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## Recontextualizing *Pudd'nhead*: Minstrelsy, Race, and the Performance of Progress

Collin A. Skeen

University of Kentucky, cskeen07@gmail.com

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Collin A. Skeen, Student

Dr. Michelle Sizemore, Major Professor

Dr. Andrew Doolen, Director of Graduate Studies

RECONTEXTUALIZING *PUDD'NHEAD*: MINSTRELSY, RACE, AND THE  
PERFORMANCE OF PROGRESS

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THESIS

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of Master of English in the  
College of Arts and Sciences  
at the University of Kentucky

By

Collin A. Skeen

Lexington, Kentucky

Director: Dr. Michelle Sizemore, Professor of English

Lexington, Kentucky

2015

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## ABSTRACT OF THESIS

### RECONTEXTUALIZING *PUDD'NHEAD WILSON*: MINSTRELSY, RACE, AND THE PERFORMANCE OF PROGRESS

This thesis examines how Twain's *Pudd'nhead Wilson* does much more than simply bridge the recurring racial and cultural behaviors of the antebellum South with the reality of late-19<sup>th</sup> century America; instead, I argue that Twain's novella acts as a performative text, participating in a dialogue with a number of cultural forces—literature, theatre, politics, and commercialism—as a way of commenting on popular conceptualizations of late-nineteenth century social progress. Using the critical perspective of Performance Studies, it is clear that Twain's novel is demonstrating how nineteenth century America used certain sets of symbols and signs to perform race, ultimately critiquing the arbitrary nature of these signs and identifiers. From minstrelsy to *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and the 1893 World's Fair, Twain's text both references and reenacts popular and nostalgic 19<sup>th</sup> century performances of race and gender while showcasing how these same tropes and stereotypes are being reconfigured at the end of the century, foreshadowing the sleight of hand that presented Jim Crow and the American eugenics movement under the moniker of progress.

KEYWORDS: Mark Twain, Performativity, Minstrelsy, World's Fair, Eugenics.

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Collin A. Skeen

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May 4<sup>th</sup> 2015

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THE PERFORMANCE OF PROGRESS

By

Collin A. Skeen

Michelle Sizemore Ph. D.

Director of Thesis

Andrew Doolen Ph. D.

Director of Graduate Studies

May 4<sup>th</sup> 2015

This thesis is dedicated to Crystal Holman and Michael Hunt.

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## Chapter One -- Introduction

In a letter to his daughter Clara written five years before his death, Mark Twain asked her to return home to New York as he had “broken his bow and burned his arrows” (Tuckey 69). The life of Mark Twain at the beginning of the twentieth century was quite different from his life only a few years prior. Nearly a decade removed from the publication of his most influential novel, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Mark Twain found himself in a peculiar place at the turn of the century—his wife had passed away the previous year and his literary output was largely reduced to the necessity of paying off bills and debts. With these circumstances in mind, Twain’s parenthetical remark to his daughter may initially come across as a sign of defeat or resignation, but a closer reading of this line reveals the opposite. Here, Twain invokes the valedictory spirit of Shakespeare’s farewell to theatre as staged through Prospero’s broken staff at the end of *The Tempest*. And while Twain had always been a fan of Shakespeare—his personal letters reveal his reverence for Shakespeare’s writing and legacy—his homage to multiple theatrical forms, his own stage performances, and his involvement in organizing theatre demonstrate how influential theatre as a whole was for Mark Twain’s life and writing.

Influenced from the very beginning by Shakespeare, vaudeville, minstrelsy, melodrama, travel writing, and freak shows (among other theatrical forms), Twain spent his life consuming, creating, and conceptualizing theatre regardless of the particular medium in which he found himself working. Publically, Twain championed theatre as an essential teaching tool, suggesting that children’s theatre “is easily the most valuable adjunct that any educational institution for the young can have,” but any careful reader of his works can easily see how his perfect timing of a joke, mastery of blending comedy

and tragedy, and focus on spectacle all emerge as characteristics that Twain learned through his participation in the theatre (820). Although Twain was heavily influenced by theatre, literary scholars spent a good portion of the last century attempting to elevate Twain above the depths of popular and low-brow entertainment into the realm of high literature, thus diminishing the importance of Twain's connections to the theatre with the ultimate goal of legitimizing his writing—establishing *Huck Finn* as the “Great American Novel.”

Over the past few decades, the advent of critical movements such as New Historicism and Performance Studies have encouraged critics to revisit Twain's theatrical influences, recontextualizing the author and his extremely vast and complicated body of work within the greater scope of late-19<sup>th</sup> century popular entertainments. As a result, his works have been opened up to a variety of different perspectives that all benefit from a more careful and nuanced reading of Twain's connections to the theatre—both highbrow and low brow. More recently critics, such as Susan Gillman and Randall Knoper, have discussed how Twain's interest in theatre manifests itself in his novels, contending that issues of representation and performance became two of his biggest thematic interests during the later years of his career. Susan Gillman identifies *The Prince and the Pauper* (1881) as one of Twain's first real dissections of performativity and theatricality. Continuing this line of investigation, Randall Knoper conceptualizes *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* (1889) as Twain's struggle with the manipulation, commodification, and complete transformation of spectacle in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

In this project, I extend this scholarly work on performance by presenting *Pudd'nhead Wilson* as the next point of inquiry into Mark Twain's opus of performance and theatricality. This oft-misunderstood text suffered considerably from the cultural decontextualization of Twain's works in the early twentieth century. For both the book's content and layered social critique are largely dependent upon references and signs from various forms of 19<sup>th</sup> century popular entertainments. Ultimately, *Pudd'nhead* brings together Twain's interests in race, class, and theatricality—his interest in the manipulative potential of representation finds new inspiration in cultural performances of racial difference at the end of the nineteenth century and how these performances were used to promote ideologies of racial essentialism that justified the systematic discrimination of African Americans post-emancipation while cultivating the beginnings of Jim Crow and the eugenics movement.

I first examine Twain's establishment of *Pudd'nhead Wilson* as a performative text through the constant destabilization of his reader; from there, I show how these moments of instability reveal a deeper critique of racial representation at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. By subverting and problematizing popular racial stereotypes, Twain forces his readers to question the validity of these one-dimensional depictions and to recognize simultaneously how their own understandings of race have been shaped and influenced by performances of racial difference. Finally, I apply Twain's criticisms and alternative methods of interpreting race to the 1893 World's Fair—a global stage where issues of race, progress, and science were being highly spectacularized and performed in front of nearly two-thirds of the US population. As such I demonstrate that American racial essentialism was being performed and propagated on an international stage through the

combined use of minstrel stereotypes, antebellum nostalgia, and pseudoscientific rhetoric. *Pudd'nhead Wilson* does much more, however, than simply bridge the recurring racial and cultural behaviors of the antebellum South with the reality of the end of the century; instead, *Pudd'nhead Wilson* uses performativity to critique the late-19<sup>th</sup> century narrative of American racial progress, unsettling cultural representations of race and gender and thereby prompting readers to recognize the essentialist implications hidden within these seemingly-progressive popular performances of race in the 1890s.

## Chapter Two -- Literature Review

In his concluding thoughts on Mark Twain's *Pudd'nhead Wilson*, Hershel Parker famously conceded that some problematic texts "may be ultimately unreadable, however earnestly we will, out of necessity, continue to attempt to read them" (142). Fittingly, this statement marked the starting point of the interesting trajectory of critical scholarship about Twain's 1893 novel set in the antebellum South. Early critics were primarily concerned with the novel's place in the literary canon: did *Pudd'nhead*—despite its "gaudy" but "thrilling" conclusion (141)—provide the same caliber of literary mastery and nuanced critique of American racism as *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*? Or was the novel merely a careless attempt at writing a popular piece by a financially-desperate Twain? While these concerns continue to be addressed by critics, many contemporary scholars have used the novel's surface inconsistencies as a way of breaking new ground—its textual gaps have unearthed new tools for reading this once unreadable text. Whether addressing the novel's readability and literary value, its use of an antebellum setting in a postbellum world, or the novelist's controversial depiction of race,

most scholarship surrounding *Pudd'nhead* ultimately takes its messiness as a necessary point of departure, but one that leads to a number of different critical interpretations.

Until the 1950s, most critics either saw *Pudd'nhead* as a flawed product of Twain's financial desperation or they totally disregarded it, leaving the novel tucked away in the shadows of *Huckleberry Finn*. Arthur Mizener dismisses *Pudd'nhead Wilson* in "The Thin, Intelligent Face of American Fiction," calling it "crude and awkward" when "judged by the standards of a well-made novel" (519). Other critics pitied the novel, trying instead to justify their disappointment by pinpointing where Twain went wrong. In 1957, Henry Nash Smith's "Can 'American Studies' Develop a Method?" attempts to track this exact shift in Twain's authorial development, suggesting that Twain's later writing—citing *Pudd'nhead* as a prime example—was diminished by both a disruption of the cultural understanding of the artist and "his writing from the perspective of alienation" (6). These influential works on *Pudd'nhead* reinforced the general opinion of the novel as an unworthy text in Twain's oeuvre.

Despite these denunciations of *Pudd'nhead*'s value as a piece of literature, this period also produced two texts that are ultimately responsible for the novel's revival amongst critics: Leslie Fiedler's 1955 article "'As Free as Any Cretur...'" and F. R. Leavis's "Mark Twain's Neglected Classic: The Moral Astringency of 'Pudd'nhead Wilson'" published a few months later. Fiedler, claiming that the novel is "a fantastically good book, better than Mark Twain knew or his critics have deserved," celebrates *Pudd'nhead*'s dealings with both slavery and miscegenation—a matter "which most of our writers have chosen to avoid"—and its ability to render racial indignities "as a local instance of some universal guilt and doom" instead of simple melodrama (249, 255).

