-Reconstruction. Second, he reflects on the struggle between *Pudd'nhead*, the male advocate of a sharply defined color line, and Roxana, the female proponent of its collapse. Finally, he turns to the division within Roxana, between the "natural" mother who bears her son into bondage, and the "masquerading" mother who plays with his identity and thereby sets him free.

Susan Gillman's essay, "'Sure Identifiers': Race, Science, and the Law in *Pudd'nhead Wilson*," is clearly akin to Rogin's in its emphasis on the novel's often inadvertently revealing representation of "the social construction of racial identity" in the late nineteenth century. Gillman highlights the text's strange mingling of historical realism with melodrama, arguing that this freak of form is the offspring of the novelist's competing impulses to present and to deny the grave truth of the ongoing crisis in American race relations. Such mixed intentions can be linked to the reality of miscegenation in Southern slave culture, and to the desperate efforts by the master class to mask the truth of that mixing in fictions of white racial purity. But *Pudd'nhead* is most tellingly a barometer to the vexed question of identity construction and social control as it emerged in the wake of abolition. In the novel's dramatization of racial interchangeability, Gillman argues, and in its more oblique preoccupation with permeable sexual boundaries, we catch sight of the culture's tentative address to some of its leading fictions, and, more broadly, to the uncertain foundations of its social knowledge.

In the subtitle to her essay, "The Ties that Bind," Myra Jehlen indicates that she shares Susan Gillman's concern with both "Race and Sex in *Pudd'nhead Wilson*." She construes her major themes historically as ideological fixtures in Mark Twain's America; and, like Gillman, she locates them textually in the novel's conspicuous failures of form. Jehlen draws specific attention to the strange twist by which the novel transforms the initially innocent and wronged Roxana and Tom into the villains of the story. Such lapses in fictional coherence make historical sense as manifestations of the "anxieties aroused by a racist social structure" in which leading elements of identity construction—black and white, male and female, child and adult—are subject to sharply contradictory definitions. Thus in passing from childhood to adulthood, Tom and Chambers proceed from innocence and racial interchangeability into radically different (but equally familiar) stereotypes of the inherently inferior adult black male. In closely related developments, the heroic Roxy, who subverts the system by insisting upon her son's racial equality, later condemns Tom for his trace of black blood, and is finally cast as a guilty slave who threatens the community with chaos. These are the symptoms, Jehlen concludes, of a "stalemate" between an impulse toward social criticism and the conservative incapacity to imagine significant change.

Carolyn Porter shifts the critical focus from David Wilson's plot, with its attention to white male desire and the repressed guilt of the slaveholders, to "Roxana's Plot," the story of resilient, subversive power in "a real black slave mother." If we are to appreciate the anxiety that Roxy arouses, Porter argues, we must abandon the mystified opposition of the black Mammy and the black Jezebel, turning instead to the repressed middle, the potent figure who takes arms against the oppressive establishment. Porter's Roxana is the source, and not merely the agent, of power. In switching the babies, she brings intelligence, courage, and formidable power into subversive alliance against the white patriarchal slave system. In countenancing this Roxana, Mark Twain opened a place in his narrative for the display of the "deep rifts in [his] society's complex and contradictory ideologies." But he had no sooner released this powerful black mother—who takes control of her world and, increasingly, of her story—than he set in motion the repressive David Wilson plot that finally contains her and restores the village to the *status quo ante*.

John Carlos Rowe's essay, "Fatal Speculations: Murder, Money, and Manners in *Pudd'nhead Wilson*," is the first of several to treat institutional issues of political economy, theology, and governance.

Rowe views Dawson's Landing as a point of intersection between an older America and the bustling, aggressive, materialistic society of the post-Civil War era. Yet Mark Twain's sentimental attachment to the mythic rural idyl should not blind us, Rowe insists, to his emphasis (in *Pudd'nhead* and other works) on the continuities between the plantation system and the helpless bondage of labor in the newer urban economics. As *The Gilded Age* makes clear, Mark Twain was aware and critical of the speculative impulse that arose in America after the Civil War. *Pudd'nhead Wilson* extends this analysis by demonstrating that slavery is "not just a provincial agrarian institution but the basis for the speculative economy that would fuel industrial expansion, Manifest Destiny, and laissez-faire capitalism." The slave-owner is thus a speculator par excellence who thrives if he makes sound investments, develops his property, and accurately anticipates trends in the market. Giving ample attention to Mark Twain's disastrous career as a businessman, Rowe elaborates in detail on the implications of economic life in the novel, with a special eye to Pudd'nhead himself, the leader in the new ways of doing business.

In his "By Right of the White Election: Political Theology and Theological Politics in *Pudd'nhead Wilson*," Michael Cowan attends to the complex interplay between politics and theology in Dawson's Landing. He begins with *Those Extraordinary Twins*, observing that the entire political process is cast into uncertainty by Luigi's election to the Board of Aldermen. Here and elsewhere, the meaning of "election" is profoundly ambiguous. There are ironic variations in meaning, for example, in the term's application to slaves and their masters. Cowan goes on to draw out the social and political implications of the marked contrast between the Arminian cast of white religious doctrine, and the strong antinomian strain in black theology, especially as it is interpreted by Roxana. Racial identity, he notes, is Calvinist to the extent that one drop of black blood can "out-vote" a vast majority of white. Cowan goes on to explore the numerous cognate ironies that surface along the uncertain boundaries between the religious and the secular in this novel of rigid if equally (and ironically) uncertain racial categories.

