

Pudd'nhead Wilson Study Guide

Pudd'nhead Wilson by Mark Twain

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Plot Summary

Pudd'nhead Wilson is a novel by the classic novelist Mark Twain. In this novel, a slave switches her child with the child of her master in order to protect him from the darker side of slavery. The child grows to be spoiled and cruel, treating his own mother with disdain until he learns the truth of his birth. Frightened of being discovered, this young man commits the one crime that will reveal the truth to everyone he has ever known and cause him to be sold down river, just as his mother once feared. Pudd'nhead Wilson is a fascinating study in human nature that entertains as it encourages its readers to consider the bigger questions of society.

Dawson's Landing is a small town on the Mississippi River that has always been a quiet, simple place to live. David Wilson chooses to settle here and begin his law career, but it will be more than twenty years before he has the opportunity to practice law because a foolish statement causes him to gain the reputation of an unintelligent man, or a pudd'nhead. Instead of the law, Wilson pursues other interests, including the collection of fingerprints. Wilson collects fingerprints from everyone in town, including several babies in town.

Roxana is a slave who gave birth to a son the same day her master's wife gave birth to his only surviving son. When Percy Driscoll, Roxana's master, is widowed, Roxana becomes the sole caretaker of his young son, Thomas. Many people in town comment how alike the two babies look. Roxana is a light skinned black woman and her son is as blond and fair skinned as young Thomas. When the babies are seven months old, Roxana becomes frightened by the thought that the master might one day sell her son down river. At first Roxana considers killing her child as well as herself. However, Roxana realizes it would be much simpler to switch the babies.

Roxana's son grows up as Tom Driscoll, the spoiled son of one of the richest men in town while Driscoll's biological son grows up as Chambers, the child of a slave. When Tom's father dies, Tom goes to live with his uncle, Judge Driscoll, while Roxana is freed and goes to work on a steamboat as a chambermaid. When Roxana returns to Dawson's Landing many years later, she finds Tom just as spoiled and cruel as ever. Roxana tells Tom the truth about his birth and promises to tell Judge Driscoll if he does not pay her half his allowance every month. Tom agrees. However, Roxana is only one of Tom's troubles. Tom also has a gambling habit and is in debt. Tom cannot ask his uncle to pay the debt because the last time he did that, Judge Driscoll threatened to take Tom out of his will. Instead, Tom has begun to rob his friends and neighbors to pay the debt.

A sensation spreads throughout Dawson's Landing when two strangers, foreigners with a title, come to town. Everyone is so fascinated with these gentlemen that they do not notice Tom robbing them blind while they visit the strangers. Later, Tom learns that a knife he stole from these strangers is worth a great deal, but that all the pawn brokers have been notified in order to help catch the thief. Tom cannot sell the knife, but he needs money to pay off his debt. Roxana comes up with a plan to put off Tom's



creditors, but this plan fails when Tom is robbed. Instead, Roxana suggests that Tom sell her as a slave to get the money to pay his debts and then buy her back in a year. Tom agrees, but sells her down river to a cruel mistress who has her beaten in the fields. Roxana runs away and comes to Tom, who has already made a deal to turn her over to her new master.

Roxana threatens to tell Judge Driscoll about Tom's birth if he does not go to him and get the money needed to buy her freedom. Tom agrees, but instead of asking Judge Driscoll for the money, he decides to steal it. In the middle of the theft, Judge Driscoll catches Tom. Tom kills Judge Driscoll rather than be exposed as a thief. The crime is blamed on one of the strangers because the stranger attempted to call the Judge out for a duel and was refused. Not only this, but the murder weapon was the stranger's knife. However, Wilson recognizes Tom's fingerprints on the murder weapon. When Wilson goes back to check all of Tom's fingerprints, he also discovers the baby switch.

In court, Wilson proves Tom's guilt. Tom confesses and is convicted of murder. However, Percy Driscoll's creditors claim that they should be allowed to sell Tom to pay off the debts left from Percy's estate. Tom is given a pardon and sold down river. At the same time, Chambers, who is the real Thomas Driscoll, inherits all of Judge Driscoll's money. However, Chambers cannot read or write, feels out of place among the whites, and misses his life among the blacks.



Chapters 1-2

Chapters 1-2 Summary

Pudd'nhead Wilson is a novel by the classic novelist Mark Twain. In this novel, a slave switches her child with the child of her master in order to protect him from the darker side of slavery. The child grows to be spoiled and cruel, treating his own mother with disdain until he learns the truth of his birth. Frightened of being discovered, this young man commits the one crime that will reveal the truth to everyone he has ever known and cause him to be sold down river, just as his mother once feared. Pudd'nhead Wilson is a fascinating study in human nature that entertains as it encourages its readers to consider the bigger questions of society.