With a title that rings out as a note of critical rebellion, Leavis takes a slightly different approach, asserting that the need for *Pudd'nhead*'s reevaluation as a classic comes from its close relation to *Huck Finn*; Leavis explains that an appreciation of the "lesser work" will lead to a surer perception of the greatness of the greater (255). Beyond the comparisons to *Huck Finn*, Leavis highlights *Pudd'nhead*'s concern with "the complexities of both human nature and civilization as represented in a historical community" as one of the novel's major achievements (266). While these two works may not have changed the general opinion of *Pudd'nhead Wilson* over night, Fiedler and Leavis were monumental in positioning the novel as a text worthy of complex criticism.

By the 1960s and 70s, the New Critics found themselves interested in the novel's form and composition; most of this work was focused on the disorder and unreadability of the primary text. In 1978's "Exigencies of Composition and Publication: *Billy Budd*, *Sailor* and *Pudd'nhead Wilson*," Hershel Parker's major complaint with the novel focused on the text's clumsy transformation of the farce *Those Extraordinary Twins* to the published tragedy of *Pudd'nhead Wilson*—what Twain famously referred to as a literary Caesarean operation. Parker suggests that the final courtroom scene leaves nothing resolved because the fate of the changelings becomes a "throwaway joke" while the immorality of slavery quickly gets pushed to the background (112). Parker argues that Twain, knowing an over-the-top theatrical ending would satisfy his typical reader, hurriedly pieced the ending together; ultimately, the final manuscript fails as a singular text as "it does not bear much thinking about in relation to the rest of the published story" (141). While Catharine O'Connell's "Resecting Those Extraordinary Twins: *Pudd'nhead Wilson* and the Costs of 'Killing Half'" echoes this concern about the novel's inability to

stand alone, she points out that a close reading of both the farce and the tragedy are required to truly comprehend the finished novel's thematic concerns. She revises Twain's use of the Caesarean metaphor, suggesting that the final dependence of the texts upon each other more closely resembles an (unsuccessful) separation of Siamese twins.

While the readings of both Parker and O'Connell are certainly suggestive, others have argued that the messiness of the novel and its problematic ending is intentional. Instead of interpreting the theatrics of the final courtroom scene as a way to mask the loose threads left at the end of novel, Forrest G. Robinson's 1990 article "The Sense of Disorder in *Pudd'nhead Wilson*" notes the awareness of Twain's Pudd'nhead in the final scene as he masterfully distracts everyone, including "himself, Mark Twain, and the audience inside and outside the novel," from the fingerprints' deeper implications (44). Unlike Parker and O'Connell, Robinson believes that Twain's plot makes a very conscious turn at the end of the novel that results in "sparing the masters their appropriate grief, and in sparing Roxy hers, in banishing Tom's darkest moments from the published novel, and in finally refusing to deal with Chambers's curious fate" (45). Here, Robinson hints at the overwhelming complexity of the novel looming beneath its surface.

With the first serious work on the novel coming from a time when New Criticism was the dominant critical perspective, it is easy to understand *Pudd'nhead*'s reputation as an unreadable text; however, more recent scholarship on *Pudd'nhead* frames it instead as a text that depends heavily upon context—historical, cultural, and literary—in order to make sense of its disorder. While the framework of New Criticism once limited *Pudd'nhead* scholarship to discussions about form and content, the transition to New Historicism revealed how the novel's portrayal of race and gender—especially its deep

and nuanced portrayal of miscegenation—mirrors and perhaps critiques race relations in late-nineteenth century America. Initially, New Critics had difficulty situating the novel due to the discrepancies between its antebellum setting and 1894 publication, leading critics to interpret Twain's commentary within the context of the antebellum period. However, in 1980's "*Pudd'nhead Wilson: Whose Tragedy Is It?*" Jerry B. Hogan extends his reach from Twain's past to his present as he reads the tragedy as revealing an America that "has utterly failed its promise," suggesting that the guilt of Dawson's Landing also rests upon the shoulders of a new generation (12). This approach then sees its full realization as Myra Jehlen begins her 1990 article "The Ties That Bind: Race and Sex in *Pudd'nhead Wilson*" by acknowledging both the benefits and shortcomings of New Historicism before introducing *Pudd'nhead* as a tragedy that "only a historical criticism can fully appreciate" (412). She uses the novel's tangled plot and its ending as a way to reveal how Twain, due to the cultural conflicts involved in being a white male abolitionist, was trapped "by the impossible adjuncts of racial equality and white authority, of maternal justice and patriarchal right" (426). While Hogan's piece provides a tiny glimpse into the possibilities that historical criticism could bring to *Pudd'nhead Wilson*, Jehlen's article acts as a telescope, immediately bringing the novel's relationship with race and sex into clear focus.

After acknowledging the novel's treatment of race and gender, scholars began analyzing these aspects of *Pudd'nhead* further while examining how the novel's dual handling of time allows Twain to provide more powerful and revealing commentary about race as he highlights the lasting links between slavery, miscegenation, and the American handling of racial issues. Most noticeably, *Pudd'nhead*'s use of mulattos

reflects the increase of national interest in miscegenation at the end of the nineteenth century. Susan Gillman's groundbreaking "'Sure Identifiers': Race, Science and the Law in *Pudd'nhead Wilson*," published in 1990, argues that the novel's antebellum setting allows Twain to implicitly remind readers that "racial codes regulating miscegenation and classifying mixed-race offspring did not disappear after Emancipation"—instead, they had transformed into even more rigorous definitions of whiteness (88). Michael Rogin's "Francis Galton and Mark Twain: The Natal Autograph in *Pudd'nhead Wilson*" considers this approach when interpreting the ending, arguing that the story's interest in the naturalization of race by reducing it to blood marks Twain's goal of bringing readers to the center of racist culture in America. The work of these critics brings up an important point: without finding links between the 1840s and 1890s, readers could potentially interpret *Pudd'nhead* as another anti-slavery story with the Old South as a backdrop.

As a result, other critics began to interpret the novel's obsession with racial identification as relating to the political climate of the late 1890s, with most arguing that the novel critiques the series of events that eventually led to the Jim Crow laws that were active until the middle of the twentieth century. Eric Sundquist declared of *Pudd'nhead* in 1994, "No literary work of the late nineteenth century more accurately embodied the erosion of promised racial equality in the age of Jim Crow" (245). Of course, racial identification plays into this deterioration because of the country's unstable definition of blackness; Jim Crow was notorious for the "one drop" rule which considered anyone with "one drop" of African blood to be black—and subject to acts of segregation and discrimination. In "Some Ways of Freedom in *Pudd'nhead Wilson*," John H. Schaar

describes Jim Crow as a system where “freed people were thrown back into a condition of servitude and exploitation” with little difference from what they knew as slaves (218). Fittingly, critics have placed the novel alongside both antebellum and postwar passing narratives, where mulattoes would pass as whites due to their fairer skin, forging another link between the unjustifiable horrors of slavery and Jim Crow. Once again, Susan Gillman’s “Sure Identifiers” argues that, regardless of the different ways that race is perceived in the novel, Twain’s text demonstrates the completely arbitrary nature of race in the late-nineteenth century, and that race is a completely social construction (viii). By deconstructing the novel’s focus on racial identification, critics with historicist approaches have highlighted Jim Crow and miscegenation laws as key components in *Pudd’nhead*’s social commentary.

However, it is important to note that, since these discussions about identification, there have been conflicting arguments regarding how Twain’s use of a mulatto character in the novel fits in with conventional representations, eventually leading to more diverse and complex understandings of how Twain depicted miscegenation. Even though Twain’s choice to use mulattos as primary characters in *Pudd’nhead* was unique compared to the rest of his work, literature and theatre of the period had already established firm mulatto stereotypes; as a result, *Pudd’nhead* scholars looked to examine Twain’s depictions of miscegenation within the contexts of these cultural stereotypes. Recognizing her role as an example of the tragic mulatta trope, Arthur G. Pettit’s early-1980s article “The Black and White Curse: Pudd’nhead Wilson and Miscegenation” champions the *idea* of Roxy, a character with a mixture of white pathos and black boldness, as the one convincing female character in Twain’s writing who was

not middle-aged, a widow, or a child (334). In 1990, Carolyn Porter's "Roxana's Plot" also classified Roxy as a tragic mulatta; however, she indicates that Twain is successful in his execution, identifying Roxy as the weapon Twain used to assault and humiliate the Southern gentleman and the racist society he still ruled, ultimately marking the Southern white patriarchy as the primary target of the novel's critique. However, Kimberly Wallace-Sanders directly challenged this assumption in her 2009 book *Mammy: A Century of Race, Gender, and Southern Memory*, explaining that while Roxy's position as an enslaved, practically-white servant certainly marks her as a tragic mulatta, her place as the main caretaker of the Driscoll child also establishes her as a mammy. Wallace-Sanders explains that this unique hybrid, what she calls the mulatto mammy, "is marked by racial impurity, and her presence challenges normative forms of representation and behavior" (74). As evidenced by Wallace-Sanders's findings, even the novel's use of traditional tropes and stereotypes are being constantly reevaluated based upon the dominant critical landscape.

