

## ANALYSIS

*Pudd'nhead Wilson* (1894)

Mark Twain

(1835-1910)

“There is plenty of humour in it of the genuine Mark Twain brand, but it is as a carefully painted picture of life in a Mississippi town in the days of slavery that its chief merit lies. In point of construction it is much the best story that Mark Twain has written, and of men and women in the book at least four are undeniably creations, and not one of them is overdrawn or caricatured, as are some of the most popular of the author's lay figures. There is but one false note in the picture, and that is the introduction of the two alleged Italian noblemen. These two young men are as little like Italians as they are like Apaches. When challenged to fight a duel, one of them, having the choice of weapons, chooses revolvers instead of swords. This incident alone is sufficient to show how little Italian blood there is in Mark Twain's Italians. But this is a small blemish.”

William Livingston Alden  
*The Idler* (London) VI  
(August 1894) 222-23

“The best thing in *Pudd'nhead Wilson*, by Mark Twain...is the picture of the negro slave Roxana, the cause of all the trouble which gives scope to Mr. Wilson's ingenious discovery about finger-marks. Her gusts of passion or of despair, her vanity, her motherly love, and the glimpses of nobler feelings that are occasionally seen in her elementary code of morals, make her very human, and create a sympathy for her in spite of her unscrupulous actions. But hers is the only character that is really striking. Her son is a poor creature, as he is meant to be, but he does not arrest the reader with the same unmistakable reality: his actions are what might be expected, but his conversations, especially with Wilson and the Twins, seem artificial and forced.

Wilson, the nominal hero, appears to most advantage in the extracts from his calendar which head the chapter, but as a personage he is rather too shadowy for a hero. And what has to be said about the book must be chiefly about the individuals in it, for the story in itself is not much credit to Mark Twain's skill as a novelist. The idea of the change of babies is happy, and the final trial scene is a good piece of effect; but the story at times rambles on in an almost incomprehensible way. Why drag in, for example, all the business about the election, which is quite irrelevant?... Still, if the preface be skipped the book well repays reading just for the really excellent picture of Roxana.”

Anonymous  
*The Atheneum* (London) No. 3508  
(19 January 1895) 83-84

“The author is a signal example of sheer genius, without training or culture in the university sense, setting forth to conquer the world with laughter... *Pudd'nhead Wilson*...is a Missouri tale of changelings ‘befo’ the wah,’ admirable in atmosphere, local color and dialect, a drama in its way, full of powerful situations, thrilling even; but it cannot be called in any sense literature. In it Mark Twain's brightness and grotesqueness and funniness revel and sparkle, and in the absurd extravaganza, ‘Those Extraordinary Twins,’ all these comicalities reach the buffoon point... Adapted to the stage...the thing has met with immediate success.”

Anonymous  
*The Critic* XXVI  
(11 May 1895) 338-39

“*Pudd'nhead Wilson* is a tragedy, but a very sordid one. There is no trace left of the light-hearted gaiety of *Tom Sawyer*, and very little of the genial humanity of *Huckleberry Finn*. On the contrary, the book is marked by a strong dash of ironical cynicism which finds utterance mainly in the...mottoes to the various

chapters.... It is, perhaps, a result of this bitter mood that there is no one figure in the book capable of arresting and retaining our sympathies. Tom Driscoll, the slave who takes his master's place, is a monster of meanness, cowardice, and ingratitude; the mulatto Roxana, is a strongly conceived, but rather repellent character; and Pudd'nhead himself is, till the very close of the book, a mere lay figure on which to hang the author's own philosophizings. And yet the work is by no means devoid of power. It is a strong, direct, and simple piece of narrative; it has an ingeniously constructed plot and a startling climax... Had any one but Mark Twain written such a book it would no doubt have been more generally recognized as the graceful and powerful piece of art it really is."

T. M. Parrott  
*The Booklover's Magazine* III  
(February 1904) 145-54

"Here, it may be in all innocence, he states and develops a theme completely tabooed in nineteenth-century American literature, miscegenation. It is so inevitably a part of the book that critical amazement develops only retrospectively. Yet there is an intense artistic courage in this presentation of the slave Roxana, one sixteenth negro, of fair complexion and fine soft hair, and of the son whom she bears to Cecil Burleigh Essex. Roxy is unique and formidable. Mark's handling of her suffers somewhat from the melodrama and sentimentality that, it should be clear, were inescapable--but does not suffer much. In outline and detail she is memorably true. She lives: her experiences and emotions are her own, and, being her own, are faithful to the history of thousands."

Bernard De Voto  
*Mark Twain's America*  
(Little, Brown 1932) 293-94

"Even the better novel *Pudd'nhead Wilson* (1894) defied the efforts he put into it and escaped his control as he wrote. Part of it moved off into unrestrained farce and had to be issued separately as *Those Extraordinary Twins*; part of it developed into the seriously conceived tragedy of Roxana and her son--but a tragedy founded on the conventional device of infants changed in the cradle. It adds something to Mark Twain's documentary value by its picture of Virginians in the West and by its principal character, Pudd'nhead Wilson. As an amateur detective he illustrates the interest which Mark Twain, who liked all sorts of ingenuity, took in stories of the detection of crime... But Pudd'nhead is more memorable as the village atheist, whose maxims, printed at the head of each chapter in this book...so frequently express the tired disillusionment which was becoming Mark Twain's characteristic mood."

Carl Van Doren  
*The American Novel 1789-1939*, 23<sup>rd</sup> edition  
(Macmillan 1921-1940) 155

"On the Mississippi during the 1830s, at Dawson's Landing, Mo., lives Percy Driscoll, a prosperous slave owner. On the day his son Tom is born, his nearly white slave Roxy gives birth to a son, Chambers, whose father is a Virginia gentleman. Since Tom's mother dies when he is only a week old, he is raised by Roxy along with Chambers, whose twin he is in appearance. Roxy, fearful that her son may some day be sold down the river, changes the two children, and upon the death of Percy, his brother Judge Driscoll adopts Chambers, believing him to be Tom. The boy grows up a coward, a snob, and a gambler. Even though Roxy tells him that she is his mother, he sells her to pay his gambling debts. On escaping, she blackmails him. To obtain money he robs the judge and murders him with a knife stolen from Luigi, one of a pair of Italian twins with whom the judge once fought a duel.

The evidence is against the twins, who are defended by David Wilson, an unsuccessful lawyer, whose 'tragedy' consists in the ridicule that has resulted from his eccentric originality and iconoclasm; his humor and his interest in palmistry and fingerprints cause the people of Dawson's Landing to call him 'Pudd'nhead.' Wilson feels secure in his case for the twins, since the fingerprints on the knife are not those of the accused. One day he acquires the fingerprints of the spurious Tom, and with this evidence is able to vindicate his methods, and to win at last the admiration of his fellow townsmen, by saving the twins and convicting Chambers, who is sold down the river while the real Tom is restored to his rightful position."