Dawson's Landing is a sleepy little town on the Mississippi River. The chief resident, or most prominent, is Judge Driscoll, whose ancestors are from Old Virginia. Judge Driscoll is married, but he and his wife have never had children. Judge Driscoll's sister, a widow who is also childless, lives with him and his wife. Judge Driscoll has a younger brother who has had many children, but these children have died from various childhood illnesses. Percy's wife gives birth to a son, named Thomas à Becket Driscoll, a few days before she dies. On the same day, Percy's slave, Roxana, gives birth to a son she names Valet de Chambre. With the death of his wife, Roxana becomes the sole caregiver of both Chambers and Tom. The same month the boys are born, a new man comes to town. David Wilson is a lawyer who plans to open a practice in Dawson's Landing. However, Wilson makes a comment about owning half a dog that strikes those in town as unintelligent. Within a day Wilson is given the nickname Pudd'nhead. The nickname sticks and no one hires Wilson as a lawyer because no one wants a dumb lawyer.

Without a law practice, Wilson spends his time with other pursuits, including accounting and surveying. Wilson also indulges certain hobbies that those in town find frivolous. One of these pursuits is the collection of fingerprints. Wilson takes fingerprint samples from everyone in town using glass slides and the natural grease found in people's hair. Wilson takes the fingerprints of Tom and Chambers several times in the first year of life, specifically at five, seven, and eight months. In September, the slaves working for Percy Driscoll are accused of theft. Percy tells the slaves he will sell them down river if they do not tell him who stole money from his house. Three of the slaves confess to protect themselves from being sold down river, which is the Deep South and could mean a difficult life. Roxana is not guilty, however, because she recently discovered religion.

Chapters 1-2 Analysis

All the main characters are introduced in the first chapter through the use of the authorial voice. The author practically writes out a cast of characters to let the reader know who is important and why. The first character introduced is Judge Driscoll. Judge



Driscoll is the most prominent citizen of Dawson's Landing, suggesting to the reader that he will feature prominently in this story as well. The fact that Judge Driscoll is childless is pointed out in this first chapter, suggesting that Judge Driscoll really wanted a child, but was unable to have one, therefore he would be grateful if a child came into his life. At the same time, Judge Driscoll's brother is introduced as a man who has had a great many children, but all these children have died until his last son is born in the days before his wife's death. This child is clearly going to play a role in both Percy Driscoll and Judge Driscoll's lives, foreshadowing an impact by this child on the lives of these men.

The child, Tom, is left in the care of Roxana, a slave who gave birth to a son the same day Tom was born. These two boys are going to grow up together, almost as brothers, implying a kind of equality between the two boys to the reader that a modern reader might expect but someone from the period in which the novel was set would understand was not morally or socially possible. These boys may seem to be equals at the moment, but will never be equals because one is the heir to his father's wealth and social standing while the other is the child of a slave.

David Wilson is also introduced in these chapters. Wilson is a young lawyer when the story opens, hoping to begin a law practice in Dawson's Landing. However, a single comment misunderstood by the local gentlemen earns Wilson the nickname of Pudd'nhead, a nickname that will stick with him for twenty years and end his law career before it can begin. Wilson pursues other avenues of interest in place of the law. One of these pursuits is the collection of fingerprints. The reader suspects that this interest will lead to some sort of impact on the story since it is an unusual interest at the time.



Chapters 3-4

Chapters 3-4 Summary

That night, Roxana becomes obsessed with the idea of her son being sold down river. Roxana decides to kill the baby rather than see that happen to him. Roxana dresses up for the murder-suicide, then dresses the baby in some of Tom's clothes. When Roxana sees Chambers in Tom's clothes, she realizes how alike the babies really are. Roxana is only an eighth black, therefore her baby is fair skinned, causing him to appear white like Tom Driscoll. Roxana decides to switch the babies in order to give her son a chance at a good life. Roxana worries that someone will notice the switch, but the babies look so much alike that no one ever guesses, not even Wilson when he takes their fingerprints again.

The babies grow up together, but in different roles. Tom, who is really Chambers, grows up spoiled and self-centered, treating both Roxana and Chambers, who is really Tom, with disdain. Chambers comes to be Tom's protector, keeping him safe from bullies who threaten to beat him senselessly the moment Chambers' head is turned. Tom resents Chambers for his protection and constantly puts Chambers in his place with words and actions. Chambers even saves Tom from drowning one day and Tom rewards him by accusing him of falling for a joke and making a fool of them all. Tom treats Roxana the same way, constantly refusing to offer her any kindness at all. When Tom is fifteen, Chambers is sold to Judge Driscoll a month before Percy Driscoll dies, leaving behind a pile of debt. Tom is sent to live with Judge Driscoll and his wife, while Roxana is given her freedom. Roxana elects to get a job on a steamboat and work as a chambermaid.