Each of these readings suggest that Twain's novel is caught up in a culture of stern racial classification; however, while these critics point out the relationship between culture and race, others have examined how classification and race operate at a scientific level. Michael Rogin explains how Twain's use of fingerprinting was ahead of its time—the first American use of fingerprinting in a criminal case did not occur until 1902. Twain's interest in fingerprinting came from Francis Galton's *Finger Prints*, a study published the year that Twain began working on *Those Extraordinary Twins*. Rogin then shifts his focus back to race as he points out that Galton's work with fingerprinting was used to support the early rise of eugenics as he hoped that race would be identifiable

though human fingerprints—Rogin argues that the flashy ending of the novel highlights the allure of fingerprints as an absolute identifier (fingerprints ultimately solve the case of the changelings) while still criticizing their shortcomings (the fingerprints only proved which man was which; they had no validity as a racial identifier). More recently, Simon A. Cole's 2007 work "Twins, Twain, Galton, and Gilman: Fingerprinting, Individualization, Brotherhood, and Race in *Pudd'nhead Wilson*" has taken Twain's interest in biometric identification and connected it to currents and themes of the twenty-first century, explaining that the need to classify and identify distinctions—between races, individuals, criminals and the rest of us—is one that remains with us. Both Rogin and Cole—who writes from a criminologist perspective—identify the underlying threads that ultimately connect *Pudd'nhead Wilson*'s racial concerns with outside cultural, historical, and scientific contexts. In all, these works based on the principles of New Historicism do offer a fantastic starting point for inquiry, but they are also limited by the broad strokes inherent to their critical perspective, recognizing much of the novel's historical and cultural context while leaving much of the text's literary techniques unexplored.

Fortunately, the advent of performance studies as an emerging discipline has urged *Pudd'nhead* scholars to take these ideas regarding the social and cultural construction of race and push them even further, allowing critics to examine the novel's complex use of literary form, race, and contextual history more closely through the lens of performativity. This approach seems like a perfect fit—Twain had a number of connections to both the theatre and other public performances that emphasize his interest in performativity. In 1990s "*Pudd'nhead Revisited*," James Cox explains that, during

lectures and other public performances, Twain always sought total control over his audiences. According to Cox, verbal performance and public speaking had a certain primacy for Twain that could not be captured by writing and that the voice was “the soul of language that was always at the point of being lost in the body of writing” (3-4). While Twain is best known for his novels, he was an immensely popular and accomplished speaker/performer during the second half of the nineteenth century. Ben Tarnoff’s recent *The Bohemians: Mark Twain and the San Francisco Writers Who Reinvented American Literature* (2014), examines how Twain’s lectures captured the essence of the American spirit; speaking in an ironic style that differed from the spiritualists and pseudoscientists of his day, Twain’s intimate talks were filled with mannerisms, gestures, and asides that made his audiences feel like they were “in on the joke” (12). Most of the lectures that these critics reference were part of the pre-*Huckleberry Finn* popularity of Twain, but, due to financial issues during the 80s and 90s, he continued traveling the lecture circuit for the rest of his career. While there certainly were disconnects between Twain’s writing and onstage persona, the overall relationship between nineteenth century literature and theatre is extremely important to consider. Many scholars, such as Peter Brooks and Nina Auerbach, have demonstrated how nineteenth century novelists wrote for audiences that were well acquainted with the conventions and values of theatre. As a result, Randall K. Knoper’s *Acting Naturally: Mark Twain in the Culture of Performance* attempts to resituate Twain’s writings among other popular forms of nineteenth-century entertainment, including minstrelsy, vaudeville, and the middle-class theatre. Once again, Knoper emphasizes that Twain’s work is much better understood through the lens of other contemporary performative genres.

With this understanding in mind, critics have established that *Pudd'nhead* shares roots with a popular theatrical genre: the blackface minstrel show—one of the most dominant genres in American history. As Eric Sundquist points out in *To Wake the Nations*, the novel borrows profusely from the minstrel tradition, using the mulatto characters—and their constant (but not always conscious) use of whiteface and blackface—to, once again, demonstrate how race is constructed at a social and cultural level. He asserts that the common minstrel theme of the “plantation masquerade pervades the entire novel in parodic but nonetheless serious forms” (49). He also points out that minstrelsy in the 1880s and 1890s was characterized by nostalgic depictions of the antebellum South as a way of combating both economic and political crises. Here, readers can see how Twain uses a carefully reconstructed anti-trope to undermine the nostalgic minstrel tropes typically found during the second half of the century. Roshaunda D. Cade’s “Mulatta Mama Performing Passing and Mimicking Minstrelsy in Mark Twain’s *Pudd’nhead Wilson*” (2007) takes this claim even further, adding a feminist perspective by explaining that Twain’s use of Roxy in blackface inverts the minstrel trope of the cross-dressed wench. She emphasizes that Twain inverts blackface performance as a way of challenging traditional understandings of both minstrelsy and gender.

While this recent focus on performativity has urged critics to revisit many novels and short stories to find underlying connections between Twain the author and Twain the performer, there is still little published about Twain’s actual experimentations with theatre. The influence of theatre and performance on Twain’s body of work has been a hot topic for critics, discussed in such works as Alan Ackerman’s *The Portable Theatre:*

*American Literature and the Nineteenth-Stage* (2007) and Lisa McGunigal's "Twins of Genius: Mark Twain on the Stage, Huck Finn on the Page" (2011), but many of Twain's more performance-based pieces—typically found fragmented and incomplete—have not been tackled by scholars. Two of his original plays, "Colonel Sellers", an adaptation of his novel *The Gilded Age*, and "Is He Dead?" have received very little attention from critics despite their relative popularity and current availability; *Sellers* was an extremely popular production in the late 1870s while *Is He Dead?* was recently unearthed, published in 2003, and resurrected for a Broadway run in 2007, over one hundred years after being written in 1898. Interestingly, Stephen Railton's fantastic *Mark Twain in His Times*, an online resource containing a staggering number of primary texts and contemporary reviews produced in conjunction with the University of Virginia, reveals that a proper stage version of *Pudd'nhead Wilson* was completed in the year after the novel's publication and enjoyed a successful run by a number of different companies. Although Twain had no part in its composition, he expressed complete satisfaction at the performance he attended in May 1895. This adaptation of the novel opens up a critical point of inquiry that has not been approached by most scholars; considering the theatrical nature of the novel, a close reading of both the script and audience reviews could potentially provide a helpful look into the complex use of Twain's own performativity and, more importantly, how his readers and audiences may interpret it.

In closing, it is clear that *Pudd'nhead Wilson* has become much more than the "unreadable" text that Hershel Parker dismissed nearly half a century ago (142). Analyzed through the lens of New Criticism, New Historicism, and Performance Studies, the novel's form, interest in race and gender, and use of performative technique and

gesture have all emerged as the core topics in *Pudd'nhead* scholarship. However, each of these critical perspectives have been somewhat limited in their approach to the novel. Most interpretations of the novel seem to exist within a vacuum, failing to make further connections between the novel and ideas that exist beyond the scope of their respective master disciplines. Although recent scholars have pointed to the uses of performative techniques in *Pudd'nhead Wilson* and Twain's interest in theatre and popular culture, few have extended their claims to consider how the novel itself acts as a performative text, constantly engaging in a conscious dialogue with nineteenth century literature, politics, consumer culture, and popular entertainment about issues of race and gender. Clearly, there is more work to be done in connecting *Pudd'nhead Wilson* to both the theatre and its material conditions. The novel's time frame, awkward form, and problematic ending have all been cited as both major obstacles and inspirations for Twain critics, but these elements also act as examples of playfulness—in a theatrical sense—in Twain's text. With the knowledge that race can be constructed, scripted, performed, and commodified, *Pudd'nhead Wilson*'s sleight of hand may very well represent Twain's critique of what was happening all across America, something that began in theatres and novels but quickly progressed into the realms of eugenics and Jim Crow.

### Chapter Three -- Performative Distancing

Over the course of *Pudd'nhead Wilson*, Twain references, reenacts, and retools popular and nostalgic depictions of blackness from the nineteenth century; however, one must first understand how Twain's use of irony establishes the novel as a performative text. This use of irony paired with playful narration allows Twain's narrator, much like

the burlesque performer, to remind readers of *Pudd'nhead*'s fictionality, allowing Twain to destabilize and subvert the very same popular and stereotypical depictions of blackness that he constantly evokes over the course of the novel. Although Twain incorporates many theatrical elements, *Pudd'nhead Wilson* emerges as a performative text through its consistent challenge to the reader's conventional understanding of words, signs, and references. As Walter Benn Michaels explains, a text manages to move beyond simple representation into the performative when its words begin to disrupt "conscious meaning" by causing readers to question them, leading to revisions of how they interpret and understand certain words, phrases, and gestures, ultimately resulting in a state where readers are solicited not by the words themselves but instead the "experience" of the author (9). Through this performativity, Twain pushes his readers to recognize the dangerous implications left in the mess of *Pudd'nhead*'s ambiguous ending. Thus, through an emphasis on performativity, readers are able to become more attuned to *Pudd'nhead Wilson*'s critique of cultural performances of race and gender at the end of the nineteenth century.