James D. Hart

“Twain’s last notable book about American life, *Pudd’nhead Wilson* (1894), written on the brink of financial disaster but before the onset of deeper tragedies, is about a nonconformist who is too witty and wise for the backwoods community where his days are spent; miscalled ‘Pudd’nhead,’ he at last wins recognition by solving a murder mystery through his hobby of fingerprints. In so doing he also unravels a case of transposed identities for which the Negress Roxy--a character of magnificent vigor and realism--had been responsible. The novel is a daring, though inconclusive, study of miscegenation. Significant of Mark Twain’s growing pessimism are the cynical chapter mottoes ascribed to *Pudd’nhead’s Calendar*, such as: ‘If you pick up a starving dog and make him prosperous, he will not bite you. This is the principal difference between a dog and a man.’ Or, still more typical of the aging Twain: ‘Whoever has lived long enough to find out what life is, knows how deep a debt of gratitude we owe to Adam, the first great benefactor of our race. He brought death into the world.’”

Dixon Wecter  
*Literary History of the United States*, 3rd edition  
(Macmillan 1946-63) 936

“Yet *Pudd’nhead Wilson* is, after all, a fantastically good book, better than Mark Twain knew or his critics have deserved. Morally, it is one of the most honest books in our literature, superior in this one respect to *Huckleberry Finn*; for here Twain permits himself no sentimental relenting, but accepts for once the logic of his own premises. The immoral device of Tom’s revelation, the fake ‘happy ending’ of *Huck* are avoided in *Pudd’nhead*. It is a book which deals not only with the public issues of slavery, after all, long resolved--but with the still risky private matter of miscegenation, which most of our writers have chosen to avoid; and it creates in Roxy, the scared mulatto mother sold down the river by the son she has smuggled into white respectability, a creature of passion and despair rare among the wooden images of virtue or bitchery that pass for females in American literature. It is a portrait so complex and unforeseen that the baffled illustrator for the authorized standard edition chose to ignore it completely, drawing in the place of a ‘majestic...rosy...comely’ Roxana--a gross and comic Aunt Jemima....

Perhaps the best way to understand *Pudd’nhead* is to read it as a complement to *Huckleberry Finn*, a dark mirror image of the world evoked in the earlier work. Nearly ten years come between the two books, ten years in which guilt and terror had passed from the periphery of Twain’s life and imagination to their center. *Huckleberry Finn* also is steeped in horror, to be sure; but it is easier to know this than to feel it. Though the main fable of the earlier book begins with a boy standing off with a rifle, his father gone berserk with the D.T.’s and ends with the revelation of that father’s death in a seedy and flooded room scrawled with obscenities, it has so poetic a texture, so genuine though unmotivated a tone of joy--that one finds himself eternally doubting his own sense of its terrible import. In *Pudd’nhead*, however, the lyricism and the euphoria are gone; we have fallen into a world of prose, and there are no triumphs of Twain’s rhetoric to preserve us from the revealed failures of our own humanity....

Just as the grotesque in *Pudd’nhead* tends to break free from the humorous, so the tragic struggles to shed the nostalgic which swathes it still in *Huckleberry Finn*. In the earlier book, it is possible to believe that the flight toward freedom and childhood is more than a flight toward isolation and death. There is always waiting in a bend of the river Aunt Sally’s homestead: a Utopia of childhood visits and Southern home cooking. But Huck rejected this nostalgic Southland at the end of his own book, and in *Tom Sawyer, Detective*, Twain had introduced death and the threat of madness into that Eden itself.... In *Pudd’nhead Wilson*, the protagonist, who is obviously Tom himself grown older and an outcast but about to be reinstated into the community... The double truth is complete: the seeming slave is free, but the free man is really a slave....

But between ‘St. Petersburg’ and ‘Dawson’s Landing’ there is a terrible difference. In the latest book, we see Twain’s mythicized Hannibal for the first time from the outside; in the two earlier books, we are already inside of it when the action begins, and there is no opportunity to step back and survey it.... The Civil War is the watershed in Twain’s life between innocence and experience, childhood and manhood, joy and pain; but it is politically, of course, the dividing line between slavery and freedom. And Twain, who

cannot deny either aspect, endures the contradiction of searching for a lost happiness he knows was sustained by an institution he is forced to recognize as his country's greatest shame. It was the best he could dream: to be free as a boy in a world of slavery!...

Even Pudd'nhead, for all his skepticism, longs not for bare survival but for style and success--and so he must pay his Tom Sawyerish respects to chivalry.... In *Pudd'nhead Wilson*...society is defined by the fathers, last defenders of the chivalric code and descendants of the cavaliers.... The religion of such a society is, of course, not Christian at all; of Driscoll, the noble character murdered by the boy to whom he was a benefactor and almost a father, we are told, 'to be a gentleman was his only religion'.... Just as in *Huckleberry Finn*, Nigger Jim is played off against the world of Aunt Polly-Aunt Sally-Miss Watson, so in this reversed version a Negress is set against the society defined by Driscoll, Howard, and Essex.... Perhaps the supreme achievement of this book is to have rendered such indignities not in terms of melodrama or a parochial 'social problem' but as a local instance of some universal guilt and doom....

The tragedy of Tom requires that he expose and destroy himself; the melodrama of Pudd'nhead Wilson requires that he reveal and bring to justice the Negro who has passed as white; and Twain decided finally that it was Pudd'nhead's book--a success story. Yet there remains beneath the assertion that a man is the master of his fate, the melancholy conviction that to be born is to be doomed, a kind of secularized Calvinism. We have already noticed that Pudd'nhead is Tom Sawyer grown up, the man who has not surrendered with maturity the dream of being a hero; but it must be added that he wants to be a hero on his own terms, to force himself upon a hostile community without knuckling under to its values.... Ever since Poe's Dupin, the sleuth has been a favorite guise of the writer in fiction--non conformist and exposé of evil, the poor man's intellectual."

Leslie Fiedler  
*The New Republic* CXXXIII, Nos. 7-8, Issues 2125-26  
(22 August 1955) 130-39

"*Pudd'nhead Wilson* is not faultless--no book of Mark Twain's is that--but it is all the same the masterly work of a great writer. Yet it is very little known.... The explanation, I think, is partly that *Pudd'nhead Wilson* is so very unlike *Huckleberry Finn*. But it is also, I think, that the nature of the greatness of *Huckleberry Finn* itself tends not to be fully recognized. There are, then, two reasons for hoping that *Pudd'nhead Wilson* may come to be appreciated as it deserves: it is a classic in its own right (if an unrecognized classic may be said to be one); and, further, for all the unlikeness, it bears a close relation to *Huckleberry Finn*; a relation of such a kind that to appreciate the lesser work is to have a surer perception of the greatness of the greater....

Provincial as Dawson's Landing may be, it represents a society that has kept its full heritage of civilization. True, it is provincial, and Wilson's fate--the 'Pudd'nhead' and the long failure to make way against that estimate--figures for us its attitude towards originality of mind. Moreover an English reader gets what are for him (the human world presented being so essentially unforeign) startling glimpses of mob lawlessness as an accepted social institution.

Yet the effect of the opening description of Dawson's Landing remains: this is a civilized community--one qualified to have exacted a very much more favorable report than any brought back by Martin Chuzzlewit. And further, it is not unaware of its provinciality, and is far from having lost the desire to keep in touch with the remoter centers of its civilization and with its past. This comes out notably in its reception of the twins, the presentment of which illustrates the complex poise of Mark Twain's attitude. The comedy of the reception is not satiric. Dawson's Landing displays, not merely its crudeness and limitations, but also a touching positive humility, a will to pay homage to something other than provinciality and philistinism and the standards of everyday life....