Chapters 3-4 Analysis

Roxana trades the babies, making her son the heir to Percy Driscoll's estate and Percy's son a slave. This exchange is possible because Roxana's baby only has a small amount of black genetics, making him appear as fair skinned as Tom Driscoll. It was common during the time in which this novel is written for fair skinned black people to attempt to pass as white, but Twain has taken this idea a step further by making a white child grow up as a slave. The two boys are raised together in Roxana's care. Roxana's biological son, who is now called Tom, becomes a cruel person, treating even his own mother with the disdain of one who believes himself better than her simply because of their roles in society, illustrating the theme of racial inequality. Tom's behavior toward Roxana tells the reader that he is an unkind person who will more than likely create a great number of problems for himself due to his behavior.

When Percy Driscoll dies, Tom goes to live with Judge Driscoll, Percy's childless older brother, while Chambers, the real Tom Driscoll, is sold to the judge as a slave. The two boys continue to live in the same household, but their positions are drastically different. Tom is pampered, adored by his aunt and uncle simply because of his existence, while



Chambers is put to work with the other slaves and treated with the same inequality as the other slaves in the household. Chambers is not abused, but his freedom is limited by his status as property to the Driscoll family. At the same time, Roxana has been granted her freedom and has left Dawson's Landing in order to work as a chambermaid on a steamboat. Roxana is a free woman and allowed to collect a salary, a rare thing for a woman of her social standing at the time. It seems to the reader that Roxana's plot to save her child has succeeded, much to the detriment of the true Driscoll heir. However, there is a lot of plot left to develop, so the reader suspects there might be trouble in Tom Driscoll's, aka Chambers', future.



Chapters 5-7

Chapters 5-7 Summary

Tom is smothered with affection from his uncle and aunts until he goes off to school at Yale. Tom quits after a short time, however, and comes home without a career or any aspirations for one. Tom lives off the kindness of his uncle, collecting an allowance that comes nowhere near covering the debts he incurs from a gambling habit. Tom has grown to be generally unpleasant, leaving him with no friends and acquaintances that put up with him only because of his uncle. During this same time, a local widow, Widow Cooper, or Aunt Patsy as many in town affectionately call her, learns that the room she rents out in her house is to be occupied by a set of twins. Much excitement follows this announcement because the twins are foreigners, originally from Italy, who have traveled to many wild and exotic locations. The twins, Luigi and Angelo Cappello, also have the distinction of a title, something else that is rare in such a small town. Aunt Patsy becomes a celebrity in Dawson's Landing when word gets out. Everyone in town wants to meet these young men, visiting in unison shortly after their arrival.

Even Judge Driscoll gets in on the excitement surrounding the twins, taking it upon himself to give the twins a tour of the town. The judge likes the twins very much and wants to impress them. The judge invites the twins to a meeting of his Society of Freethinkers, a group that includes only Judge Driscoll and Pudd'nhead Wilson. Wilson also likes the twins very much and begins a friendship with them. In fact, Wilson is waiting for the twins to come visit one day when he happens to glance in a window at Judge Driscoll's house and sees a young woman in young Tom's room in the early hours of morning. Wilson is surprised by this appearance because he knows that Tom is in St. Louis. Wilson visits Judge Driscoll's widowed sister, Aunt Pratt, and establishes that she knows nothing of the woman in her nephew's room, making the mystery even more puzzling.

Chapters 5-7 Analysis

Tom has not changed as he has matured. Perhaps because he is so pampered by his childless aunts and uncle, Tom grows up to be something of a ne'er-do-well. Tom has the opportunity to attend Yale, one of the greatest universities in the country, but quits without graduating. Tom would prefer to collect an allowance and gamble away his uncle's money than make a living. It is no surprise, then, that Tom has few friends. Tom's character is dark, lazy, and unpleasant and nothing illustrates that more than his choice to throw away a top rate education. Tom also has a gambling problem, a fact that is likely to cause him troubles since most gamblers end up in such deep debt that they struggle to find a way out.

Two new people come to town. These young men, Luigi and Angelo Cappello, are foreigners who hold the distinction of a title. Dawson's Landing is a very small town, if



the reader will recall from the author's description at the beginning of the novel. The arrival of two men of such distinction causes a fuss in the small town among people who have never met anyone who has traveled throughout the world and has a title. Even Judge Driscoll is impressed and Judge Driscoll is the most prominent citizen of Dawson's Landing, therefore it probably takes a lot to impress him. Wilson too befriends these young men, suggesting a friendship that could help Wilson change his reputation, a theme of the novel, among the town's people.

