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Exploring Prejudice, Miscegenation, and Slavery's Consequences in Mark Twain's *Pudd'nhead Wilson*

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ABSTRACT

This research paper analyzes Mark Twain's use of racist speech and racial stereotypes in his novel *Pudd'nhead Wilson*. Twain has often been criticized for his seemingly inflammatory language. However, a close reading of the text, supplemented by research in several anthologies of critical essays, reveals that Twain was actually interested in social justice. This is evident in his portrayal of Roxana as a sympathetic character who is victimized by white racist society in Dawson's Landing, Mississippi during the time of slavery. In the final analysis, Twain's writing was a product of the time period during which he wrote. This knowledge helps students understand the reasons behind Twain's word choices, characterization, and portrayal of race.

Keywords: Mark Twain, *Pudd'nhead Wilson*, miscegenation, racism, slavery, literature, American Literature, Roxana

In his novel *Pudd'nhead Wilson*, Mark Twain uses racist speech and ideology to examine slavery's consequences and make a plea for the elevation of the black race. Roxana, the true protagonist and an obviously sympathetic character, appears to be a white supremacist. This is a logical contradiction. It is one of many contradictions that lend the book its complexity and make it challenging to interpret. Roxana has a dual nature in more ways than one. She is smart yet always loses. She is committed to her own survival while being filled with self-loathing. She is free and relishes her freedom, yet can be bought and sold at any time.

The basic plot of *Pudd'nhead Wilson* involves Roxana, a house slave of Percy Driscoll living in Dawson's Landing, Missouri. She gives birth to a child on the same day that Driscoll's wife does. Fearing her child will be sold down the river, Roxana switches the two babies in their cribs so that her son will be raised as Driscoll's son and heir. She is able to do this because both she and her son are of mixed

race and can pass for white (Twain 15). When the children become adults, one is accused of murder. Only the title character, a disgraced young lawyer, is able to sort out the identities and identify the murderer.

In a novel made up of realities that deny one another, Roxana is the most conflicted character and, for that reason, the most important. Without her switching the babies, there would have been no story. She begins and maintains the conflict (Ziff 86). Roxana, not Wilson, is the true protagonist of the novel, the one through which readers experience it. Punished for her strengths, shackled by her weaknesses, and denied a place of any stature, Roxana is a stand-in for all women. At the novel's climax, when she cries "De Lord have mercy on me, po' misable sinner dat I is!" (Twain 193), she is speaking for all humankind, not just for herself or even just for black women.

Twain intended Roxana to be a symbol of slavery's consequences. This intent is evident in *Pudd'nhead Wilson's* setting, the inventory of Roxana's interior

and exterior dialogue, the nature of the novel's main conflict, and in the consensus of its major critics and analysts. That Twain buried his intent beneath racial caricatures, regional stereotypes, melodrama and sardonic humor is a function of the historical context in which he wrote and of his development as a writer.

Twain shows us, from the first pages of *Puddn'head Wilson*, the status of race relations in Dawson's landing. The uniform houses boast "whitewashed exteriors" (Twain 5). The town is "...washed by the clear waters of the great river;..." (Twain 6). This is the Mississippi River. To the whites, it is a symbol of purity and prosperity. We learn that "[s]teamboats passed every hour or so" (Twain 7) carrying passengers and merchandise. Like the virginal white houses, the river lets the white folk know that they are part of a successful, contented community. But there is another community, hidden from view and prevented from joining the dominant culture. Having given us the setting, Twain's narrator states, "Dawson's Landing was a slaveholding town" (Twain 7). There is an entire class of people who are seen as merchandise, something to be bought, sold, and carried away on steamboats. The river does not represent purity and prosperity for them. When Driscoll threatens to sell his slaves down the river, "[i]t was equivalent to sending them to Hell!" (Twain 20).

As Fiedler points out, the whole description of Dawson's Landing is meant as a lead-in for the introduction of slavery and its consequences (Fiedler 133). Roxana's life exemplifies these consequences. Central to the plot are Roxana's questionable morals and constant self-justification. The earliest example is the incident of Driscoll's stolen money. Roxana is innocent, but only because she has been "saved in the nick of time" (Twain 18) by a

religious experience. The money disappears anyway, leading to Driscoll's angry demand for a confession, his threat to sell the slaves "DOWN THE RIVER!" (Twain 20), and his ostensibly generous decision not to do so. This scene shows the consequences of slavery in one key way. That way is the ethical dissolution of the slaves, exemplified in Roxana. Her religious awakening is only temporary. The narrator assures us Roxana "would be rational again" (Twain 19) in a few days and would be able to justify a petty theft. This is because blacks "had an unfair show in the battle of life, and held it no sin to take military advantage of the enemy" (Twain 19).