Earlier critics helpfully contextualized the performativity of *Pudd'nhead*'s narrator within the oral storytelling tradition. In "*Pudd'nhead Wilson* as Fabulation," John C. Gerber disagrees with critics who attempt to read *Pudd'nhead* within the confines of the realist novel; instead, he places *Pudd'nhead* within the tradition of the fabulation, a narrative that puts "the emphasis on the fable or story, not on careful documentation of the outer world or on detailed analyses of the characters' inner worlds" (21). He continues:

The fabulator is more like the oral story-teller than the novelist. Concerned primarily with the design and effects of his story, he cheerfully ignores the realism of both subject matter and presentation when it serves his purpose to do so. Yet by keeping his fantasy ethically controlled he puts forth a story that paradoxically comments upon actual human life at the same time that it seems to be flouting that life. (22)

This reading of Twain as a fabulator is appropriate considering his background on the lecture circuit; it also helps root the novel within the oral storytelling tradition while emphasizing the explicitly performative nature of the text. As a way of highlighting this relationship with storytelling, Gerber points out that the first chapter of the novel begins with “the scene of this chronicle”; here, Twain’s introduction locates the story within a performative space between realism and fantasy while also echoing the “once upon a time” that prefaces many stories in the oral tradition (3).

With the fabulation in mind, recent scholarship has examined the novel’s construction of a performative space, engaging more directly with *Pudd’nhead’s* antebellum setting. In “History Repeating Itself,” Sinead Moynihan notes Twain’s focus on the novel’s form as she highlights his attempt to resituate the past. Considering the novel’s antebellum setting, she calls *Pudd’nhead Wilson* a piece of historiographic metafiction: “*Pudd’nhead Wilson’s* own historical setting serves to destabilise and defer endlessly any comfortable sense of ‘the past’ that it might seem to represent” (15). Moynihan uses the performativity of the novel to argue that Twain used the historical setting of the novel to provide context for *Pudd’nhead* while forcing readers to reevaluate how the novel’s reenactment of the past conflicts with common perceptions of the past.

While Moynihan's and Gerber's analyses both highlight how *Pudd'nhead Wilson* should be read as a performative text and account for many of Twain's narrative techniques throughout the novel, such as the numerous asides and constant emphasis on irony, they do not explain all of Twain's narrative patterns.

Considering Twain's use of both literal and narrative performativity, I argue that a close reading of *Pudd'nhead* benefits greatly from an understanding of late-19<sup>th</sup> century burlesque. Finding its major popularity alongside vaudeville and minstrelsy as one of the major variety entertainments of the period, burlesque shows at the end of the century focused on parodying and caricaturing classical works of literature, theatre, and music as a way of providing social commentary. One of the most powerful elements of burlesque was its synthesis of incongruities—reality and fantasy, high art and low art. As Henry Wonham points out, burlesque's "power to set in motion an uncertain relationship between reality and representation, the 'genuine' subject and its 'extravagant' embodiment," is precisely why Mark Twain was so drawn to the genre (132). Introduced to both the burlesque novel and show during his time in San Francisco, Twain incorporated specific examples of the genre into his novels—as shown in the conflation of speeches from *Macbeth*, *Hamlet*, and *Richard III* used by the duke and dauphin in *Huck Finn*—but his works also drew inspiration from burlesque's representative qualities at a thematic level. Maria Marotti points out how the burlesque perspective manifests itself in *A Connecticut Yankee*, "it is a reality that, although distorted by displacement of time and space, still alludes to the American setting...here, too, displacement and ridicule shatter generic expectations connected to an ancient and revered legend" (34). For Twain, the space where these contrasting representational modes come together is where his

social commentary finds its strength. Similar to metafiction and the fabulation in the sense that it also brings attention to the constructed and performative nature of a piece, burlesque results in a distancing effect that, through the constant displacement and distortion of reality, constantly reminds readers of the artificiality of a work, prioritizing its underlying message over the intense emotional involvement typically associated with melodrama. This distancing provides a way of engaging with the spectator-reader more critically. In *Pudd'nhead Wilson* these moments of performative distancing, facilitated by elements such as irony, direct address and certain cues, represent Twain's attempts to situate his readers outside his own text.

Over the course of *Pudd'nhead Wilson*, Twain uses his narrator to ensure that, by the end of the novel, his readers understand that the events of the novel and the community's reactions to them are absolutely ridiculous. Through this distancing, Twain engages in a much larger dialogue about race that was taking place at the end of the nineteenth century, one facilitated by literature, politics, and popular culture. From the beginning of the novel, Twain makes use of a few key narrative techniques such as the displacement of time and space, the introduction of different racial ideologies, and the inversion of racial tropes to assure the reader's distancing from the novel. Leading up to its final culmination in the courtroom scenes, his readers are trained to distance themselves from the novel while reading its use of performativity. As a result, they ultimately see through the sleight of hand that Pudd'nhead Wilson pulls during the final courtroom scene, in which he solves the case by distracting the citizens of Dawson's Landing from the underlying questions of race, miscegenation, and the ever-lasting lingering presence of slavery in the American psyche.

Twain's narrator first establishes this distancing effect by separating the reader from the novel's sense of time and space. Although the town of Dawson's Landing is fictional, Twain's lush description and comparisons to the ancient canals of Venice constructs an extremely idyllic Missouri frontier town—one on the cusp of profound changes. Although the narrator initially situates the story in 1830, the year Wilson was christened a pudd'nhead, most of the novel takes place in 1850—ten years before the beginning of the Civil War. While Missouri is well known as one of the borderlands that connected early America with the expanse of the frontier, the state was also, in the words of Russell Weigley, the site of “increasingly unrestrained and indiscriminate violence” during the Civil War; he suggests that confrontations between Northern anti-slavery forces and Southern pro-slavery forces on the border between Kansas and Missouri were “perhaps the most promiscuous of the entire violent war” (44). Although the novel never refers to the Civil War by name, typical readers at the end of the nineteenth century would be aware of violent Civil War confrontations in the state, such as 1854's Bleeding Kansas, allowing Twain to maintain a very dynamic representational contrast between the idyllic 1850s Missouri and the war-torn state it found itself in only four years later. This constant contrast gives the town an almost dreamlike quality that showcases the carefully scripted series of events that takes place over the course of the story.

Twain also highlights this disruption of time and space by emphasizing that Dawson's Landing is about to experience a very significant political change. At the narrator explains, “the little town was about to become a city and the first charter election was approaching” (70). By stressing that Dawson's Landing is about to transform from a town into a city, Twain establishes his setting as a place in transit—Dawson's Landing

does not exist distinctively within the confines of the past or the future, the antebellum or the postbellum, or the real or imaginary, but instead in a transitory space. Twain's portrait of Dawson's Landing is reminiscent of Foucault's concept of the heterotopia, places that "possess certain qualities or features that distinguish them hierarchically from all other places by virtue of the fact that they comment on, or refer to, other places within the cultural landscape" (Rubertone 84). Here, Twain uses Dawson's Landing to make a number of thematic and structural connections with slavery, the South, and history while also highlighting the illusory and fictitious nature of this space. Twain distances his readers from the setting of the novel by showcasing how readers are not intended to think of Dawson's Landing as an actual town; instead, Twain urges readers to conceptualize Dawson's Landing as a structural device that maps out a complex series of historical, cultural, and political points that instigate cultural commentary through the use of constant temporal and spatial references.

In addition to setting, the narrator's understanding of race in *Pudd'nhead Wilson* also showcases one of Twain's most obvious techniques to highlight the distancing of his narrator from the characters of novel; the narrator consistently demonstrates a much more complex awareness of race compared to the citizens of Dawson's Landing. When Roxy is first introduced, Wilson overhears her in conversation with another slave. Her speech resembles that of a stereotypical slave, but instead of an emphasis on her physical blackness, the narrator describes a small, "beautiful," "noble," and "majestic" white body while also anticipating the reader's surprise at this discovery, remarking that "from Roxy's manner of speech, a stranger would have expected her to be black, but she was

not” (9). After providing this seemingly contradictory description, the narrator offers the reader a glimpse into his own view of race:

To all intents and purposes Roxy was as white as anybody, but the one-sixteenth of her which was black out-voted the other fifteen parts and made her a negro. She was a slave, and salable as such. Her child was thirty-one parts white, and he, too, was a slave, and by a fiction of law and custom a negro. (9)

This passage has a tremendous effect on how the novel approaches race. Here, by calling race (not just slavery) a “fiction of law and custom,” Twain establishes that his narrator believes in an ideology that is radically different from that of any character in the novel. Although Roxy and Tom do exhibit a more complex understanding of race due to their mixed heritage, they both remain convinced of the dominant racist ideology of the time. Tom gets closest as he questions “this awful difference made between white and black” after he learns his true identity, but his awareness of race never reaches the quite the same level as the narrator’s (48). Furthermore, the narrator’s irony of suggesting that the one-sixteenth part of Roxy that was black “out-voted” the other fifteen is emphasized by the reality of the fact that it was the one part that kept her from actually voting in a real election. By almost immediately establishing his narrator as an anti-racist figure, Twain prepares the narrator’s progressive stance on race as one of the major cornerstones for the audience’s alignment with the novel.