Finally, in this chapter Wilson happens on a mystery. Wilson sees a woman in Tom's room, but knows Tom is out of town. This is curious and makes Wilson wonder who the woman is and what she might want in Tom's room. This might seem like a minor thing to a modern reader, but a woman appearing in a man's room was highly unusual in the time period in which this novel is set, especially the room of a single man. The identity of this woman will prove important later in the novel, but for reasons no one can at this point predict.



Chapters 8-9

Chapters 8-9 Summary

Roxana works on the steamboat for eight years, placing four dollars of her monthly salary in a New Orleans bank each month take care of her in retirement. When Roxana develops arthritis in her arms, she quits her job and goes to collect her savings only to discover that the bank has folded and taken her money with it. Penniless, Roxana makes her way back to Dawson's Landing thanks to the kindness of her co-workers on the steamboat who donate money for the cause. Roxana imagines her son, Tom Driscoll, will help her. However, when Roxana visits the Driscoll home she finds Tom just as mean and disrespectful as ever. In fact, Roxana learns from Chambers that Tom was disinherited briefly by Judge Driscoll for incurring two hundred dollars in gambling debt that the judge was forced to pay. Roxana insists on seeing Tom, who finally agrees but only after abusing Chambers for bringing the message to him. Roxana asks Tom for money, telling him if he does not give her money she will go to Judge Driscoll with information that will cause him to disinherit him once again. Tom, believing that Roxana is talking about new debt he has incurred, gives her a dollar and arranges to meet her later that night.

When Tom meets Roxana that night at the local haunted house where she has been living, Roxana tells him about his birth. Tom is shocked, outraged, and filled with fear that Judge Driscoll will disinherit him when he learns the truth. In order to keep Roxana from telling anyone, Tom promises to give her half his monthly allowance. However, Tom has another problem. Tom is more than three hundred dollars in debt again thanks to his gambling habit in St. Louis. Roxana is concerned because it is in her best interest as well as his that he be Judge Driscoll's sole heir. Roxana asks how Tom plans to cover the debt and he tells her he has been stealing from his neighbors in order to sell the loot to pawn brokers and pay the debt without Judge Driscoll finding out. Roxana is impressed with Tom's ingenuity and encourages him to pay off the debts and then to go straight so that he never again risks being cut out of the will.

Chapters 8-9 Analysis

Roxana returns to Dawson's Landing after her retirement fund disappears from the bank where she had a savings account, something that was more common in the time period in which the novel is set than it might be in modern times. Roxana wants her son to take care of her, therefore she tells him the truth about his birth and essentially blackmails him into paying her half his monthly allowance. Roxana anticipates being kept in high style now that her son knows the truth about her. However, this dream is threatened by Tom's gambling habits. Judge Driscoll has made it clear that he will write Tom out of his will if he continues to embarrass the family with his gambling debts. Tom is once again in debt and desperate to find a way out without his uncle learning the truth. Tom is stealing to cover his debts, showing the reader how desperate he is to cover these



debts without his uncle learning the truth and how low his moral standard is. Another man, given the same circumstances, would most likely admit his mistakes and ask for forgiveness. Tom is a coward, hiding from the truth by committing another crime. This behavior and attitude show the reader Tom's lack of maturity and predicts an escalating pattern of behavior that will lead to Tom's downfall.



Chapters 10-11

Chapters 10-11 Summary

For the first couple of days after learning the truth about his birth, Tom is ashamed and begins to shun his few friends and family. Tom feels he has changed his behavior, but no one else sees anything different in Tom's behavior because he has always been distant, unpleasant. Tom throws himself into the only pursuit through which he gets pleasure, gambling. However, this habit again throws Tom into debt and he is forced to again steal from his neighbors. Tom has begun dressing as a woman in order to hide his appearance during these robberies. It is during preparation for a robbery-raid on the town that Wilson sees the woman in Tom's room. That day, the same day the whole town turns out to meet the twins, Tom takes advantage of the large number of empty houses to rob them while disguised as an old woman.

One evening, Tom visits Pudd'nhead Wilson at the same time that the twins have come to visit. Tom embarrasses Wilson by asking how his law practice is doing, fully aware that Wilson has not had a client in twenty years. Tom then tells the twins about Wilson's idle pursuits, including fingerprint collection and palm reading. The twins are impressed with Wilson's palm reading skills and ask him to read them. Wilson declares that he is not good at seeing the future in palms, but will tell their past. To test his skills, Luigi writes down something from his past and gives the paper to Tom. Wilson then reads Luigi's palm and finds a secret there that he is afraid to say out loud. Wilson writes down his finding and discovers that he has written the same thing Luigi wrote on the paper he gave Tom. It turns out Luigi once killed a man who was trying to kill his brother in order to steal an expensive knife that an Indian prince gave them. When Angelo draws the knife on a piece of paper, Tom realizes that he has stolen this knife and is glad because it alone should make enough money for him to pay his debts.