Politics are even more exclusively the concern of Wilson Carey McWilliams in his essay, "*Pudd'nhead Wilson* on Democratic Governance." Observing that the novel is framed by the Jacksonian era in American mass party politics, and that it may be read as a meditation on the ancient question, "Who should rule?" McWilliams approaches the text with an eye to its bearings on American political history,

and on democratic ideology. His essay unfolds as a linked series of ruminations, gravitating to the politically paradoxical and subversive in *Pudd'nhead*, and prompted by references to such traditional political thinkers as Plato and Aristotle, Dante, Locke, Franklin, and Jefferson. Their aristocratic pretensions notwithstanding, the F.F.V. leaders of Dawson's Landing are in fact "small-town entrepreneurs" whose authority rests on property, not rank. As a woman and a black, Roxy is challenging testimony to major flaws in the Constitution. And it is a popular delusion that freedom and equality are primary American political values. They take second place, as *Pudd'nhead* shows, to the accumulation of private wealth. But to challenge that delusion directly is probably futile and possibly dangerous. Mark Twain knew this, and thus "elected to write in soft disguises," hoping to beguile his readers – where he could not lead them directly – to reform.

George E. 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") moves broadly into the question of personal identity – a question explored in the specific terms of race and gender in earlier essays. According to Marcus, the half-a-dog joke that makes a "pudd'nhead" of David Wilson incorporates key elements of an enduring American cultural critique – namely, that social categories (e.g., race) are constructions, and that the autonomous individual is the leading such category in Western bourgeois culture. *Pudd'nhead* is typical of the late nineteenth century in its containment of an impulse to subvert the category of the autonomous self. The challenge to convention generally features divided, doubled, or crossed selves. *Pudd'nhead* employs all three, though in the crossing of Tom and Chambers it foregrounds the third and most disruptive, where the attempt to keep selves separate is "defeated at every point by the complete merging of both selves in each character simultaneously." Marcus emphasizes that such assaults on the integral self are always contained by hegemonic processes circulating through the novel (Wilson's fingerprinting display, most notably), and much more broadly through the American culture of the time.

In the concluding essay, "Some of the Ways of Freedom in *Pudd'nhead Wilson*," John H. Schaar draws into alignment with the consensus opinion that the novel is a maze of inconsistencies and contradictions (it is "a mess," he declares). But he cannot join the others in viewing the text's manifest shortcomings as usefully telling symptoms, as seams or fissures through which the analyst may penetrate

to profitable new insights about Mark Twain's world, and about our own. Rather, inclining toward the position familiarly associated with Hershel Parker, Schaar concludes "that the book is all-but unreadable, that sense cannot be made out of it." It follows that the study of *Pudd'nhead Wilson* is a waste of time. Worse yet, Schaar allows that in lavishing our attention on inferior fictions we draw it away from the real life and the real problems that we share with our neighbors. There are no flattering explanations for this anomalous behavior. Still, because he has agreed to participate, Schaar turns in the body of his essay to the examination of what the novel "can teach about the difficulties of thinking and feeling well and justly" about the related topics of freedom and human social classification. He finds that the book contributes little of value to this discussion.

It hardly diminishes the weight of Schaar's position to record that it did not carry the day at the conference for which these essays were originally written, or to venture that it will do little to dampen the current revival of interest in this flawed child of Mark Twain's imagination. On the other hand, there are undoubtedly readers who will complain that his essay should have been placed first, where it could have done the most good. At the very least, "Some of the Ways of Freedom" will be welcomed as a salutary prod to ever-encroaching complacency, a reminder that in laboring to make sense of Mark Twain's ideological swerves and moral evasions we should be equally attentive to those concealed in our own critical enterprise. It is to be hoped, of course, that the essays in this volume justify themselves by opening new perspectives on the past, and by helping us to make our way forward in the present and future. There are human dividends here, perhaps, that Schaar overlooked. Still, he offers a bracing challenge, not only to our assessment of *Pudd'nhead Wilson*, but also to many of the assumptions at the foundation of the "new historicism" in American letters, with its emphasis on ideology, and its impulse to reshape the canon.

There is no real disagreement, after all, that *Pudd'nhead Wilson* is a "mess." On this there is something approaching consensus. If most of these essays urge canonical status on *Pudd'nhead Wilson*, they do so with a newly sharpened, ironic sense of what it means to be "non-canonical." Let us recall that it was Mark Twain who first expanded upon the novel's grave structural shortcomings. In *Pudd'nhead Wilson* we have a celebrated white male author whose main fictional concerns are the powerless and the excluded, yet who derides himself, in the preface to this novel so occupied with questions of racial and sexual exclusion, as a "jackleg" novelist. He further com-

plicates matters in the preface to *Those Extraordinary Twins*, making a celebrated “confession” of his own putative lack of authorial control over the work that “changed itself from a farce to a tragedy” – an entertaining confession about the vagaries of “original intention” that perhaps unintentionally, but farcically and tragically, has allowed *both* the long search for some hidden, unifying structure in *Pudd’nhead Wilson* and the dismissal of the novel as “patently unreadable.”

Our collective critical response to this history is to do what Mark Twain would say is the only thing we can, that is to follow our training slavishly. We are thus imitating our author’s own impulse to have it both ways, offering *Pudd’nhead Wilson* as a new classic – a new masterpiece – while emphatically abandoning the notion of the canonical text as culturally transcendent. All of us in this volume have different ideas of how Mark Twain inserted himself into his book, yet none assumes that the novelist was fully the master of the unexampled literary hybrid that he finally produced. Unifying the twelve very different essays in the collection is a critical approach to unfamiliar texts and how to teach them. We begin with the belief that the lack of control all readers sense in *Pudd’nhead Wilson* is a key to the novel’s literary and cultural significance. Lack of control for Mark Twain meant freedom from mastery. Or as James Cox would say, Twain left mastery to Henry James, offering himself instead as jack-leg novelist, ever ready to play the irresponsible slave and fool, never able to master the current of plot and pen that enslaved him.³