Twain also distances his readers from the world within the text through his careful manipulation of popular racial tropes, such as passing. Typically, nineteenth-century passing narratives involve mulatto characters consciously using their lighter skin as a way

to assimilate with whites, allowing them to escape enslavement or discrimination. While the central action of the novel—the switching of Tom and Chambers—is dependent upon passing, *Pudd'nhead* differs from many of its popular contemporaries in the way that it inverts this trope over the course of the novel. When Roxy confronts Tom after he sells her down the river, she goes into detail about her escape, “I blacked my face en laid hid in de cellar of a ole house dat’s burnt down, daytimes, en robbed de sugar hogsheads en grain sacks on de wharf, nights” (95). Here, blackness emerges as Roxy’s main tool for escape. While passing usually depends upon emphasizing whiteness, Twain’s ironic insistence on the potential of passing as black reverses the typical melodramatic narrative. Twain inverts this trope again when Tom uses blackface to disguise himself while robbing his uncle. While this specific inversion may initially appear ideologically problematic, as the text’s linking blackness with criminality, Lawrence Howe explains that it may be a reference to a defensive measure taken by black leaders against accusations of rape in the 1890s. He writes that these leaders “gave birth to the idea that many of the rapes had actually been perpetrated by white men who disguised themselves with burnt cork to sate their sexual appetites and blame black men” (509). This “blackness” was a disguise donned by those who understood its negative cultural implications, but Tom’s use of it represents how these negative implications are more associated with literal color instead of biological racial indicator. In both instances, Twain uses unconventional representations of race to maintain critical engagement with the audience.

Overall, Twain’s narrator emerges as the most important component of establishing *Pudd'nhead Wilson* as a performative text as he demonstrates Twain’s most

explicitly performative gesture in the final courtroom scene. During the last two chapters of *Pudd'nhead Wilson*, the narrator begins inserting stage directions into the body of the text. Placed within the final courtroom scene, every single instance of these bracketed lines expresses some type of action or observation as exemplified in their first two appearances: “[Murmurs, in the house—‘It is getting worse and worse for Wilson’s case]” and “[Here she broke down and sobbed. Sensation in the court]” (106-107). As these chapters continue, more of these inclusions appear, demonstrating interest, applause, and a number of angry ejaculations. These lines are extremely isolated when considering the expanse of the entire novel as they only appear in the final courtroom chapters; furthermore, these twenty-two bracketed lines only appear while action is taking place inside the courtroom—they are completely absent during the second half of Chapter 20 which is set inside Wilson’s home. Here, Twain’s spectacular finale forgoes the narrator’s winks to the reader, instead choosing to end with a spectacular transformation of the novel’s concerns with representation and power into a literal performance.

As read through the lens of performative distancing, Twain’s use of stage directions signals his most obvious use of theatrical conventions; by reading his stage directions as hyper-performative instances that identify the courtroom scenes as a scene in a melodramatic play, Twain’s critique of publicized spectacle becomes apparent as he points out its manipulative potential. Michael Ross explains that “the corrosive irony of *Pudd'nhead Wilson* may seem to be deflected, at the end, by the competing spectacle of Wilson's courtroom performance” (254). In fact, Wilson’s spectacular performance distracts his audience from the ambiguous implications left by his victory, problems that

prove to be more unsettling than the switching of Tom and Chambers. Was the impostor Tom flawed because of his slave ancestry or because of his white upbringing? Could Wilson's fingerprinting be used as a way to identify race? *Pudd'nhead Wilson* does not answer these questions, but the novel makes it clear that the people of Dawson's Landing are not really looking for answers. With community responses reduced to easily anticipated reactions that are merely scripted lines in a show, Twain depicts an unsettling reality where no other outcome could happen. With an impressive new mayor, a solved murder mystery, and the false heir sold down the river, Dawson's Landing seems perfectly content simply restoring a feeling of order through the dramatic courtroom catharsis.

Twain's novel pushes readers to recognize the absurdity of how towns like Dawson's Landing—and, in effect, communities all across America—approach race, gender, and class. Using narrative performativity as a way of distancing readers from both Dawson's Landing and understandings of their own communities, Twain's treatment of race, setting, and spectacle allows the novel to communicate the problems associated with race relations of the 1890s. While distancing his readers from the novel, Twain's references to minstrelsy, vaudeville, and other popular forms of theatre become more apparent. In the context of the 1890s, Twain's reimagined depictions of the traditional Uncle Tom, Mammy, and tragic mulatta characters are eerily similar to those being used by supporters of the eugenics movement and Jim Crow. By promoting the importance of the novel's performativity and structure, Twain prepares his audience to recognize the dialogue that he cultivates between the novel and late-nineteenth-century depictions of race.

## Chapter Four -- The Minstrel Tradition

While Twain's manipulation of the traditional passing narrative and use of a narrator with progressive racial ideologies both represent the structural foundation of his commentary on late-19<sup>th</sup> century race relations in America, a complete reading of *Pudd'nhead Wilson's* depends upon an acute understanding of how racial difference was performed in plays, novels, and other popular entertainments of the second half of the 1800s. Twain's writing intimately interacted with these entertainments, fostering a dialogue between literature and theatre using familiar stereotypes, settings, and tropes. Unfortunately, many of these references remain uninvestigated due to the historical neglect of lowbrow popular culture in Twain criticism. *Pudd'nhead Wilson's* complicated and often misunderstood use of race, however, is better comprehended in relation to one of America's most popular yet problematic art forms: the minstrel show.

As mentioned previously, *Pudd'nhead Wilson* only has two specific instances of blackface; however, the characterization of both Roxy and Tom are deeply connected to the minstrel tradition as they act as retooled representations of minstrel figures such as the Uncle Tom and the Mammy. One of the most popular forms of entertainment during the middle of the nineteenth century, the influence of the minstrel show often made itself apparent in Twain's works. This use of minstrel stereotypes often proved problematic. Using *Huckleberry Finn's* as an example, Kenny J. Williams explains that the novel's depiction of Jim merely reinforced the ideologies of "committed racists" through Jim's "pseudo-minstrel antics" and "the legitimization of the word 'nigger' by one of the nation's most popular writers" (42). On the other hand, Toni Morrison's introduction to

*Huck Finn* suggests that Twain's use of minstrel elements in his representation of Jim is far more complex:

The withholdings at critical moments, which I once took to be deliberate evasions, stumbles even, or a writer's impatience with his or her material, I began to see as otherwise: as entrances, crevices, gaps, seductive invitations flashing the possibility of meaning. Unarticulated eddies that encourage diving into the novel's undertow—the real place where writer captures reader. (4)

Here, Morrison correctly asserts that Twain's withholdings are part of his overall point. Similarly, the incongruities and inconsistencies of *Pudd'nhead*'s racial depictions are best understood in the context of a much larger dialogue about race at the end of the century. Pulling singular moments of racial representation from *Pudd'nhead* may result in a problematic reading, but seeing these instances in the light of 19<sup>th</sup> century performances and understandings of race through mediums such as the minstrel show reveals a much larger critique of how racial difference was being communicated at the end of the century in America.

In *Pudd'nhead Wilson*, which was both written and set nearly ten years after the publication and events of *Huckleberry Finn*, Twain's allusions to the minstrel tradition reflect significant changes that occurred in the genre between 1850 and the beginning of the 1890s. The minstrel show, originally structured as a three-act performance of minstrel songs, parodies, and sketches by white men in blackface, was conceived, as Eric Lott explains, "at the intersection of slave culture and earlier blackface stage characters" such as the American clown and the harlequin from the Italian *commedia dell'arte* (21). Early

white audiences often mistook blackface performers for blacks; Lott adds that “even Mark Twain’s mother, at her first (and presumably only) minstrel show, believed she was watching black performers” (20). These issues of representation proved to be problematic because of their white-identified depictions of blackness, but these performances also acted as a forum that encouraged working class white Americans to face the concept of race directly, engaging in a racial dialogue at a cultural level. Although many of the depictions of blackness performed on the minstrel stage initially appear to support the ideology behind pro-slavery agendas, Sarah Meer explains that blackface “could incorporate ambiguous and contradictory effects, using the black mask both to stand for black people and as a disguise from which to attack middle-class strictures” (11). Despite these issues of representative ambiguity, the popularity of these performances grew until they reached their height at the middle of the nineteenth century. At this point, the structure of the show shifted to incorporate melodrama and realism as adaptations of novels and stories such as *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* became immensely popular in both the North and the South. By the beginning of the Civil War, however, minstrel shows were eclipsed by the increasing interest in vaudeville and variety shows.

While these late minstrel performances were progressive in the sense that they allowed black actors to perform (as long as they still “blackened up”), their racism actually hardened. In 1906, Mark Twain stated that “the real Negro show has been stone dead for the past thirty years;” Twain, a vocal fan of the dualism and social potential acted out in the 1850s minstrel shows, began to dismiss them as their decline in popularity led to significant thematic changes (15). Henry B. Wonham argues that, when referring to the “real” Negro, the object of Twain’s nostalgia was an attitude toward racial mimicry”

(132)—one that Eric Lott calls minstrelsy’s “oscillation between currency and counterfeit” (20). This fluid, ambiguous nature of early minstrelsy began to disappear as shows became less popular towards the end of the century and the “ethnic imagery of this ‘coon’ era” of minstrelsy focused on “fixing categories of identity according to a reassuring logic of racial essentialism” (Wonham 119-120).

As increasingly reductive representations began to flood minstrelsy, most narratives devolved into nostalgic yearnings for the antebellum period. Robert Toll notes the prominence of the Southern “Old Darky” in minstrels after 1885, a character through which white audiences were able to “mourn for lost simplicity, order, and control” while simultaneously providing “a temporary diversion, a reassuring certainty that whites desperately needed and clung on to” (187). Kimberly Wallace-Sanders echoes this sentiment, suggesting that these performances of race, ones that proved to be much more one-dimensional and stereotypical than the already problematic figures of early minstrelsy, tapped into a sense of racial nostalgia and national memory that “symbolizes slaveocracy as a positive, enriching experience shared by white Americans in the North and in the South” (62). Ultimately, the minstrel show of the late 1800s was very different from its formulation in the middle of the century; as the popularity of the minstrel show declined, shows began depending upon narratives that attempted to profit from antebellum nostalgia by utilizing even more exaggerated racial stereotypes aligned with racial essentialism than those used by the productions during the height of their popularity.