During this visit, a local man comes to take the twins to a meeting of a group organized to support the legalization of rum. The twins are invited to join the group and are paraded to the meeting hall where they find themselves the center of attention. One twin is for the group, but the other would rather join the anti-rum group because he does not drink. Tom follows the twins to the meeting and finds himself plied with rum. Tom makes a comment that offends one of the twins. Before he knows what has happened, Luigi kicks Tom, causing him to fly off the stage into the laps of several group members. A fight breaks out and before anyone knows what has happened, the auditorium is on fire.

Chapters 10-11 Analysis

Tom has taken to wearing women's clothing to commit his burglaries. This is important because it solves the mystery of the woman Wilson saw in his bedroom. It also keeps the police from suspecting Tom of these crimes, both because the suspect is a woman and because Tom was thought to be out of town during each of the robberies. Tom



continues to rob from his neighbors because he has indulged further in his gambling habit to soothe his grief over the truth of his birth. Tom takes advantage of the arrival of the twins in order to steal from many neighbors on the same day, even stealing from the twins. This theft is important not because of the crime itself, but because of what Tom steals. Tom takes a knife from the twins that is worth a great deal of money because of the jewels encrusted on its ivory handle. Tom can pay all his debts and have some left over by selling this knife. However, the knife is unique, so the reader is curious if it might not be traceable even in the time period of the novel.

Tom learns that that the twins are murderers during a palm reading at Wilson's house. The murder was justified, but Tom has a habit of twisting things to make them sound the way he wants, as exemplified by his jabs at Wilson about his non-existent law practice. The reader wonders if maybe Tom might have occasion to use this information against the twins based both on Tom's established character and the fact that later in these chapters Luigi embarrasses Tom by kicking him off a stage. A man, even one with loose morals, does not like to be made to look like a fool, therefore the reader would be amiss in not believing Tom will do something to avenge himself in this case.



Chapters 12-14

Chapters 12-14 Summary

Judge Driscoll goes to bed early the night of Tom's humiliation and goes fishing the next day, therefore he does not learn about the incident until late the following day. When Judge Driscoll learns that Tom took the matter to court rather than handling it with honor by requesting a duel, he is outraged and tears up his will once again. Then Judge Driscoll calls Luigi out for a duel himself to repair the Driscoll family name. Tom is despondent over this situation and goes to visit Wilson in order to find a sympathetic ear. Wilson represents Luigi in court, taking on his first case in his career, but still insists that he would have made sure the matter was settled out of court if he had known Judge Driscoll was not aware of Tom's actions. Tom is shocked and more convinced than ever that Wilson is a pudd'nhead.

The conversation then turns to the thefts that took place all over town the previous day. Wilson tells Tom and several other men who have joined them that the twins' knife was also stolen. However, Wilson has concocted a plan to have the thief arrested the moment he attempts to pawn it. Unknown to him, Wilson has just warned the thief of his trap. Wilson's visitors have come as well, to ask him to run for mayor. Due to Wilson's friendship with the twins and his debut in court, public opinion is shifting. As soon as Wilson sees his visitors out the door, Pembroke Howard comes by to tell him about the duel. Wilson agrees to be Luigi's second. At the same time, Judge Driscoll decides to rewrite his will in case he should die during the duel. Tom overhears this conversation and later sneaks a look at the will.

During the duel, Tom goes to the haunted house to search out sympathy from Roxana. Everything is beginning to seem very bleak to Tom because even though his uncle has rewritten the will, he still has a large debt that needs to be paid, but now he cannot pawn the one item he stole that is sure to pay it off. Tom regrets that his uncle did not die in the duel because that would have solved all his problems. Roxana tells Tom to go to St. Louis and arrange to pay interest on his debt. Roxana then assures Tom that Judge Driscoll will surely die in the next few months, because he is old, before the creditors become too upset about their lack of payment. Roxana also makes Tom promise to behave from now on so that he does not run the risk of being written out of the will again. Tom agrees.