Wilson, the poised and preeminently civilized moral center of the drama, whom we take to be very close in point of view to Mark Twain, is not, all the same, to be identified with him. Wilson *is* an actor in a dramatic whole that conveys its significance dramatically. The upshot of the drama is to set a high value on the human qualities fostered by the aristocratic code: to endorse the code even as far as Wilson does would be quite a different matter, and no reader of the book can suppose it to be doing that. Against the pride and

the allegiance to an ideal of conduct that make personal safety a matter of comparative indifference, we see the ignominy and ugliness of Tom's complete self-centeredness... Hearing that the Judge, fighting in *his* cause, has survived the duel, he reflects immediately, with an exasperation untouched by shame, how blessedly all problems would have been solved had the Judge been killed: the duel has been wasted....

The irony of the work as a whole means a very secure poise, and the poise is secure because the author has achieved a mature, balanced, and impersonal view of humanity. He himself is not involved in the personal way that involves animus in condemning. The attitude of *Pudd'nhead Wilson* is remote from cynicism or pessimism. The book conveys neither contempt for human nature nor a rejection of civilization as represented in a historical community--for Dawson's Landing, it may reasonably be said, is one that, at a given time in actual American history, Mark Twain had intimately known.... [*Roxy*] represents a frank and unembarrassed recognition of the actuality of sex, with its place and power in human affairs, such as cannot be found elsewhere in Mark Twain.... We know that what we have been contemplating is not just an exhibition of Negro traits: 'her race' is the human race.... There is of course a glance here at the Calvinism of Mark Twain's youth. And it is to be noted that *Roxy*, while usurping the prerogative of the predestinating Deity, has shown a wholly human compassion, and has invoked a compassionate God in doing so....

I have not yet touched on the central irony of the book, the sustained and complex irony inherent in the plot. *Pudd'nhead Wilson* should be recognized as a classic of the use of popular modes--of the sensational and the melodramatic--for the purposes of significant art.... An obvious criticism lies against the unfulfilled promise represented by the twins--the non-significant play made with them, their history and the sinister oriental dagger. Mark Twain, we can see, had intended to work out some interplay between the two parallel sets of complications: twins and interchanged babies. He abandoned the idea, but didn't trouble to eliminate that insistent focusing of expectation upon the twins. The fault is in a sense a large one, and yet it is not, after all, a very serious one: it doesn't affect the masterly handling of the possibilities actually developed... The ironic subtleties that Mark Twain gets from the interchange of the babies in their cradles seem, as one ponders them, almost inexhaustible....

There is a terrible difference, no more questioned by *Roxy* than by her master, between the 'nigger' and the white. The conventionality of the distinction is figured by the actual whiteness of *Roxy*, whose one-sixteenth of Negro blood tells only in her speech (with which, indeed, it has no essential relation, as is illustrated later by the inability of 'Valet de Chambers,' now revealed as the pure-white heir, to shed the 'nigger'-speech he learnt in childhood). So awful, ultimate and unchangeable is the distinction that *Roxy*, as, in order to save her child from the fate hanging over the slave (to be 'sold down the river'), she changes the babies in their cradles, justifies herself by the example of God. The rendering is an irresistible manifestation of genius, utterly convincing, and done with a delicate subtlety of ironic significance....

It is a mark of the poised humanity characterizing the treatment of the themes of *Pudd'nhead Wilson* that, worthless and vicious as 'Tom' is, when he has to face the sudden revelation that he is a Negro, we feel some compassion for him; we don't just applaud an irony of poetic justice when he is cornered into reflecting, with an echo of his mother's self-justifying recall of the Calvinistic God: 'What crime did the uncreated first nigger commit that the curse of birth was decreed for him? And why is this awful difference made between black and white?' Compassion, of course, soon vanishes as the dialectic of utter selfishness unfolds in him."

F. R. Leavis  
"Mark Twain's Neglected Classic"  
*Commentary* 21 (February 1956) 128-36

"It will probably be a long time before another critic calls *Pudd'nhead* 'the poised and pre-eminently civilized moral center of the drama.' This would seem to be high praise for a man who, though undeniably civilized, is only Tom Sawyer grown up and become a conventional and respected citizen of small-town America, after enduring a period of scorn while he was regarded as the village atheist and crank.... *Pudd'nhead* is Mark Twain, on the Tom Sawyer but not the Huck Finn side of his personality. He stands at the head of the procession of small-town intellectuals, cranks, and nonconformists that we find in American fiction, especially of the 1920's, although the type continues to be represented--for example, the Gavin

Stevens of Faulkner.... It is of the essence that Pudd'nhead Wilson is scorned by the citizenry as a crank, a complainer, and an ironist, that he stubbornly takes up a position of aloofness and nonconformity, but that ultimately he shows that he is in no way radically alienated from the conventional ways and in fact dreams of being one of the boys. Pudd'nhead Wilson is finally able to vindicate his Tom Sawyer-like fantasies and crotchets by putting them to direct, socially-approved use....

The most important meanings of *Pudd'nhead Wilson* are suggested by comparing it with *Huckleberry Finn*... Fiedler rightly calls it a prosy book, in which we have 'fallen' from the more poetic *Huck* and in which the social realities observed in *Huck* strike us in a different way. Our feelings about justice and injustice are strongly aroused in the earlier book, but they are relatively abstract and universal feelings. In *Pudd'nhead*...throughout the book we think of the Deep South as a kind of mythic but ever-present Hell. The Deep South gives a sinister implication to the small-town treacheries, minor felonies, and social deceptions which more or less sustainedly engage our moral feelings as we read the book. And it comes unmistakably to symbolize that irredeemable slavery--social, psychic, cosmic--to which every human being is in his own way subject.... The apparently free and open world of the earlier book seems more precarious and more wistfully elusive because, in *Pudd'nhead Wilson*, we have seen its fluid moral life fixed and intensified in power by being expressed in social conventions and institutions....

In *Pudd'nhead Wilson* there is nothing like the rich store of folk motifs one finds in *Huck*. But there is, as in *Huck*, an imaginative conception at the symbolic heart of the book which...one may call a universal 'Manichean' dualism which has been given a special quality, in Mark Twain, by the Calvinism of his early environment.... A book that does as much as *Pudd'nhead Wilson* to objectify and illustrate the 'buried ambivalence,' 'the archetypal symbolism of light and dark' that characterize the American imagination cannot be called a failure either artistically or morally.... [However] the moral truth it asserts is not adequately attached to the characters, or dramatized by them.... What keeps this book from being a great novel is that the characters and their relationships are not adequate to the moral action; the split between action and actors runs through the book. And although this would not necessarily be a flaw in a romance, even less in a Platonic dialogue, it is in a novel...