Twain, drawing on the cultural significance of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and its relationship to this thematic paradigm shift at the end of the century, deploys minstrelsy

in *Pudd'nhead Wilson* to disrupt the racial nostalgia surrounding popular 1890s blackface performance. Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, which is undoubtedly one of the most popular and influential novels of the nineteenth century, was quickly adapted into a number of stage productions after recognizing the overwhelming success of the novel. While the first major stage productions of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* were not technically minstrel shows, these performances utilized blackface and its associated conventions due to *Uncle Tom's* focus on race. However, as Sarah Meer explains, subsequent performances illustrated how *Uncle Tom* has a long, intertwined history with minstrelsy, "Minstrels adapted and parodied *Uncle Tom's Cabin* so often that it became a minstrel fixture, making appearances in manuals for the amateur minstrel...even people who did not go to minstrel shows might have created their own blackface *Uncle Tom* in home entertainments" (59). The popularity of these *Uncle Tom* shows cannot be underestimated—nearly three million Americans saw these stage adaptations, a number ten times the first year sales of Stowe's novel. Much of the popularity and success of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* on stage was fueled by the text's ideologically open-ended message; typically, adaptations of the novel would either prioritize the novel's abolitionist perspective or they would manipulate their presentation of race, using exaggerated minstrel tropes as a way of transforming the piece into one that defended slavery—while disregarding the message of the original novel.

By the late-nineteenth century, the portrayal of Uncle Tom had undergone a monumental transformation; minstrels began to separate Uncle Tom from the novel, incorporating repurposed exaggerations of Stowe's character as a permanent fixture in the minstrel tradition. Often aligned with the Old Ducky character, the minstrel Uncle

Tom of the 1890s was no longer the brave and masculine anti-slavery Christ figure of Stowe's 1852 novel. As Michele Wallace explains, "Uncle Tom as created by Harriet Beecher Stowe was nothing like the flat stock figure who has come down to us, mostly through the interventions of theatre and film, as a white-identified, elderly and cowardly bootlicker" (145). When considering the tremendous cultural influence and overall popularity of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* along with *Pudd'nhead Wilson's* interest in racial ambiguity, perception, and identification, it is clear that Twain's choice to align the racially ambiguous character of Tom Driscoll with *Uncle Tom's Cabin*—and all of its culturally charged implications—was much more than a coincidence. When understood in the light of late-nineteenth century minstrelsy, Tom Driscoll can be read as Twain's reaction to the shifting climate of minstrelsy that highlighted racial essentialism; *Pudd'nhead Wilson* uses this blackface performance, both figurative and literal, as a way to undermine this essentialism by complicating and reappropriating the genre's most prominent stock characters.

By associating the Tom name with a black character that identifies as white, Twain initially seems to align his Tom with the minstrel figure; however, Twain's dual use of "Tom" highlights the lack of complexity and depth found in the popularized racial representation of the minstrel Uncle Tom in the 1890s. *Pudd'nhead's* mystery premise revolves around the performance of different races; Chambers, as a white child being raised with a black identity, performs unconscious blackface while Tom, as a black child being raised with a white identity, essentially passes for the majority of the novella. Eric Lott also notes this racialized performance, reading it as "a sort of minstrel gag in reverse...Tom's whiteness is itself an act, a suggestion that is truer than either the bell

ringer or Tom can know since Tom's identity is precisely a black man's whiteface performance" (145). At first glance, Twain's portrayal of Tom Driscoll as Uncle Tom falls in line in two major ways. First, like the minstrel Uncle Tom, Tom Driscoll is repeatedly characterized as a coward. Twain emphasizes that this is a very firm personality trait as Tom exhibits cowardice continuously as he forces Chambers to protect him as a child, chooses to retreat from his duel with the twin by bringing the assault to court, and, in a truly pathetic moment, sells his mother down the river. For example, the narrator points out that the murder of Judge Driscoll could only be carried out by "the blackest of hearts consummated by the cowardliest of hands;" even though the narrator is directly referencing the trial's current suspects, the Italian twins, both of these descriptions literally describe Tom (120). Furthermore, Tom's denial of his identity after learning that he is actually a black man mirrors the minstrel Uncle Tom's characterization as a of white-identification. Secondly, readers can easily make the connection between the Uncle Tom's white identification and Tom Driscoll's original identification as a white man. Here, Twain's use of irony, exhibited in the reader's knowledge of Tom Driscoll's true ancestry, helps accentuate this connection by highlighting the absurdity of a slave who acts as a "sellout," choosing to identify with those in power instead of the other members of his race, such as Roxy and the other slaves in Dawson's Landing.

While Tom Driscoll's white identification and cowardice link him to the common conceptualization of the Uncle Tom, Twain's dramatic irony also manages to destabilize this connection, complicating this simple reading. From the moment in the novel where Roxy switches the two children, transforming Chambers into the false Tom and Tom into

the fake Chambers, the reader is privy to Twain's destabilization of the Uncle Tom figure. While Tom Driscoll represents the cowardly and traitorous elements of the Tom name, Chambers, facilitated by both the loss and eventual reclaiming of his name, embodies the opposite. Chambers, the real Tom, draws pity from the reader as he is forced to carry out each of Tom Driscoll's whims. In contrast to Tom Driscoll's cowardice and frailty, Chambers's meekness is associated with vitality, health, and strength. As they share the name and the identity, both of these men are associated with the Tom name, leading readers to compare the two extreme representations of the Tom figure. Here, Twain takes the minstrel Tom and retools it, retaining the familiar outline while repurposing it to represent a more complex figure, negating the common racial misrepresentation.

This conflation can best be seen when the neighborhood kids retaliate against a showy Tom by calling Chambers his "nigger pappy" (34). Parenthetically, the narrator explains that the insult signifies "that he had had a second birth into this life" and "that Chambers was the author of his new being" (34). On one hand, this insult applies to Tom Driscoll: blackness, embodied in the form of Chambers, proves to be his major weakness. On the other hand, it functions for Chambers, the real Tom, in a similar way: blackness, in the form of the mulatto Tom Driscoll, has forced him to live as a slave. When the reader encounters this insult, the double meanings and contextual references uncovered when untangling the novel's mess of racial signifiers and identifiers ultimately prohibit a clear, definitive, and essentialist view of race. At this point in the novel, Twain has painted Tom Driscoll as a spoiled brat while victimizing Chambers, providing a potential argument for an essentialist reading of the novel. Instead of validating these claims, the

narrator's introduction of genealogy and paternity to the conversation introduces the idea of nature vs nurture—the novel asks readers to consider that social environment could lead to the traits typically tracked by racial essentialists. As a result, the novel's disruption of these essentialist ideologies takes place when these two explanations—race and nature/nurture—are evoked at the same time by the dualisms of the Tom character and the novel's ironic handling of racial identity. The moments in which Twain encourages readers to think directly and simultaneously about the race of the two changelings are when the novel's reappropriation of the Tom are most clear. By challenging the traditional minstrel Tom while also acknowledging its influence, Twain is able to use the reappropriated racial figure to emphasize the ambiguity and fluidity of race.

Overall, Twain's complication and reconfiguration of the Uncle Tom character in *Pudd'nhead Wilson* undermines the racial essentialism that had become a large element of the minstrel show by the end of the nineteenth century. Through his method of distancing the reader from the novel while setting up a number of different yet associated cultural reference points, a very large component of Twain's overall critique of race relations is illuminated through an understanding of the novel's dialogue with the minstrel tradition. But *Pudd'nhead Wilson* was not merely critiquing stylistic shifts in a racist and dying genre; the novel's engagement with the shifts in the minstrel tradition is reflective of a much more monumental shift occurring at the end of the nineteenth century. By 1890, racial essentialism marked a change in cultural ideology that signaled the beginning of both Jim Crow laws and the eugenics movement. As we will see in the next section, the one-dimensional caricatures found in late minstrelsy were being adopted

by racial essentialists. Using these stereotypes to satiate the pangs of antebellum nostalgia intensified by increasing industrialization, cyclical depressions, and outbursts of class warfare at the end of the century, these minstrel figures were being repackaged and performed by those in power in order to sell products, public policies, and entire ideologies. Twain's *Pudd'nhead Wilson* focuses on retooling racial stereotypes in minstrelsy as a way to counteract the way that racial essentialists were repurposing and exploiting the very same figures, from Aunt Jemima to Jim Crow.

#### Chapter Five -- The World's Fair

“Among monuments marking the progress of civilization throughout the ages, the World's Columbian Exposition of 1893 will ever stand conspicuous. Gathered here are the forces which move humanity and make history, the ever-shifting powers that fit new thoughts to new conditions, and shape the destinies of mankind. The Chicago Exposition, dedicated in October, 1892, to the great navigator who four centuries ago set foot on New World shores, opening the way to the founding in this western hemisphere of many nations and governments.”

Hubert Howe Bancraft, *The Book of the Fair*  
(1893)

"October 12, The DISCOVERY. It was wonderful to find America, but it would have been more wonderful to miss it."