Chapters 12-14 Analysis

Tom humiliates his uncle and brings dishonor on the family name when, rather than face Luigi in a duel, Tom presses charges against him for assault. Judge Driscoll is so angered by this that he tears up his will and then challenges Luigi to a duel himself. At the same time, Tom learns that Wilson and the twins have discovered the theft of the twins' Indian knife and have concocted a scheme to catch the thief. Unfortunately,



Wilson is unaware that by discussing this plan in front of Tom that he has told the thief the plan. Tom is now desperate. Tom needs money to pay off his debts, but cannot sell the one item that was sure to pay the whole bill. The fact that the judge has written a new will to benefit Tom is no consolation because the judge is still alive, therefore his money is of no help to Tom. Tom's moral fiber is exposed here, proving that he is a self-centered man who would rather have his uncle die and leave him his money, than to enjoy the love and devotion his uncle offers in life. Roxana is also disappointed because she would also benefit from the uncle's death through her son. Roxana concocts a plan for Tom to pay interest on his debts while they wait for Judge Driscoll to die of old age, therefore allowing Tom to inherit all the money he could possibly need to pay for his gambling habit. In the meantime, Roxana instructs Tom to behave, something Tom has sworn to do many times but has failed to do, telling the reader the possibility of Tom remaining well behaved is slight.

Wilson's life is turning around, however. Although he has had the reputation of a pudd'nhead for twenty years, touching on a theme of the novel, his friendship with the titled twins and his acceptance of his first legal case has elevated him in stature among the people of Dawson's Landing. Wilson has been invited to run for mayor. The reader has always suspected that Wilson is much more intelligent than he was ever given credit for, due to his fascination with things such as fingerprints in a time when fingerprints were not fully understood, and is pleased to see this turn in his fortunes. It seems as Tom's life becomes more complicated, Wilson's is paralleling it by becoming more favorable.



Chapters 15-16

Chapters 15-16 Summary

A week passes and no one is caught for the burglaries that have been taking place in Dawson's Landing. Tom takes it upon himself to point this out to both the constable and Wilson, suggesting that the knife the twins claim was stolen either never existed or was never stolen. Even Wilson believes this to be possible despite his high regard for the twins. At the same time, Tom tells his uncle that the twins are assassins, based on the story that Luigi told the night of Wilson's palm reading, and suggests that he is not a coward, just reluctant to meet an assassin on a field of honor. Judge Driscoll decides to use this information against the twins in their campaign for mayor, planning to announce it in a speech on the day of the election.

Tom is extremely helpful throughout the campaign, behaving as Roxana has instructed him to do, and wins his uncle's trust. Now it is time for Tom to return to St. Louis to deal with his debts. Tom takes a group of stolen items to sell and use to pay interest on the debts, but these items are stolen his first night on the steamboat. Roxana learns of the theft and decides that she will allow Tom to sell her in order to get the money he needs to pay his debts. Roxana makes Tom promise to buy her back after a year. Tom sells Roxana, for twice what he needs to settle his debt, but unknown to her sells her to a farmer down river rather than someone up north.

Chapters 15-16 Analysis

Tom makes fun of Wilson and the constable, claiming that neither is very good at solving crimes since they have not been able to catch Dawson's Landing's thief. Tom then goes on to suggest that the reason Wilson's plan to catch the thief did not work because he based it on the knife that the twins claimed was stolen. Tom suggests the knife was never really stolen. The reader knows that the knife was stolen and knows Tom did it, but Wilson does not know this and begins to entertain Tom's theory. This theory causes the twins to lose some of the esteem they have garnered since moving to Dawson's Landing, illustrating the power of reputation, a theme of the novel. Tom continues to disparage the twins by telling his uncle that Luigi is a trained assassin, basing his story on the fact that Luigi killed a man with the knife Tom stole. However, Tom conveniently leaves out the fact that Luigi committed the murder to protect his brother, which again shows the reader Tom's lack of morality.

In other avenues, Tom has turned a corner. Tom has been helpful to his uncle, gaining back his trust, and has kept out of trouble. However, Tom's debts are still unpaid and he finds himself desperate to make arrangements to pay them when the items he intended to use for that purpose are stolen from him. Roxana, in a rare act of selflessness, convinces Tom to sell her as a slave to a landowner up north. Tom does as he is asked, but in an ironic twist, sells his own mother down river, which is exactly the fate that

Roxana feared for her son and the reason why she switched him with the real Tom Driscoll.