The book coheres only by its almost geometric demonstration, its true and false equations, its revelation and redistribution of opposites. There are no characters who are capable, either by themselves or in relation to each other, of giving the book a sustained organic life--not even Roxy, who is as vibrantly alive and human as anyone in Mark Twain's books. She is not allowed, by what she says, does, feels, and thinks, to command or permeate the novel, although there are certain scenes--notably the one in the old barn where she contemptuously tells Tom the truth about his parentage--to which she gives dramatic effectiveness. Wilson himself is an original type--but a type still, for we never understand much of what he feels or why he does what he does. We are not told out of what complex of experience and feeling issued his aphorisms in the Calendar, and except for the ones that are mere easy cynicism we do not believe them to have come from him....

Mark Twain's novel seems finally, as a work of near-art, to exist as a stiffly dialectic moral action, together with a considerable presentation of manners and morals, into which the breath of life has entered only here and there. Mark Twain's real fictional province is not the novel proper, but the borderland between novel and romance. *Huckleberry Finn* is his one complete triumph, even though the tragic dialogue to which *Pudd'nhead Wilson* almost gives shape will always haunt our minds."

Richard Chase  
*The American Novel and Its Tradition*  
(Doubleday 1957) 149-56

"David Wilson is called 'Pudd'nhead' by the townsfolk because his wisdom and eccentricity is beyond their comprehension. He redeems himself in their eyes by solving simultaneously a murder mystery and a case of transposed identities.... On the same day in the 1830's in Mississippi two children are born: a white boy and a boy of part Negro parentage. The latter's mother, Roxy, a slave, is given charge of both children, and in fear that her own child will be sold down the river, interchanges them in the cradle. When they grow up the whites of the region accept the Negro as an equal and treat the white boy as a mulatto bound to be sold sooner or later. As it happens, the boy of mixed breed grows up to be a scalawag, sells his own mother,

and robs and murders his uncle. He accuses Luigi, one of a pair of twins who have wandered into the neighborhood, of the murder. Pudd'nhead, who is a lawyer, undertakes Luigi's defense and proves his innocence by comparing fingerprints, a novel police technique in those days. The real murderer and his identity are exposed and the white boy takes his rightful place.

Throughout his life Twain was interested in the dichotomies of human nature, the personalities of twins, and the influence of heredity and environment on individuals.... In 1869 he wrote a sketch about the original Siamese twins, Chang and Eng, who join opposite sides in the Civil War, and take each other prisoner at Seven Pines. Another set of twins appears in the comedy *Those Extraordinary Twins*, which was bound with *Pudd'nhead Wilson* in 1894 and in which Pudd'nhead and Roxy are also introduced. *The Prince and the Pauper* is probably the best known of Twain's 'twin' stories....

He used [*Pudd'nhead Wilson*] as an opportunity to create a wonderful group of epigrams, which appear as headpieces for the chapters and are given as taken from *Pudd'nhead Wilson's Calendar*. They are a distillation of Twain's wit and wisdom. Commentators have found Calvinism, melodrama, a fearless treatment of the theme of miscegenation, and a great artistic courage in the book, undoubtedly one of Twain's masterpieces."

Max J. Herzberg & staff  
*The Reader's Encyclopedia of American Literature*  
(Crowell 1962)

"The central theme of *Pudd'nhead Wilson* is still the corrupt state of the official culture of Dawson's Landing--that is, Hannibal--and the plot of the novel is focused around two acts which, in quite different ways, call attention to evils beneath the apparently placid surface of it. The first act, the slave Roxana's desperate effort to free her son by exchanging him with her master's son in the cradle, is frustrated by the second, which consists in Wilson's detection of Roxy's stratagem more than twenty years later.... Even in this farce, Mark Twain is dramatizing the conflict between propriety and nonconformity that had served him so often before as comic material. The playful fantasy, however, touched off deeper responses--hence the appearance of the three characters who figure in *Pudd'nhead Wilson*.

Roxy's son, known as Tom Driscoll during most of the story, is the psychological equivalent of the twins. He is two persons in one: a Negro (according to the definition operative in Dawson's Landing--he 'has one thirty-second Negro blood') who appears 'white' and is reared as the adopted son of the great man of the town. He is by law a slave but apparently free. The duality of white and Negro introduces the theme of false appearance and hidden reality, which is repeated in Tom's activities as a burglar in the disguise of a woman while he is ostensibly leading the life of the idle young heir to the town's largest fortune.... Tom's mixed biological heritage points to the further fact that slavery debases sexual relations. To be sure, Mark Twain handles this topic with marked reticence. From the standpoint of imaginative coherence Judge York Leicester Driscoll is the father of Tom just as clearly as Roxy is his mother. But Mark Twain places the unmentionable fact of sexual intercourse between master and slave at two removes from the actual story--first by making Roxy, Tom's mother, the slave of a shadowy brother of Judge Driscoll at the time of Tom's birth; and then by the further precaution of creating an even more shadowy figure, Colonel Cecil Burleigh Essex, to be his biological father....

The other half of Tom's heritage is that of his mother, Roxy the slave. The two parts of it are at war with each other.... Just as in some not negligible sense Judge Driscoll takes over the function of the Arthurian aristocracy in representing the values of a society stained by tyranny and cruelty, Roxy takes over Hank Morgan's role [in *A Connecticut Yankee*] as adversary of the dominant class.... Of course, there are important differences. Because she is a Negro (however 'white' in appearance) and a woman, Mark Twain cannot identify himself with her as he identifies himself with Hank Morgan. And her aggression against the established order is not motivated by a program of reform.... With a beautiful irony Mark Twain shows that she has adopted many of the values of the white aristocrats: their pride of ancestry, their code of honor, even their contempt for Negroes. Her denunciation of Tom, setting forth Judge Driscoll's sentiments in her heavy dialect, is one of the great passages in this uneven but often powerful book....

There is a haughty grandeur in her character that shines through the degraded speech and manners of a slave, and confers on her an intimation of tragic dignity.... Mark Twain never conceived a more effective passage than the scene, at once tragic and comic, in which she determines to exchange her son with the Driscoll heir, and justifies the action to herself by a process of reasoning both humble (for she takes for granted the inferiority of the Negro—"Tain't no sin--white folks has done it!") and arrogant, because she compares herself with royalty and even usurps the divine prerogative of conferring free grace on her child.... Roxy's subversive threat to the dominant culture is the only aspect of the material of *Pudd'nhead Wilson* that stirs Mark Twain's imagination. As a result, she is the only fully developed character, in the novelistic sense, in the book. She has a different order of fictional reality from the figures of fable with which she is surrounded. She resembles a portrait in full color set in a black-and-white background....

Tom's most atrocious act, his betrayal of Roxy by selling her down the river after she has helped him pay his debts by allowing herself to be sold back into slavery, comes after he is aware that he is a Negro and himself legally a slave. It is not an expression of aristocratic arrogance but of the unmotivated melodramatic villainy that Mark Twain ascribes to Tom along with his sociologically determined traits. While this deed is not inconsistent with Tom's character, it does not belong to the imaginative fabric of the novel or even to its ideological structure; it represents the infection by stereotypes from popular fiction and the theater to which Mark Twain was always exposed when he lost control of his materials....