Mistreatment at the hands of the white power structure left the slaves with no choice but to rationalize theft. This is the novel's first examination of slavery's consequences. It hurts both the slaves, who have lost their values, and the masters, who continually lose personal property. Carolyn Porter points out that Roxana made a slave of Tom, who was born free (Porter 158). In this way she stole his future. This is a huge theft that she is able to justify- like the smaller thefts of money and provisions- first because of her general condition in life, and, more shockingly, by comparing herself to her oppressor. After switching the infants, she tells baby Tom "I's sorry for you, honey... God knows I is" (Twain 24). This indicates Roxana does have a moral compass, one that makes her feel guilty. She then overrides this sense of right and wrong, saying: "Tain't no sin- *white* folks has done it! It ain't no sin, glory to goodness it ain't no sin! *Dey's* done it- yes en dey was de biggest quality in de whole bilin' too- *kings!*" (Twain 24).

In this terrible statement, Roxana has both given white men supremacy and reduced her status (and that of her people) to one no better than slavery. In effect, Roxana,

the most intelligent, nuanced, and complex character in the novel, has become a white supremacist. Later, when her son refuses to duel Luigi, she tells him “It’s the nigger in you, dat’s what it is!” (Twain 119). This is not proof of Twain’s racism. Rather, as Fiedler says in his analysis, this is “The name of their own lot turned insult in the mouth of the offended- beyond this it is impossible to go; and we cannot even doubt that this is precisely what Roxy would have said!” (Fiedler 137).

Rather than deriding the black race, Twain is pushing for social justice by showing how far blacks have fallen. But why not write a story with more positive black characters? As a group, the morally dissolute slaves grovel before Driscoll when he spares them. They “...kissed his feet, declaring that they would never forget his goodness” (Twain 20). This is for a man who believes his actions are “noble and gracious” (Twain 20), simply because he takes the slightly less cruel option of selling the slaves in Missouri rather than down the river. Even Roxana, the heroine, is at the end “...reduced to the rags of a racial stereotype” (Porter 168). Her son is sold to pay his master’s debts. She is only able to survive through the true Tom’s granting of a pension (Porter 168). The selling of her son down the river, the event she tried to avoid at all costs, has taken place despite Roxana’s best efforts. If Twain felt empathy for the black race, why personify blacks in a woman who is foiled every step of the way and finally comes to ruin?

For one thing, Twain probably could not have published his book with a cast of fully realized black women and men. He was writing at a time when slavery and the Civil War were fresh in the minds of many readers. For that reason, the most scathing indictment of slavery is Bowdlerized from the novel. This is miscegenation, the

unspoken reason for Roxana and her son’s ability to pass for white. It is obvious that Tom and Chambers have the same father (Ziff 87). But Twain cannot state this outright, so he substitutes Judge Driscoll, making him a paternalistic foster father. This is the reason Tom kills him. Fiedler states that

“The logic of the plot and its symbolic import both demand really that Tom be revealed as the bastard of the man he killed; but we are provided instead with a specially invented double of the dead Driscoll as the boy’s begetter, a lay figure called Cecil Burleigh Essex” (Fiedler 135).

Puddn’head Wilson is a book of contrasts, duality, and deception. Just as Roxana substituted her son for Driscoll’s rightful heir, Twain substitutes Driscoll for the father of both children. He named the novel after Wilson even though Roxana is the main character. Roxana is both intelligent and a crude caricature, a self-aware black woman and an ostensible white supremacist. Puddn’head Wilson is a bumbling crank who brilliantly solves a mystery. But this jumbled novel and its body of criticism are clear on one conclusion: Mark Twain was neither a racist nor a provocateur when he wrote *Puddn’head Wilson*. He was a late nineteenth century American writer with progressive views on race relations. He is also the same writer who said “[t]he skin of every human being contains a slave” (Fiedler 133). Bondage, cruelty, and miscegenation, in Twain’s view, have bound blacks and whites together. We are just as inseparable as the true Tom and the true Chambers- siblings through treachery and shared experience, no matter how hard we have tried to suppress that experience.

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