Chapters 17-19

Chapters 17-19 Summary

The summer drags on and it comes to Election Day. Judge Driscoll makes an impassioned speech against the twins, stressing the rumors about the supposedly missing knife. Judge Driscoll then claims that Luigi is a trained assassin and Angelo is his partner in crime. Due to these claims, the twins lose the election and Wilson becomes mayor. Judge Driscoll is worn out from the election, so Luigi delays challenging him to a duel, but everyone in town knows that is his intention. When the judge is well enough, he refuses the challenge of a duel based on the fact that Luigi is an assassin, but makes it known he is prepared to face Luigi elsewhere. At the same time in St. Louis, Tom is followed into his room by a strange, black man. It turns out to be Roxana in disguise. Roxana tells Tom how the wife of her new master disliked her and had her placed in the fields where she was mercilessly worked by the overseer. Roxana put up with the abuse until the day the overseer beat a young woman Roxana had developed an affection for. Roxana hit the man with his own stick and then ran off on his horse. Roxana found a canoe and traveled down the river until she came across the steamboat on which she once worked. The crew of the steamboat gave Roxana a ride to St. Louis and some money when they learned about her circumstances. Once in St. Louis, Roxana hid out until she found Tom.

Tom has known about Roxana's escape from the farm because her master located him and told him. The farmer threatened to go to Judge Driscoll about the sale if Tom did not help find Roxana. Roxana suspects this, so she tells Tom he will go to Judge Driscoll to get the money to buy her freedom, telling Judge Driscoll the truth about selling Roxana down river, or else she will tell Judge Driscoll about Tom's birth. Tom agrees. However, Tom refuses to tell Judge Driscoll the truth and risk being disinherited again. Instead, Tom decides to sneak into the Driscoll home and steal the money. Tom slips into the sitting room where Judge Driscoll has fallen asleep going over his accounts. Tom begins to take the money left lying on a table, but the judge awakens and calls for help. Tom stabs the judge with Luigi's knife, leaving the knife behind when he flees. Tom dresses in his women's clothing and escapes out a back door while the twins, who were out for a walk, run into the house. The twins are found standing over the body, leaving everyone in town with the impression that the twins killed the judge in revenge for his accusation made during the mayoral campaign. Wilson does not believe the twins guilty, however, and agrees to represent them in court. As their lawyer, Wilson begins to investigate, starting with the mystery woman he once saw in Tom's room who was spotted leaving the house the night of the murder.

Chapters 17-19 Analysis

Judge Driscoll uses the information Tom gives him to impeach the twins, to make them look like criminals and frauds. This is successful in that it allows Wilson to win the



election. However, it is a lie and it causes the twins to lose the reputation they had in Dawson's Landing. The twins, who were once the most popular citizens of Dawson's Landing, are now outcasts, forced to stay in their rooms all day and exercise at night. This event shows how easily a person's reputation, a theme of the novel, can turn with a little gossip. This episode also leaves Luigi hoping to avenge himself in a duel, but Judge Driscoll refuses on the grounds that Luigi is a trained assassin. However, the judge leaves open the possibility that Luigi might attack him in a less honorable circumstance, giving Luigi a motive for Judge Driscoll's murder.

Tom travels to St. Louis where Roxana finds him after escaping the farm where she is a slave. Roxana has been treated badly and escaped. Tom knows about Roxana's escape because the farmer who bought her has threatened to go to Judge Driscoll about the sale if Tom does not help him find Roxana. Instead of turning Roxana in, however, Tom allows her to blackmail him once again and agrees to get the money to buy her back her freedom. However, Tom does not want to tell Judge Driscoll about the gambling debts that led him to sell Roxana, so Tom's moment of possible maturity turns out to be fear, revealed when he decides to steal for his uncle rather than be honest and risk his uncle's wrath. In the process of the theft, Judge Driscoll is killed and Luigi is charged with his murder, Angelo with accessory before the fact. Now Wilson is on the case, giving the reader cause to believe the truth might finally come out. This faith in Wilson stems from the fact that Wilson is fascinated with fingerprints and the author has made a point of telling the reader that Tom left his fingerprints on the knife in the judge's blood.



Chapters 20-21 and Conclusion

Chapters 20-21 and Conclusion Summary

Wilson takes the knife and compares the prints to all those of every woman he has ever fingerprinted. Wilson believes the killer is the woman he saw in Tom's bedroom some months before. However, none of the fingerprints match. Wilson is frustrated, afraid that Luigi and Angelo might be convicted of murder because he cannot prove another person was in the house. However, while looking through his glass slides one night during the trial, Wilson gets a break. Tom stops by the house to visit and picks up the glass slide on which Roxana once put her prints. When Wilson takes the slide back, he sees Tom's fingerprints and recognizes them at once as those on the knife. Wilson puts it all together, realizing that Tom was the woman he saw, dressed in female clothing, and that Tom killed the judge.