Wilson is incarnate analytical intelligence, the personification of science. Mark Twain liked to embody the notion of rational analysis, either farcically or seriously, in a figure borrowed from the newspapers and from popular fiction: the detective... When Wilson reveals in the courtroom that the supposed Tom Driscoll is a bastard, a thief, a murderer, and worst of all a Negro, he demonstrates that the official culture, with its vaunted ideals of honor and chivalry and ancient lineage, is merely a facade for deceit, avarice, and illegitimacy. He also defeats Roxy by frustrating her plan to free her son: Tom suffers precisely the fate of being sold down the river that she tried to save him from."

Henry Nash Smith  
*Mark Twain: The Development of a Writer*  
(Harvard 1962) 173-83, 207

"There are really three plots. The central one concerns Roxana, a slave nurse, who switches her own infant son with the son of her master. The deception is not discovered. Roxy's son, raised as a white boy, becomes a wastrel, and much of the plot is given over to his affairs involving theft, selling his mother, and murdering his benefactor, whose heir he is. The two secondary plots are interwoven with the main plot. One deals with Pudd'nhead Wilson chiefly as a foil for the 'damned human race' aspects of the village. His interest in fingerprints provides the device by which the true identities of the two boys are ultimately revealed. The other minor plot, involving the twins, was the plot with which Twain started, but in the final version it was somewhat altered and subordinated....

One redeeming feature is that Twain does finally come close to creating a satisfying full-length female character in Roxana, probably because she was Negro and therefore could be treated as a primitive like Huck, Tom, Jim, Pap, and a lesser gallery of such characters. Not only as a character but in another way, Roxana represents a notable achievement on Twain's part. For the first time, the institution of slavery had been dealt with relatively objectively and realistically in American fiction. Uncle Tom and Uncle Remus are childishly artificial by comparison. It is a tribute to Twain's art that the theme of miscegenation, daring in his day, was handled unobtrusively--yet without compromising the truth--and did not arouse any objection on the part of his audience. The antipathy toward the institution of slavery is generated almost incidentally to the feeling evoked by the poignant illustration of man's inhumanity to man in Roxana's being sold down the river by her own 'white' son. The incident illustrates Twain's Calvinistic-deterministic belief that man is fundamentally evil and incapable of moral goodness....

The book's conclusion affirms another of Twain's doctrines, that the individual is not responsible for his character, but is the product of forces outside his control. Tom Driscoll is black-hearted by the circumstances of his birth. Roxy says, 'Thirty-one parts of you is white, on'y one part nigger, en dat po' little one part is yo' soul. Tain't wuth savin'; tain't wuth totin' out on a shove en throwin; in de gutter.' And in a scant paragraph Valet de Chambre is doomed to a life of misery because he was raised as a slave.

He is free, but his conditioning as a slave haunts him the rest of his life. Twain did not see the inconsistency in this conclusion. One is damned because one thirty-second part of him was black, though he was raised white, and the other damned because he was raised as a black, though all his ancestry was white. On one hand heredity is the factor determining character, and on the other it is environment....

After the first few chapters, Chambers is lost, not even mentioned, until he is resurrected for the concluding trial scene. And even there his role is only a minor one. Twain might well have capitalized on the dramatic possibilities offered by Chambers, for he, not the twins, was really related to the central theme of the book.... The theme is a profoundly moving and serious one of tragic dimensions, but not as Twain handles it. Having done as much as indicated, Twain backs off and does not explore the subject further. Just as gingerly, he treats Roxy as a desirable woman, mistress of a white man, a Virginia gentleman. Saying that this was the first occasion on which the institution of slavery and miscegenation were handled relatively objectively and realistically in fiction is not the same thing as saying they were handled successfully as material for a novel. We may be grateful for what he has done and understand the reasons for his compromise, but if we judge *Pudd'nhead Wilson* fairly, we must recognize that the flawed structure of the work keeps it from being a satisfying novel."

Robert A. Wiggins  
"The Flawed Structure of *Pudd'nhead Wilson*"  
*Mark Twain: Jackleg Novelist*  
(U Washington 1964) 105-12, 128

"*Pudd'nhead Wilson* is one of Mark Twain's greatest accomplishments; of all his novels, it is the one which faces up to the dilemma of American politics most squarely, and it is the most meaningful of the books in which he employs the Unpromising Hero motif.... *Pudd'nhead Wilson* addresses itself directly to the problem of who shall govern and proposes a solution which is realistic and practicable: the hero-leader whose disinterested honesty and personal effectiveness in combating his and society's enemies capture the common imagination--the man, in short, with Dave Wilson's qualities--will be and ought to be followed....

The final and conclusive step in Pudd'nhead's ascent to leadership in Dawson's Landing is another courtroom scene, one in which he employs both rhetoric and science in service of truth and justice. When Pudd'nhead reveals that Tom Driscoll is, first, his supposed uncle's murderer and, second, actually a slave, he causes a courtroom sensation and wins himself a place of unassailable leadership in the town; yet during the triumphant trial scene Pudd'nhead seldom seems to be striving in Hank Morgan's manner or Tom Sawyer's for an 'effect'....

Because the F.F.V. aristocrats in *Pudd'nhead Wilson* are to so marked a degree fictive realizations of Mark Twain's feelings about his father, a strong element of censorship operates to prevent their portraits from becoming utterly repugnant. The cruel slave-owner whose barbarous and self-righteous treatment of his Negroes triggers the main action of the book conveniently dies at the end of Chapter IV. The lecherous Virginian who begets the white Negro Roxy's slave child also disappears. These two unambiguous representatives of the inhuman slave system, Percy Driscoll and Col. Essex, are replaced by Judge Driscoll, Percy's brother, and his friend Pembroke Howard, kindlier representatives of their cast, but this evidence of Mark Twain's censorship does not effectively obscure his point.... The four F.F.V. aristocrats of Dawson's Landing represent the old order of authority: They are the collective father-figure for Pudd'nhead, their odious features covered, but only partially, by an attractive disguise of kindly behavior and gracious living. Two of them, Percy Driscoll and Colonel Essex, are dead before the major action of the novel commences....

In the middle of the book, Percy's brother is murdered by a mulatto slave he believes to be his nephew. The sole survivor, Pembroke Howard, becomes Pudd'nhead's opposing lawyer in the climactic trial scene. Three issues depend upon the outcome of that trial: the detection of the murderer, the identity of slave and freeman, and the leadership of the community. In settling the first two issues, Pudd'nhead settles the last also. Before his exposés identify criminal, chattel, and leader, the townspeople, characteristically sympathetic to an underdog, are 'sorry for Pudd'nhead; his budding career would get hurt by this trial'; but when the court rises at the conclusion of the trial, the last representative of the Virginia aristocracy, the

F.F.V. lawyer who has opposed Wilson, has simply faded from view and Pudd'nhead has begun to act as both defense and prosecuting attorney, as detective and judge, as prophet and king....

He does not parade his graces, but he has graces--real ones--which set him apart from the other young men and win him their derision. He does not surrender and ultimately this 'slicker' gets the best of the yokels. Pudd'nhead is the obverse of Tom Driscoll, the 'stranger,' not the 'slicker.' The radical, archetypal antagonisms between Tom and Pudd'nhead may explain one of the most puzzling flaws in the intellectual structure of the novel, Pudd'nhead's appearing as a partisan of the code duello. This flaw has, not surprisingly, led many commentators to see Pudd'nhead as self-identified with the F.F.V., for the duel is their special ritual, their means of reminding the townspeople that they stand above the ordinary race of men. The life of the novel, its pattern of ideas, lies in its paired opposites, and of these Pudd'nhead and Tom make the most important pair....