Mark Twain, *Pudd'nhead Wilson's*  
*Calendar*

During the 1893 Chicago World's Fair, officially known as the World's Columbian Exposition of 1893, organizers celebrated achievements such as the first ferris wheel, the creation of Pabst Blue Ribbon, and the pressing of the United States Postal Service's first Commemorative Stamp Set. How could the fair possibly fit the systematic subjugation of African Americans into the Fair's overall narrative of progress, when Jim Crow America had carried out practices such as “voter registration restrictions, literacy

tests, poll taxes, the grandfather clause, and the white primary” and the appallingly public spectacle of the most violent lynchings in history—lynchings where admission tickets were sold and body parts of the deceased were hawked around like souvenirs (Davis)? The organizers of the fair were very aware of its performative influence as Chicago represented the stage where they could champion the superiority of the American way over the rest of the world. As a result, the fair’s performance of progress, exemplified through advances in culture, science, and technology, was heavily scripted and controlled in order to make sure that this idea of progress was front and center.

Even though the 1893 World’s Fair officially celebrated the anniversary of Columbus’s discovery of the new world by highlighting the achievements made by civilization during the last 400 years, the fair also, inadvertently, became a site of contest over different racial narratives. Fair organizers brushed aside African American race leaders such as Frederick Douglass and Ida B. Wells because they challenged this script of national progress. Nevertheless, Douglass and Wells, with the assistance of Haitian representatives, managed to distribute a protest pamphlet at the fair entitled *The Reason Why the Colored American is Not in the World’s Columbian Exposition*, a pamphlet aimed to showcase the work accomplished by African Americans since Emancipation while also underlining the dangerous and difficult conditions they still faced.

Although organizers were focused on keeping African American activists like Douglass and Wells out of this narrative, they did not intend to silence all African American voices; instead, the World’s Fair of 1893 exemplifies how racial essentialists in positions of power were focused on using their own carefully constructed depictions of blackness to reinforce the narrative of progress. This marks the intersection between the

1893 World's Fair and Twain's *Pudd'nhead Wilson*. The one-dimensional racial stereotypes being critiqued and reworked by Twain in *Pudd'nhead Wilson* were the same figures being used to propagate the fair's narrative of progress. Unlike the voices of Douglass and Wells, these figures painted a more idyllic portrait of American race relations that communicated a longing and nostalgia for the Old South all while providing the rhetorical foundation for the eugenics movement.

In order to understand *Pudd'nhead Wilson*'s participation in this narrative of progress, one must recognize the tremendous influence that the various world's fair expositions held over the American public. Although their origins lie in ancient times, modern world's fairs were large public exhibitions held every few years that typically ran for up to six months. Historically, they served both commercial and cultural purposes as the fairs gave people a venue where they could experience new cultures, forms of entertainment, emerging scientific achievements, and cutting-edge inventions from around the world. While the majority of the first expositions were held in Europe, beginning with London's Great Exhibition in 1851, the United States hosted five of the eighteen exhibitions held before the end of the nineteenth century. The intentions behind the fairs were idealistic in nature as they focused on bringing different nations together through trade, but in reality they "encouraged huge audiences and the industrial rivalry of nations" (Wilson 11). Historian Robert Rydell points out that these exhibitions also performed a hegemonic function as they "propagated the ideas and values of the country's political, financial, corporate, and intellectual leaders and offered these ideas as the proper interpretation of social and political reality" (3). Citing a "search for order" sparked by increasing industrialization, cyclical industrial depressions, and outbursts of

class warfare, Rydell explains that the American fairs at the end of the nineteenth century “offered millions of fairgoers an opportunity to reaffirm their collective national identity in an updated synthesis of progress and white supremacy that suffused the blueprints of future perfection” (4).

These American fairs proved to be extremely popular, with 1893’s Chicago World’s Colombian Exposition attracting over twenty seven million visitors—nearly half of the country’s population at the time. Attendees included notables such as Hamlin Garland, President Grover Cleveland, and, almost, Mark Twain. Twain came to Chicago hoping to display a typesetter he had invested in, but shortly after arriving in April he became ill with a cold and never actually *saw* the exposition (Thoreson 289). However, that did not stop Twain from commenting on the more ironic elements of the fair, such as the juxtaposition between Chicago, well known as *the* city of sin at the time, and the fair’s Congress of Religions (Thoreson 290). Coincidentally, according to a letter to publisher Fred J. Hall, Twain finally finished his last major revision of *Pudd’nhead Wilson* at the end of July 1893, only four months after his visit to Chicago (*Letters to His Publishers* 354).

The fair embodied the possibility of progress with David F. Burg calling the 1893 fair a “moment of rapture, inspiration, and hope” that “warrants rescue from the past” and “remains symbolic of a harmonious urban world still worthy of pursuit” (348). According to Rodney Badger, the Chicago fair was focused on providing a sense of cultural unity and self-confidence for America in response to the intense political and racial conflicts at the end of the century (123). The primary stage for the construction of this image was White City, a utopian model city built for the fair where attendees could visit various

international exhibits, experience new technological wonders such as the original ferris wheel, and watch different forms of cultural entertainment, including Egyptian “hootchy-kootchy” dancers, American vaudeville and minstrel shows, and Buffalo Bill Cody’s Wild West show (which was actually set-up directly outside of the fairgrounds).

Race, science, and technology were all deeply connected to each of these spectacles as the Chicago fair’s attractions introduced millions of attendees to progressive “evolutionary ideas about race” that highlighted evolution, ethnology, and entertainment as “active agents” of “hegemonic assertion of ruling-class authority” (Rydell 41). Many of these attractions were staged to emphasize the achievements and accomplishments of white-led Western nations over those of other countries, and the fair’s narrative suggested that these differences were due to evolutionary and ethnological differences. While using science to justify the presence of the fair’s white/Other binary, these exhibits also sought to establish a racial hierarchy of “civilized” and “uncivilized” colored peoples as shown in comparisons between the Afro-American and African exhibits. A souvenir book released shortly after the fair eagerly took the opportunity to judge the black presence at the fair: “Perhaps one of the most striking lessons which the Columbian Exposition taught was the fact that African slavery in America had not, after all, been an unmixed evil, for...the advanced social conditions of African Americans over that of their barbarous countrymen is most encouraging and wonderful” (Putnam). Here, the danger of the fair’s revisionist rhetoric becomes clear as slavery is romanticized and the systematic mistreatment of African Americans is instead framed as an “advanced social condition.”

In order to propagate these ideologies, many fair organizers took advantage of the period’s racial nostalgia, the very same nostalgia that Twain invokes with his

complicated use of minstrel figures in *Pudd'nhead Wilson*. One popular product introduced at the 1893 fair was Aunt Jemima's pancake mix, notable for creating advertising's first living trademark. As an advertising tool, the Pearl Milling Company hired a former slave from Kentucky, Nancy Green, to promote the product by taking the role of New Orleans-raised Aunt Jemima, asking her to incorporate both true stories from her own life as a slave and a fictional script written by white sales representatives into her performance of the mascot. As Kimberly Wallace-Sanders explains, this creation of a mythic origin story tapped into racial nostalgia through national memory as she points out that the company ideally extended "an invitation for all Americans to remember a time when Aunt Jemima," like the mammy of the antebellum South, "cooked for the national family"— a comforting memory reshaped by carefully scripted recollections. Interestingly, much of this nostalgia was directed towards Northerners who existed outside of the antebellum South. Nina Silber points out that many Northerners felt like the country was losing its moral center as a result of industrialization (95). Jo-Ann Morgan argues that the marketing of the mammy at the end of the nineteenth century acted as a "welcome balm" to soothe these concerns. She explains, "By providing the same loyal service to the northern 'lady of leisure' as she once did for her southern mistress, mammy helped consumers tap into the reverie of a romantic Old South" (98). As a result, this shared cultural nostalgia retained a monumental national purpose as it helped foster future economic and cultural relations between the North and the South.

In *Pudd'nhead*, Twain counters this racial nostalgia through his relentlessly non-sentimental portrayal of the antebellum South, including this invention of an anti-mammy figure in the form of Roxy, a character that complicates and ultimately dismantles the

romanticism associated with the antebellum slaveocracy. Because he sets the novel in the early-1850s, Twain manages to accomplish this dismantling on two major levels; the antebellum setting gives Twain the opportunity to deny this nostalgic, revisionist history by reminding readers of the grim reality faced by those who occupied the role of the slave mammy, thus disrupting the racial nostalgia of the 1890s. Twain uses Roxy to illustrate the horrific struggles faced by the mulatta mammy, directly destabilizing the maternal nostalgia associated with the mammy at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. At the very beginning of the novella, Twain highlights the tragic mulatta trope by demonstrating Roxy's fear at the realization that her child's fate does not rest in her own hands, but rather in the hands of Mr. Driscoll. The gravitas of Roxy's consideration of both suicide and infanticide in order to keep her son from being sold down the river is underscored by Roxy's extreme terror as shown in her fits of crying and moaning. Furthermore, her choice to switch the two children, permanently altering both of their identities, denotes her commitment to her child's safety and well-being—even though it means that she will only be recognized as the mammy by her own son.

