



# Pudd'nhead Wilson

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BY MARK TWAIN



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**SENIOR EDITOR:** Paul Moliken

**EDITORS:** Lisa M. Miller and Kelley Stewart McConathy

**COVER DESIGN:** Kyle Price

**PRODUCTION:** Jerry Clark



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# Notes

**What is a literary classic and why are these classic works important to the world?**

A literary classic is a work of the highest excellence that has something important to say about life and/or the human condition and says it with great artistry. A classic, through its enduring presence, has withstood the test of time and is not bound by time, place, or customs. It speaks to us today as forcefully as it spoke to people one hundred or more years ago, and as forcefully as it will speak to people of future generations. For this reason, a classic is said to have universality.

Mark Twain (Samuel Langhorne Clemens) was born in Florida, Missouri, on November 30, 1835. He had two brothers and a sister. A slave named Jenny worked for the family, and it is thought that her storytelling had a strong influence on the young Twain. He traveled extensively, working in various jobs, including a stint on a newspaper and one as a riverboat pilot. He supposedly took his pseudonym from the way a river's depth was measured: a piece of line was dropped into the river, and when the rope hit bottom, the depth was called out to the pilot. Therefore, "Mark Twain," or "two fathoms," literally means "twelve feet."

In 1864, Twain left for San Francisco where he worked as a reporter. After a trip to Hawaii for *The Sacramento Union*, he began giving lectures. Later, in 1869, he wrote *The Innocents Abroad* based on his experiences traveling in France and Italy. The book was immensely popular, and Twain's sharp, humorous barbs set him apart from most other writers of the time.

Twain married Olivia Langdon in 1870, and between 1876 and 1884, he wrote *Tom Sawyer*, *The Prince and The Pauper*, and *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Twain also became a very popular lecturer, drawing huge crowds to hear him read his own works.

Family tragedies, including the death of his favorite daughter, and a series of bad financial investments left him bitter and depressed in his old age. His later writings, most of which were published posthumously, reflect his disappointment at what he saw were grave weaknesses and flaws in human nature.

# Pointers

## READING POINTERS

### Reading Pointers for Sharper Insight

As you read *Pudd'nhead Wilson*, pay attention to the following:

1. **The objects of Twain's satire:**

- The topic of slavery is part of *Huckleberry Finn*, but Huck does not become aware of how immoral owning a slave is until late in the book. In *Pudd'nhead Wilson*, however, Twain emphasizes the cruelty and immorality of slavery from very early on.
- The distinction between a "white" person and a "black" one is made strictly on heredity, not skin color. Even someone who was only "one-sixteenth" black (having a black great-great-grandparent), as Roxy is, would not have been considered white.
- A person's upbringing plays a more important role in determining human goodness than nature and heredity do. Twain points this out through the differences between "Tom" and "Chambers."

2. **The Mississippi River:**

- The river serves as a vehicle for mobility among the characters, and with a new town comes the possibilities or dangers a new beginning brings.
  - David "Pudd'nhead" Wilson has come from New York.
  - Judge Driscoll is from Virginia.
  - Luigi and Angelo come from Italy through St. Louis.
  - Roxy, as a free person, travels to St. Louis and confronts "Tom."
  - Slaves could be sold "down the river" and away from the relatively humane treatment they have in Dawson's Landing in Missouri.



## C H A P T E R I

Tell the truth or trump—but get the trick.

—Pudd'nhead Wilson's Calendar.

**T**HE SCENE OF this chronicle is the town of Dawson's Landing, on the Missouri side of the Mississippi, half a day's journey, per steamboat, below St. Louis.

In 1830 it was a snug little collection of modest one and two-story frame dwellings whose whitewashed exteriors were almost concealed from sight by climbing tangles of rose-vines, honeysuckles, and morning-glories. Each of these pretty homes had a garden in front fenced with white palings and opulently stocked with hollyhocks, marigolds, touch-me-nots, prince's-feathers, and other old-fashioned flowers; while on the window-sills of the houses stood wooden boxes containing moss-rose plants and terra-cotta pots in which grew a breed of geranium whose spread of intensely red blossoms accented the prevailing pink tint of the rose-clad house-front like an explosion of flame. When there was room on the ledge outside of the pots and boxes for a cat, the cat was there—in sunny weather—stretched at full length, asleep and blissful, with her furry belly to the sun and a paw curved over her nose. Then that house was complete, and its contentment and peace were made manifest to the world by this symbol, whose testimony is infallible. A home without a cat—and a well-fed, well-petted and properly revered cat—may be a perfect home, perhaps, but how can it prove title?

All along the streets, on both sides, at the outer edge of the brick sidewalks, stood locust-trees with trunks protected by wooden boxing, and these furnished shade for summer and a sweet fragrance in spring when the

clusters of buds came forth. The main street, one block back from the river, and running parallel with it, was the sole business street. It was six blocks long, and in each block two or three brick stores three stories high towered above interjected bunches of little frame shops. Swinging signs creaked in the wind, the street's whole length. The candy-striped pole, which indicates nobility proud and ancient along the palace-bordered canals of Venice, indicated merely the humble barber shop along the main street of Dawson's Landing. On a chief corner stood a lofty unpainted pole wreathed from top to bottom with tin pots and pans and cups, the chief tinmonger's noisy notice to the world (when the wind blew) that his shop was on hand for business at that corner.