The conflict within Mark Twain's mind is apparent: dueling had for years--perhaps since his hasty departure from Nevada--been a special source of irritation to him; it had always been a prime target for his satire. But if Tom Driscoll shunned it, Pudd'nhead was forced into the position of defending it. The only hope under these circumstances lay in making the duel comic and keeping Pudd'nhead's role passive....

Pudd'nhead's sole concern, conscious or unconscious, his sole objective, is to reveal the hidden truth of the society in which he lives not as a citizen but as a stranger, the truth that in such a society the master is a slave, that both master and slave are degraded, and that for redemption and leadership such a society must look to an outsider. Pudd'nhead is at once the hero and the stranger, the outsider and the leader. But in his characterization there is none of the shifting from one role to another which blurred the features of Hank Morgan [in *A Connecticut Yankee*]: Pudd'nhead is a demonstration of Mark Twain's conviction that only in the stranger, the man who stands aloof, the man who is not implicated in the common guilt, can society find its heroic leader. He demonstrates that stranger and hero are one....

The novel's theme is the whole problem of identity--the identity of the slave and the master, of the Negro and the white man, of the guilty and the innocent...of the true and the false leader. The history of the Unpromising Hero Dave Wilson is, in itself, involved with only the last of these problems of identity, but the actions by which Pudd'nhead makes himself Mayor Wilson effect... The resolution of all the problems of identity and propound a telling paradox: in a society in which the chains which bind slave to master and master to slave call all men's identities in question, only the stranger, the unfettered outsider, possesses a reliable identity."

Robert Regan  
*Unpromising Heroes: Mark Twain and His Characters*  
(U California, Berkeley 1966) 207-19, 240-41

"*Pudd'nhead Wilson* is his most classically conceived 'tragedy' and the epitome of his deterministic view of reality in the novel form. Like most of Mark Twain's work in this period it deals with failure, betrayal, and damnation--innocence lost even as it gives the illusion of man's capacity to triumph over the fate of the damned human race. *Pudd'nhead Wilson* is, therefore, not merely a 'novel of ideas,' but a theological study of man's nature whose intrinsic pattern is modeled on the myth of the fall of man. Temptation, pride, banishment, and damnation, dramatized in biblical terms, provide the key to the novel's meaning and help us to resolve some of the critical questions raised by its archetypal and tragi-satirical form....

For Mark Twain the tragedy lies in the fact that Tom, by 'training' a white slaveholder with the white slaveholder's vices, is blamed for these vices because of his Negro birth. Chambers, goodness and humility personified, has been conditioned by his Negro training that teaches him to know his place and accept his lot, yet that goodness is assumed to be the result of his being white. Such is the terrible irony and confusion about race and character with which the South (and, by extension, America) was burdened. And the tragedy is compounded because of the irrevocability of training, the attitudes it creates, and the universal nature of man himself. Man could not reform. Once fallen, he must stay fallen. That is the essence of Mark Twain's pessimistic determinism....

In the end, there is only the realization that man is tricked by God or Providence and his own sinful nature into thinking that through choice (Roxana) or through the saving grace of ironic humor (Pudd'nhead) he could change destiny and reform the world and himself. And it is this realization that Mark Twain consciously embraced, allowing it to dominate the mood and content of the work of his remaining years."

Stanley Brodwin  
"Blackness and the Adamic Myth in Mark Twain's *Pudd'nhead Wilson*"  
*Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 15 (1973-74) 167-76

"Mark Twain has been credited with having introduced the miscegenation theme to American fiction, but this is a view which shows little knowledge of his predecessors and contemporaries. Roxy's talk makes it difficult to remember that she is only one-sixteenth black and her son one-thirty-second... Both sides of her inheritance speak through Roxy, depending upon her position and the particular situation by which she is confronted when she sounds off. It is the fifteen-sixteenths white part of her that speaks when she denounces her recreant son as a 'nigger'; or if not that, then she expresses the point of view that her white masters have forced upon her through the circumstances of her life, but the really important thing to remember is that she does not speak for the book or for its author....

The book, then, does not seem to deny that some people (presumably in all races) are 'born bad,' but in it conventional 'black' and 'white' characteristics are determined by conditioning. The thought is quite as good as the reality; 'if you believe it, it's so.' Only, it is not being black that contaminates, but being a slave, and there is nothing in nature itself to account for the conventional identification of blackness with slavery in this country, which is an accident of geography, economics, and social conditions....

Pudd'nhead Wilson himself is a kind of *deus ex machina* character, and certainly more convincing than most such; but it is generally agreed that the triumph of the book is Roxy, and most of the critics dust off all their superlatives for her. Thus Lynn calls her Mark Twain's finest character with the single exception of Huckleberry Finn, and Henry Seidel Canby thought her 'the only completely real woman' in Mark Twain's books. To me, even after having made all reasonable allowances for her primitivism, her Negro psychology or what Mark Twain may have supposed to be that, and for the complications necessarily involved in the presentation of a character who is required to be both wicked and heroic, she changes toward her son too radically, too suddenly, and too often to be wholly convincing.... Twain's faculty for *evoking* character was very great, but he had considerably less skill in *constructing* it. Roxy is a combination of sometimes magnificent parts, but it would be too much to say that they cohere into a completely convincing whole....

Roxy is not a 'nice' woman, nor even a good one, judged by the standards Mark Twain applied to women. He glosses over none of her faults (indeed, he uses the stock whisky-bottle prop somewhat too freely, but for all her contradictions he still presents her as capable, at her best, of a kind of grandeur that most 'nice' women never achieve. When, at the end, 'Roxy flung herself upon her knees, covered her face with her hands, and out through her sobs the words struggled: "De Lord have mercy on me, po' miserable sinner dat I is!"' few of us can remain unmoved. This is Mark Twain's triumph of comprehension and compassion, and these things are more precious than perfectly wrought art."

Edward Wagenknecht, Introduction  
*Pudd'nhead Wilson*  
(Avon 1974) v-xiii

"Criticism of *Pudd'nhead Wilson* seems to have come to a dead end. What one critic finds admirable, another deplors. Robert Rowlette writes a monograph in praise of the book's design; Robert A. Wiggins thinks the design is a failure. Henry Nash Smith believes that Roxy is 'the only fully developed character, in the novelistic sense, in the book,' but Arthur Pettit argues that she is just another example of the 'tragic mulatto' type and not a very good example at that, for she is really two persons--a black and a white--and is neither black nor white long enough at a stretch to be entirely convincing. F. R. Leavis finds *Pudd'nhead Wilson* 'a classic in its own right,' and Leslie Fielder variously calls it 'the most extraordinary book in American literature' and 'a fantastically good book.' Richard Chase, however, believes that in considering *Pudd'nhead Wilson* 'as an example of the art of the novel, one observes that the moral truth it asserts is not

adequately attached to the characters, or dramatized by them.' Rowlette summarizes the situation rather well when he writes, 'If critics now generally agree that *Pudd'nhead Wilson* has artistic stature--even while disagreeing about how much, or what accounts for it--they also agree that the novel is seriously flawed.'