As a result, Roxy must act as both mammy and mother to her child. In fact, the text suggests that this split causes Roxy to experience double consciousness; throughout the narrative, Roxy is referred to as both “mammy,” the literal mother, and “Mammy,” the caretaker. Here, the text makes a bold but subtle distinction that remains in place for the majority of the novella. For example, while Roxy contemplates killing her child, she keeps referring to herself as “mammy,” signifying her personal connection to her child, the boy who would grow up as Tom Driscoll. When she converses with Chambers the text shifts accordingly as Chambers, Roxy, and the narrator all repeatedly refer to her as

“Mammy,” the caretaker. However, one major break in this convention can be seen when she finally returns to Dawson’s Landing, hoping to see her son, Tom. Twain writes, “She began to tremble with emotion, and straightway sent to beg him to let his ‘po’ ole nigger Mammy have jes one sight of him en die for joy’” (46). This instance marks the only time in the novel where Roxy refers to herself as “Mammy” the caretaker in regards to Tom. In every single interaction between the two after this moment, Roxy uses “mammy,” even as she instructs Tom that he should call her “ma or mammy” (53). At this crucial breaking point, the text suggests that there has been a lapse in Roxy’s double consciousness; although she was the one who switched the two children, this break insinuates that the dual identity of mammy/Mammy has proven to be too much for her to handle. Here, Twain demonstrates the intense human struggle faced by the tragic mammy that manifests itself in the form of loss and intense physical and emotional trauma, a struggle that is easily forgotten when in the presence of soothing racial nostalgia. When put in contrast with Twain’s nuanced and complicated depiction of the mammy, the smiling and nostalgic figure of Aunt Jemima is revealed as fantasy as the reality of slavery and its grim implications become clear once again.

While his response to the nostalgia of the fair is telling, the novella’s most spectacularized moment, the courtroom/fingerprints scene, can be interpreted as Twain’s response to the 1893 fair’s focus on ethnology and evolution. Robert Rydell explains that “the fair did not merely reflect American racial attitudes, it grounded them on ethnological bedrock” (55). In order to accomplish this, fair organizers created “simulated native villages” that aimed to represent “living ethnological displays” of “the savage races,” ultimately hoping that Americans would be able to “compare themselves

scientifically with other peoples” (65). This desire for comparison and scientific classification in regards to race can be seen in the period’s anxiety regarding racial certainty. The growing mulatto population in the United States emphasized the possibility of performing blackness *and* whiteness. Thus there was a growing concern about the potential consequences, such as the fate faced by Tom and Chambers due to Roxy’s switch, which could arise from this double-sided performance. This anxiety was present in a number of popular cultural products, as well. Bartley Theo Campbell’s popular 1882 play *The White Slave* chronicles the story of a young white girl who is raised believing she is a slave after her mother risks the family honor when she is impregnated by an Italian during a European retreat. In 1892’s “Desiree’s Baby,” Kate Chopin demonstrates how it is possible that many people are simply unaware of their true racial origins due to the secrecy usually involved when discussing the subject.

*Pudd’nhead Wilson* certainly focuses on this anxiety, but it is fundamentally different because it offers a potential scientific solution: fingerprinting. At the end of *The White Slave*, Lisa eventually learns from her nanny that she was not born a slave. Similarly, Armand recognizes his mixed heritage in “Desiree’s Baby” after he discovers a letter written from his mother to his father. In both examples, the truth is dependent upon people and memory. In *Pudd’nhead*, however, the truth is discovered through the use of science in the form of fingerprinting. Revisiting the most overtly performative scene in the novel, Twain presents readers with a spectacle of science, exhibiting, as one might see at the world’s fair, how technology could alleviate the anxieties associated with mixed blood and passing. Wilson’s collection of “window palace decorations” suddenly transform from oddities into powerful pieces of scientific evidence. The scene’s stage

directions emphasize the excitement and awe experienced by the audience and the narrator even paints the scene in a way that is reminiscent of a nineteenth century theatre:

He moved to his place through a storm of applause—which the sheriff stopped, and also made the people sit down, for they were all standing and struggling to see, of course. Court, jury, sheriff, and everybody had been too absorbed in observing Wilson's performance to attend to the audience earlier. (134)

Wilson's rhetorical skill in this scene is astounding as he demonstrates his performative prowess, leading the courtroom like the ringmaster of a circus. As Wilson finally reveals the murderer and solves the case of the switched children, he leaves the room "awed in silence," finishing the trial just before lunch.

However, the ending of the novella does not wrap up as neatly as the trial. The Italians, "weary of Western adventure," return to Europe while Roxy is left as a shell of her former self, only finding solace in religion. Chambers is arguably left with the worst fate; even though he is given his rightful place as heir, he exists somewhere between black and white, unable to reconcile his birth and cultural identities. Here, Twain makes it clear that Wilson's new technology is limited. Even though he was able to return the children to their rightful places, his fingerprinting was not able to prove any claims about race or its effects on human development. In fact, the fingerprints only prove that the children were switched—they say nothing about race—interestingly, the 1895 stage adaptation of *Pudd'nhead* ends with the fingerprints proving that Tom is a negro and a slave. Readers are still left with the central question of nature versus nurture that is often at the heart of racial issues. In this light, the narrative of the novel provides more insight

into the effects of race on identity than the fingerprints. Perhaps this is Twain's point: he is demonstrating how hypnotic the rhetoric of progress really is.

When all was said and done, the World's Columbian Exposition set the standard that world's fairs were judged by for the next century. Rydell stresses that, because of the fair, "millions of Americans would understand the ensuing decades of social struggle and imperial adventure as an integral part of the evolutionary process that accompanied progress" (71). Twain's use of fingerprinting in *Pudd'nhead Wilson* actually foresaw the use of the new technology as there were three different exhibits showcasing different fingerprinting techniques at the St. Louis World's Fair in 1904. While Twain has now become a permanent part of the history of fingerprinting, it is important to remember how *Pudd'nhead Wilson* attempted to interact with the narrative of progress at the 1893 Chicago fair. Twain's use of dual timelines, the historical setting of the 1850s and the 1893 year of authorship, allows him to both disrupt and counteract the racial nostalgia and technological spectacle present at the 1893 fair. Twain's careful problematization of racial stereotypes and emerging technologies provides readers with a grounding sense of reality in the face of the spectacle of progress. Understanding *Pudd'nhead's* relationship to this narrative of progress is vital as it points out the rhetorical moves used by those in power to both foster a sense of racial nostalgia and revise history to promote a national sense of social and economic progress that was absolutely vital in solidifying the United States as a major global power, economically and culturally.

## Chapter Six -- Conclusion

In 1833, two years before Mark Twain was born, Ira Aldridge made theatre history as the first black man to play Othello. Dating back to its Jacobean debut in 1604, the titular character of Shakespeare's *Othello* had always been performed by white men donning blackface; although the Jacobean use of blackface is both stylistically and conventionally different from how it was later used in minstrelsy, its fundamental use—the performance of racial difference as spectacle—ultimately remained the same. Over two hundred years before minstrelsy found its popularity in America, Renaissance audiences were witness to the power struggle inherent in racial representation. Joyce MacDonald asserts that these early blackface performances “offered the more reassuring spectacle of whites acting black, of reasserting a relation between observer and object which affirmed white authority over, and authorship of, narratives of racial difference” (232). Although these performances of *Othello* and the authorship of *Pudd'nhead Wilson* were separated by nearly three centuries, four thousand miles, and the institution of American slavery, it is clear that the lingering issue of representing racial difference found a new relevance in 19<sup>th</sup> century American culture.

*Pudd'nhead Wilson*'s use of performativity demonstrates how Twain's writing participates in a much larger system of institutional racism—one that was deeply involved in the same entertainment mediums where Twain, along with millions of other Americans, found inspiration. When read in the context of nineteenth-century popular entertainment, *Pudd'nhead Wilson* emerges as a novella that addresses how those in positions of power, be it novelists, performers, newspaper editors, or governments, have a tremendous influence in shaping an entire culture's understanding of social reality—

especially race, gender, and class. However, Twain's novel does not merely bring attention to this issue; instead, he uses *Pudd'nhead Wilson* as a means of urging readers to question and rethink their understandings of race.

Originally published as *The Tragedy of Pudd'nhead Wilson and the Comedy of Those Extraordinary Twins*, Twain's decision to classify Wilson's story as a tragedy—even though social order is ultimately restored—initially seems strange, especially considering how Wilson's rise to power embodies the determination and drive associated with the American Dream. However, in light of Twain's larger commentary, reading *Pudd'nhead* as a tragic character begins to make sense; Wilson manages to restore social order at the end of the novel, but at what cost? The real tragedy of *Pudd'nhead* is apparent in the way Wilson unknowingly contributes to the rhetoric of late-19<sup>th</sup> century racial essentialism; grossly unaware of his case's deeper implications, Wilson's use of fingerprinting to assign racial difference inadvertently justifies the same pseudoscience that was being used to support both Jim Crow and the eugenics movement. Consistently presented as a likable, intelligent, and justice-aligned protagonist, Wilson's actions at the end of the novel ultimately contribute to the systematic oppression of African Americans. Perhaps this is the key to *Pudd'nhead's* tragedy: when living in a culture that is so deeply intertwined with an institution that is as large, complicated, and ideologically powerful as slavery or racism, perceptions of right and wrong are skewed and blurred by those at the top of these systems, causing well-intentioned people to do the wrong thing. By pulling back the curtain and exposing how these processes of representation function, Twain's novel attempts to bring readers closer to understanding how these same processes are being used to shape an entire culture's understanding of racial difference.

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## Vita

Collin Alexander Skeen, raised in Ewing, Virginia, received his B.A. in English Literature and Theatre from The University of Virginia's College at Wise in 2012.

Collin Alexander Skeen