

History 498
Devine
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Pudd'nhead Wilson Study Guide

Though Mark Twain sets his novella, *Pudd'nhead Wilson* (1894) in the antebellum [pre-Civil War] South, Twain is satirizing not only the Old South, but leveling a withering critique of his own society's obsession with race, racial categories, and policing racial boundaries. (within two years of the book's publication, the Supreme Court would endorse the principle of "separate but equal" in *Plessy v Ferguson*.)

As you read the book, it will be useful to keep the following questions and issues in mind:

First off, don't ignore the quotes from Pudd'nhead's calendar that begin each chapter. Read them closely, since they offer some clues as to Twain's own world view. How would you characterize the sentiments expressed in these quotes?

What does Twain think of the people in Dawson's Landing? How does he convey to his readers what he thinks of the townspeople?

Why do you think Twain has Pudd'nhead tell the joke about the "half a dog"? One critic has argued that the "dog" is essentially a metaphor for society itself. Why would he say this?

What position does Twain seem to take on the age-old "nature vs nurture" debate? How does Twain seem to explain the various characters' behavior? Are they shaped more by their "blood" or their environment?

How does society (and his mother, Roxy) view Tom? Are his character flaws a result of his upbringing, his "black blood," his "First Family of Virginia white blood," both, or neither?

How does the character of Chambers undermine the notion of white supremacy? By the end of the novel, why has Chambers become something of a tragic character?

Do you think Twain the author agrees with Roxy the character that Tom is a bad person because he has black blood in him (if only 1/32 part)? Why does he have Roxy (who society identifies as "black" even though she looks "white") insist that white blood is better than black blood?

How does Twain use humor to advance his social criticisms? How, by getting his readers to laugh at episodes and situations in the novel, might he also be "nudging" them to rethink their own views?

Though the book is obviously challenging social attitudes regarding race, the author also mocks class pretensions and notions of "Southern honor." In what specific episodes does Twain target "Southern honor" and those who adhere to its "code"?

As an author, Twain loved dualities and juxtaposing contradictory ideas. How does he do this in *Pudd'nhead Wilson*? What are some of these dualities? [Hint: "Pudd'nhead" is the smartest person in town; the Judge is shocked that Tom would do something so dishonorable as to avoid a duel and instead take his complaint against the Twins to a court of law.]

What does Twain seem to think of the law and the legal process? Are "justice" and "the law" one and the same?

The novel ends with Tom being sent down the river. Is this a "happy ending" in the sense that "order" has been restored – everything is put back in its proper place? What do you make of the ending?

What role does "fate" play in the novel? Do the characters control their own fates (or destinies) or do things that change the characters' lives just seem to happen randomly?

What is the relationship between the law, honor, and race in *Pudd'nhead Wilson*? Do racial attitudes influence notions of honor and how the law is applied? For example, why is "Tom" not punished for being a murderer but rather sold "down the river"? Is that a just punishment?

What, if any, lessons or messages do you believe Twain is trying to convey in this book?

How might an audience in 1894 respond differently to this book than a 2018 audience?