So here we have a book that has artistic stature but is seriously flawed, a book that critics admire though they cannot agree on the reasons for their admiration. At the risk of compounding the confusion, I should like to suggest that almost all of the criticisms proceed from the wrong premise, namely that *Pudd'nhead Wilson* is a novel and therefore must be measured primarily by the standards of Realism.... My answer is that it *should* be read in another tradition. The appropriate one, it seems to me, is the great storytelling tradition that stretches from Cervantes, Fielding, Smollett and Sterne to such writers of our own day as Heller, Vonnegut, and Hawkes [fabulation]...

As a fabulation *Pudd'nhead Wilson* holds a rather remarkable position between the great stories of the eighteenth century and those of our own time. Like *Tom Jones* and *Humphrey Clinker*, for example, it has an omniscient author who is immediately and pervasively present, a story told in dramatic episodes and without worry for coincidence, and an approach to the material that is essentially ironic.... *Pudd'nhead Wilson* pictures a bizarre world in which the characters play necessary roles in what can only be called a cruel and on-going Joke....

William Dean Howells had inveighed, doubtless at times in Mark Twain's presence, against author intrusion, holding that it destroys the illusion of reality. But Mark Twain gives no indication in *Pudd'nhead Wilson* that he is attempting to create such an illusion. Throughout the book he feels free to intrude both as commentator and narrator, just as Fielding and Smollett and Sterne had felt free to do.... This persisting presence of Mark Twain as story-teller, despite the fact that the story is told in the third person, has several happy effects. Mark Twain himself becomes an appealing and interesting character, or, more accurately, presence. He is lively, witty, and shrewd. He is 'good' because he hates social injustice, a 'regular guy' because he can enjoy buffoonery as well as irony. He has an enthusiasm for his own story that is infectious. His personality is so strong, indeed, that it gives the work a rhetorical unity that holds it together even when the action seems to be exploding in three ways at once.

With all of these appealing qualities the Mark Twain who is the narrator of *Pudd'nhead Wilson* can nevertheless be faulted. He seems not to be so learned, so careful with details, so chary of melodrama and burlesque as we might like. Worse, he does not seem interested enough in his characters. He is too predictable in his response to goodness and evil, and his descriptions of joy and sorrow are so exaggerated that we feel he is not moved by either. Nothing stops him if he senses possibilities for humor; he even makes fun of Roxy as he has her preparing to commit suicide. In fine, one becomes more aware than he should of the author as manipulator, of the way he moves his characters at will for such purposes as climax, irony, humor, and pathos....

Along the way when the story lines drift apart, Mark Twain with the aplomb of an experienced raconteur simply tells us that he is dropping one line and taking up another.... The implausibilities that are the curse of realistic fiction but part of the charm of fabulation abound in *PW*. *Pudd'nhead Wilson*, who has to his credit not only a college degree but a year's post-graduate work in an Eastern law school, settles in Dawson's Landing of all places to seek his fortune.

Furthermore, this handsomely educated fortune hunter, despite the fact that he gets no legal business because of his nickname, stays in Dawson's Landing for twenty years! By chance Roxy and the Percy Driscolls have babies on the same day, and the babies look so much alike that only Roxy can tell them apart. Mrs. Driscoll conveniently dies within the week of the birth of her baby so that Roxy can take care of both children--and exchange their clothes and cradles. Roxy plans to establish herself in New Orleans, but the bank fails in which she has her money invested, and so she has to return to Dawson's Landing. By chance the false Tom, Roxy's son, sees the cash box of his 'uncle' open and available, a circumstance that leads to both theft and murder. And it is the same false Tom who inadvertently calls attention to the glass strip that carries the fingerprints which eventually convict him. It is a world of make-believe in which excitement, suspense, and ingenuity are more important than probability....

Readable as it is, *Pudd'nhead Wilson* nevertheless falters as a story, chiefly because of Mark Twain's dependence upon stock situations. The good boy saves the bad boy from drowning. Babies are exchanged so that the offspring of the doting mother will have honor and riches. The chief concern of the villain is over a will that will make him either a prince or a pauper. The virtuous slave is sold down the river by the villain. The aristocratic gentleman has nothing but contempt for a son who when insulted fails to challenge the offender to a duel. Capping the stock situations are the stock scenes: the son on his knees before his mother, the worried villain sitting on a sofa with his throbbing head between his hands, the murderer finally convicting himself by fainting when the facts are offered in court. In sum, the overlay of nineteenth-century melodrama is too great to allow the narrative to come through freshly and vigorously. To say this is not to downgrade the book for lack of Realism, but to fault its narrator for failing to portray his fictive world with enough imagination. The story is weaker than it should be, not because it departs from life but because in departing from life it stays too close to other stories....

All of the crimes and tragedies that follow in the story, Mark Twain makes evident, result directly or indirectly from the fact that the Southern whites cling perversely to the myth about blood instead of accepting the evidence of their senses. The basic conflict in the tale, thus, is not between the moral and the immoral, or between a sound heart and a deformed conscience, but between the rational thought of the author and the irrational thought of man as represented by the people of Dawson's Landing. As a counter to the unscientific thought of his characters Mark Twain opposes his own brand of science, mechanical determinism....

This story has about it a parable-like clarity, we are what our training makes us. Unfortunately Mark Twain blurs his point with the false Tom who, pampered as a youth, grows up to be selfish and arrogant as one might expect. But he also turns out to be cowardly and not even above killing his benefactor and selling his mother down the river--traits that are not inevitable because of the training. Nevertheless, though Mark Twain may botch a demonstration now and then (usually to answer the siren calls of melodrama and burlesque) his belief in determinism emerges clearly in the book as a whole. The blacks are obviously trapped by their training, but the whites do not escape. They are the products of the myths, prejudice, and false assumptions that have been drilled into them since childhood. Possibly the ultimate in entrapment is that none of the characters even remotely suspects that he is trapped. Life as depicted in *Pudd'nhead Wilson*, then, is a purposeless absurdity in which the men and women simply play out their destined roles."

John C. Gerber  
"Pudd'nhead Wilson as Fabulation"  
*Studies in American Humor* 2 (April 1975) 21-31

"Several things from the author's life influenced his writing of [tales about twins]. He had seen Siamese twins on exhibit in 1891. He had been interested in fingerprinting as a means of identification at least as early as 1883 in 'A Dying Man's Confession'...and had gotten specific details of fingerprinting from Sir Francis Galton's book *Finger Prints* (London, 1892). The topics of slavery and miscegenation (the interbreeding of races) had been with him since his childhood. From his earliest days on the Virginia City Territorial *Enterprise*--as early as 1863--when he adopted the pen name Mark Twain, his own identity had taken on at least two public faces: the humorist writer and the serious reporter. As Frederick Anderson points out, 'Identical twins are an obvious and graphic symbol of divided identity and Clemens' preoccupation with them appeared early and was persistent thereafter. In 1869 he had published an account of the "Personal Habits of the Siamese Twins"--twins possessing many habits and characteristics later to be assigned to the twins, Luigi and Angelo.'