The hamlet's front was washed by the clear waters of the great river; its body stretched itself rearward up a gentle incline; its most rearward border fringed itself out and scattered its houses about the base-line of the hills; the hills rose high, inclosing the town in a half-moon curve, clothed with forests from foot to summit.

Steamboats passed up and down every hour or so. Those belonging to the little Cairo line and the little Memphis line always stopped; the big Orleans liners stopped for hails only, or to land passengers or freight; and this was the case also with the great flotilla of "transients." These latter came out of a dozen rivers—the Illinois, the Missouri, the Upper Mississippi, the Ohio, the Monongahela, the Tennessee, the Red River, the White River, and so on; and were bound every whither and stocked with every imaginable comfort or necessity which the Mississippi's communities could want, from the frosty Falls of St. Anthony down through nine climates to torrid New Orleans.

Dawson's Landing was a slaveholding town, with a rich slave-worked grain and pork country back of it. The town was sleepy and comfortable and contented. It was fifty years old, and was growing slowly—very slowly, in fact, but still it was growing.

The chief citizen was York Leicester Driscoll, about forty years old, judge of the county court. He was very proud of his old Virginian ancestry, and in his hospitalities and his rather formal and stately manners he kept up its traditions. He was fine and just and generous. To be a gentleman—a gentleman without stain or blemish—was his only religion, and to it he was always faithful. He was respected, esteemed, and beloved by all the community. He was well off, and was gradually adding to his store. He and his wife were very nearly happy, but not quite, for they had no children. The longing for the treasure of a child had grown stronger and stronger as the years slipped away, but the blessing never came—and was never to come.

With this pair lived the Judge's widowed sister, Mrs. Rachel Pratt, and she also was childless—childless, and sorrowful for that reason, and not to

be comforted. The women were good and commonplace people, and did their duty and had their reward in clear consciences and the community's approbation. They were Presbyterians, the Judge was a free-thinker.†

Pembroke Howard, lawyer and bachelor, aged about forty, was another old Virginian grandee with proved descent from the First Families.† He was a fine, brave, majestic creature, a gentleman according to the nicest requirements of the Virginia rule, a devoted Presbyterian, an authority on the "code," and a man always courteously ready to stand up before you in the field if any act or word of his had seemed doubtful or suspicious to you, and explain it with any weapon you might prefer from brad-awls to artillery. He was very popular with the people, and was the Judge's dearest friend.

Then there was Colonel Cecil Burleigh Essex, another F. F. V.† of formidable caliber—however, with him we have no concern.

Percy Northumberland Driscoll, brother to the judge, and younger than he by five years, was a married man, and had had children around his hearthstone; but they were attacked in detail by measles, croup, and scarlet fever, and this had given the doctor a chance with his effective antediluvian methods; so the cradles were empty. He was a prosperous man, with a good head for speculations, and his fortune was growing. On the 1st of February, 1830, two boy babes were born in his house; one to him, the other to one of his slave girls, Roxana by name. Roxana was twenty years old. She was up and around the same day, with her hands full, for she was tending both babies.

Mrs. Percy Driscoll died within the week. Roxy remained in charge of the children. She had her own way, for Mr. Driscoll soon absorbed himself in his speculations and left her to her own devices.

In that same month of February, Dawson's Landing gained a new citizen. This was Mr. David Wilson, a young fellow of Scotch parentage. He had wandered to this remote region from his birthplace in the interior of the State of New York, to seek his fortune. He was twenty-five years old, college-bred, and had finished a post-college course in an Eastern law school a couple of years before.

He was a homely, freckled, sandy-haired young fellow, with an intelligent blue eye that had frankness and comradeship in it and a covert twinkle of a pleasant sort. But for an unfortunate remark of his, he would no doubt have entered at once upon a successful career at Dawson's Landing. But he made his fatal remark the first day he spent in the village, and it "gaged" him. He had just made the acquaintance of a group of citizens when an invisible dog began to yelp and snarl and howl and make himself very comprehensively disagreeable, whereupon young Wilson said, much as one who is thinking aloud:

"I wish I owned half of that dog."



“Why?” somebody asked.

“Because I would kill my half.”

The group searched his face with curiosity, with anxiety even, but found no light there, no expression that they could read. They fell away from him as from something uncanny, and went into privacy to discuss him. One said:

“ ’Pears to be a fool.”

“ ’Pears?” said another. “Is, I reckon you better say.”

“Said he wished he owned *half* of the dog, the idiot,” said a third. “What did he reckon would become of the other half if he killed his half? Do you reckon he thought it would live?”