And he was influenced by his observations of the social evils in his society stemming from man's baseness--a baseness which allowed slavery and its inhumanity to come into being. Finally, Clemens' hometown of Hannibal must have served as his model for Dawson's Landing--the name coming from J. D. Dawson, who ran a school in Hannibal. Clemens attended this school, which also served as a model for Dobbin's school in *Tom Sawyer*....

The humor on the surface that surrounds David Wilson--with his ignominious name and treatment far below what his education, intelligence, and profession deserve--this humor points up the stupidity of all the

residents of Dawson's Landing, a pessimistic though perhaps justifiable commentary on the common man. Even Pudd'nhead's own maxims, with their wry humor and satire, make us grimace at how bitter our existence must be, how foolish we all are, how insignificant man is. And the humor in the duel, both for its participants and its observers, is not terribly funny. The seconds get shot. Roxy, observing from afar, gets the skin of her nose shot off.

What we have in the duel is Clemens' broad criticism of an entire code of conduct represented by the First Families of Virginia--an antiquated code in a depressingly corrupt South with its fading, outdated aristocracy.... Roxy, when she is disturbed at her son's cowardice at his refusal to fight a duel, says of him, 'Ain't nigger enough in him to show in his finger-nails, en dat takes mighty little--yit dey's enough to paint his soul.' She even says to Tom, 'Here you is, a slinkin' outen a duel en disgracin' our whole line like a ornery lowdown hound! Yes, it's de nigger in you!' The phrase 'our whole line' ostensibly refers to the Essex blood in him, but her final statement redirects our thinking. From the mouth of a character whom we respect we hear that cowardice is a racial matter. Both the southern aristocracy and the Black race suffer here."

Sidney E. Berger, Preface  
*Pudd'nhead Wilson and Those Extraordinary Twins*  
(Norton Critical Edition 1980)

"As any student of Mark Twain soon discovers, serious critical attention to his work is not apparent until the middle of the twentieth century. In the case of *Pudd'nhead Wilson* (1894), the watershed dates from essays by Leslie Fiedler in 1955 and F. R. Leavis in 1956. Since that time there have been a surprising number of studies of the novel, all of them useful in unraveling one or another aspect of the work without presenting in total more than a mosaic of motifs and themes....

The tendency is to treat the Italian twins, Luigi and Angelo, as vestige from *Those Extraordinary Twins* or as examples of Twain's fascination with doubles; to eliminate Wilson's palmistry and fingerprinting as cheap motifs from Victorian melodrama; and to ignore all but a handful of entries from *Pudd'nhead Wilson's Calendar* which are easily recognized as satiric commentary on the story....

It is worth emphasizing that Roxana's diluted black blood is the result of four cases of miscegenation in four successive generations; her son's dilution to one thirty-second is the further result of her secret union with Colonel Cecil Burleigh Essex--the fifth successive occurrence. Yet nothing is disturbed. The regular crossing of the color line for the purpose of gratifying white lust is by now an established institution, completely integrated into the equilibrium of the community. Twain emphasizes this when he outlines the important citizens of the town: 'Then there was Colonel Cecil Burleigh Essex, another F.F.V. of formidable calibre--however, with him we have no concern'....

The hiding of Pudd'nhead's intellect behind the mask of the fool, paradoxically, allows for his acceptance and partial integration into the life of the town. Meanwhile, unable to practice his legal profession, he remains an intellectual isolate for more than twenty years. His presence constitutes an instability which can only be corrected when Dawson's Landing finally assimilates into itself the qualities Wilson represents: intellect, in its purest sense; law, the practical application of intellect; and perhaps wisdom. I say perhaps because this side of Wilson, it turns out, is never successfully integrated into the community at the end. The fact that many entries in his *Calendar* have no apparent bearing on events of the story may function symbolically as an indication of a degree of wisdom quite beyond the comprehension of the town, at the beginning and later....

Like Wilson, Tom's true identity is masked; the revelation of his real identity by Wilson at the end of the book constitutes a double unmasking... What Wilson's lonely vigil from his little house 'on the extreme western verge of the town' reveals is that the community has no place for intelligence, wisdom, or procedural law. What Tom's repeated crimes reveal is that the original harmony of the town rests on a fabric of fundamental lawlessness and passion. The fact of persistent miscegenation through generations--without a visible tremor--serves as fundamental evidence. That Judge Driscoll, the highest legal authority, abhors the idea of a courtroom trial and resorts to the aristocratic code of the duel reinforces it....

Who people are becomes the real key to discovering what the community is. As people hide their identity behind masks appearances take on the status of reality, leading to multiple levels of irony. Roxana appears to be white but is really a slave according to the arbitrary definition of Dawson's Landing. Her son is likewise 'black' but his whiteness allows for the substitution of appearance for reality--engineered by the exchange of babies. Thenceforth, Roxana, who is really the mother of Tom, assumes the appearance of a family slave (which, paradoxically, she is), while Tom confuses her appearance for reality.... The deepest irony, of course, is the unquestioned acceptance by Roxana and Valet de Chambre of the arbitrary logic according to which someone with Negro blood diluted to one thirty-second is still a 'nigger' and thus only 'imitation white'....

In order to conceal his identity during his robberies in Dawson's Landing, Tom adopts the disguise of a Negro woman; later, when he attempts to rob Judge Driscoll, he blackens his face to look like a Negro slave. After Tom sells Roxana down the river she returns, disguised as a Negro tramp. These disguises represent a kind of masochistic wish fulfillment, as Roxana and her son assume the appearance of precisely what Dawson's Landing has arbitrarily defined them to be. Tom's robbery of the Judge in the guise of a Negro functions symbolically for the generalized robbery he has been engaged in for years while really a Negro disguised as a white. The fact that disguises which are identical to the underlying reality serve as the perfect way to hide one's identity is germane to the larger contradictions in the community.... *Pudd'nhead Wilson* is then a labyrinth of lost identities or secret identities, appearances which look real, disguises which symbolize reality. David Wilson is given an identity on the day he arrives in the community; what he has been given serves thereafter as a disguise concealing his real shrewdness. Disguised as a fool, Wilson uses his spare time for more than twenty years developing a foolproof test for identity... The sum total of Wilson's slides constitutes the infallible test for the identity of the town itself....

The new equilibrium which occurs, even though it now includes the lawlessness of Tom brought under the control of Wilson's legal intellect, reveals the deeper ironies of a slaveholding civilization; for even the most powerful penetration of deception and the unveiling of truth make no lasting mark on this society.... Because the people of Dawson's Landing possess only a single, literal view of things, 'irony was not for those people'; Wilson alone has the gift of double vision. The excerpts from his Calendar printed at the head of each chapter give a tonal reinforcement to the dramatic polarities of the story itself. They reinforce the more profound man which the community has masked as a fool. At the same time, if *Pudd'nhead Wilson's Calendar* seems to fly free of direct commentary on the situation this is after all the irony of its author's isolated intellect."

Barry Wood  
"Narrative Action and Structural Symmetry in *Pudd'nhead Wilson*"  
*Pudd'nhead Wilson and Those Extraordinary Twins*  
(Norton Critical Edition 1980) 370-81  
ed. Sidney E. Berger

Michael Hollister (2015)