“Why, he must have thought it, unless he is the downrightest fool in the world; because if he hadn’t thought it, he would have wanted to own the whole dog, knowing that if he killed his half and the other half died, he would be responsible for that half just the same as if he had killed that half instead of his own. Don’t it look that way to you, gents?”

“Yes, it does. If he owned one half of the general dog, it would be so; if he owned one end of the dog and another person owned the other end, it would be so, just the same; particularly in the first case, because if you kill one half of a general dog, there ain’t any man that can tell whose half it was, but if he owned one end of the dog, maybe he could kill his end of it and—”

“No, he couldn’t, either; he couldn’t and not be responsible if the other end died, which it would. In my opinion the man ain’t in his right mind.”

“In my opinion he hain’t got any mind.”

No. 3 said: “Well, he’s a lummoX, anyway.”

“That’s what he is,” said No. 4, “he’s a labrick—just a Simon-pure† labrick, if there ever was one.”

“Yes, sir, he’s a dam fool, that’s the way I put him up,” said No. 5. “Anybody can think different that wants to, but those are my sentiments.”

“I’m with you, gentlemen,” said No. 6. “Perfect jackass—yes, and it ain’t going too far to say he is a pudd’nhead. If he ain’t a pudd’nhead, I ain’t no judge, that’s all.”

Mr. Wilson stood elected. The incident was told all over the town, and gravely discussed by everybody. Within a week he had lost his first name; Pudd’nhead took its place. In time he came to be liked, and well liked, too; but by that time the nickname had got well stuck on, and it stayed. That first day’s verdict made him a fool, and he was not able to get it set aside, or even modified. The nickname soon ceased to carry any harsh or unfriendly feeling with it, but it held its place, and was to continue to hold its place for twenty long years.

## Glossary

### A Whisper to the Reader

**Pudd'nhead Wilson's Calendar** – a collection of anecdotes similar to *Poor Richard's Almanac* by Benjamin Franklin. These, in actuality, reflect Mark Twain's ironic wit, rather than Pudd'nhead Wilson's viewpoint.

**Piazza del Duomo** – a cathedral square located in Florence, Italy

**Dante** – a reference to a famous Italian Florentine poet, Dante Alighieri (1265 – 1321), who wrote *The Divine Comedy*

**"Giotto's campanile"** – a reference to the Campanile Tower in Florence, Italy, built by Giotto di Bondone (c.1267 – 1337), an Italian architect and painter

**Ghibelline** – a reference to the Ghibellines, a political faction that supported the Holy Roman Empire in Italy in the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13th centuries

**Villa Viviani** – an ancient villa in the village of Settignano, located in Florence, Italy. Mark Twain was a guest at the villa in 1892 and wrote most of *Pudd'nhead Wilson* during his stay there.

### Chapter I

**free-thinker** – a person who follows the practice of Freethinking, which involves forming one's own beliefs, irrespective of society's rules

**First Families** – an informal group of people who have traced their ancestry back to the Jamestown, Virginia colonists of 1607

**F. F. V.** – an abbreviation that stands for the First Families of Virginia

**Simon-pure** – genuine, thorough; this expression originated in the 1700s. It comes from the play "A Bold Stroke for a Wife," in which a character, Simon Pure, becomes the victim of a fraudulent crime.

### Chapter II

**palmistry** – the practice of reading one's future through the lines on the palms of the hands

**pantograph** – an instrument used for making copies and enlargements

**niggers** – Twain uses this term satirically throughout the novel. All the negative faults "Tom" has in his character are blamed on his racial background, while Chambers's positive qualities are attributed to his being "white." In doing so, Twain, a firm opponent of slavery, attempts to show the inherent hypocrisy of many of his contemporaries' beliefs about the inferiority of African Americans. The large number of times the word is used and its context indicate Twain's sympathies.

## Vocabulary

### A Whisper to the Reader

barrister – a lawyer in the English superior court

grandees – people of importance

### Chapter I.

antediluvian – ancient

approbation – a formal approval

brad-awls – an instrument used to make holes for nails

flotilla – a large number of boats

formidable – causing nervousness or fear

hamlet – a small village

infallible – certain; perfect

labrick – an idiot

lummoX – a clumsy person

opulently – abundantly, richly, profusely

pudd'nhead – an idiot

tinmonger – a tinsmith

torrid – hot

transients – people who travel in search of work

### Chapter II

abide – to bear, put up with

caste – a division of society

chary – cautious

combatants – people ready to fight or argue

comforter – a thief

conveyancing – drawing deeds

emery-bag – a tool used in sewing

etiquette – manners

fortnight – a time period of 14 days

magnanimity – generosity

piety – faith, devoutness

plunder – loot

precedent – an act that serves as an example

protestations – claims

reprisals – acts of revenge

salable – able to be sold

sally – a saying or quip

supplicating – humbling; praying; begging

### Chapter III

cloud – a shawl

communing – discussing

conflagration – an intense burst (of color in this instance) or flame (usually referring to a fire)

crooning – singing, speaking

house-minions – servants; slaves