Wilson puts on a great show in court to prove that each individual has a unique fingerprint. Wilson then has the jury examine several fingerprint examples until they are able to see a match between a set of fingerprints and that of the murderer. Wilson then reveals the murderer as Thomas Driscoll, but also proves through fingerprints he took of Tom as a baby that he is not really Tom Driscoll, but Chambers, the son of Roxana. With this news Tom is arrested. Tom makes a full confession and is convicted of murder. However, when Percy Driscoll's creditors learn of Tom's birth, they claim that they should be allowed to sell Tom for the money still left unpaid on Percy's debts. The governor agrees and Tom is sold down river. At the same time, Chambers is returned to his rightful place in society. However, Chambers cannot write or read, and is more comfortable in the kitchen with the rest of the slaves than in the sitting room.

Chapters 20-21 and Conclusion Analysis

Wilson finally proves to the people of Dawson's Landing that he is not stupid. Wilson is the only one to figure out who really killed Judge Driscoll, thanks to his hobby of collecting fingerprints. Not only does Wilson prove that Tom is a murderer, but he is able to prove that Tom is not really Tom, but Chambers. Wilson is now one of the most respected people in Dawson's Landing, his reputation restored, and a practicing lawyer. The theme of reputation is no more thoroughly illustrated than with Wilson, where the reader gets to watch what happens to a man when he is misunderstood and labeled without cause, and how that reputation can turn on a dime based on a man's actions or the gossip that fills a small town.

Tom is sent down river. This is ironic because being sold down river is exactly what Roxana was trying to save her son from by switching him with the real Tom Driscoll. Not only this, but Chambers, the real Tom, is restored to his rightful place, but he does not feel as though he belongs in this life. Chambers would rather remain among the slaves, the people he has been associating with since he was a small child. This is an

interesting study in human nature, playing with the modern day debate of nature versus nurture. The entire novel is also a study in class structure within society and how tenuous those classifications can be. If not for a silly comment, or a fact of birth, and the lives of all the people in this book could have been very different.



Characters

David 'Pudd'nhead' Wilson

When David Wilson first comes to Dawson's Landing, he makes a comment about a dog that makes everyone believe he is unintelligent. Wilson says he would like to own half the dog so he could kill his half to make it stop barking. The people who hear this comment think it is the stupidest thing they have ever heard. Wilson is given the nickname of Pudd'nhead for this comment and the idea that Wilson is unintelligent sticks. When Wilson hangs out a shingle for his law practice, no one will hire him because no one wants a stupid lawyer.

Over the years, Wilson fills his time with other pursuits, namely accounting, palm reading, and the collection of fingerprints. Everyone in town has come to think of Wilson as a sweet, if strange, unassuming neighbor. Everyone in town has given Wilson their fingerprint, thinking it is a harmless occupation. However, when Judge Driscoll is killed, Wilson suddenly finds himself with a client. Wilson wants to prove his client innocent, but has trouble finding a way to do it. One night, while studying his fingerprint collection, Tom Driscoll offers Wilson the perfect opportunity to prove that his fascination with fingerprints is not useless, as well as prove his intelligence once and for all. Wilson proves, in court, that his clients could not have killed Judge Driscoll because their fingerprints do not match those on the murder weapon. Instead, Wilson is able to prove that Tom Driscoll committed the crime.

Wilson is suddenly a new person, a person who has earned the respect of the community he came to live in more than twenty years before. Wilson is asked to forgive the town for mislabeling him all those years ago. Not only this, but Wilson's law career finally begins to thrive after twenty years of waiting for the opportunity to use his education.

Thomas a' Becket Driscoll

Thomas à Becket Driscoll was born to Percy Driscoll and his wife, the only surviving child of a couple who has lost many children. However, Thomas's mother dies within days of his birth, leaving his care completely to his father's slave, Roxana. Roxana had a baby at the same time Thomas was born, Chambers, and raises the two children together. When the babies are seven months old, Roxana begins to fear for her son. Roxana does not want her child sold down the river when he is older, but knows this is a real possibility because she is a slave and her child is a slave as well. In order to save her child, Roxana decides to kill him. However, before she kills him, Roxana dresses her son in the clothing belonging to Thomas. When Roxana sees how alike the two babies are, she decides to exchange her baby for Thomas.



Chambers grew up without knowing the truth of his birth, believing himself to be Tom Driscoll. Tom is a cruel person who looks down on the slaves around him, treating his own mother like a common slave who deserves no respect. As an adult, Tom, drops out of college and lives off the kindness of Judge Driscoll, the man he believes to be his uncle. Tom also develops a gambling problem that causes him to fall into a great deal of debt that his uncle refuses to pay. Tom learns the truth about his birth when Roxana comes to him to ask for money. Roxana tells Tom the truth and then threatens to tell Judge Driscoll unless Tom agrees to share his money with her. Tom becomes desperate. Tom begins breaking into people's houses to steal the items he needs to sell to pay off his gambling debts so he does not have to ask his uncle for the money. When this does not work, Tom sells his mother down river for the money he needs. However, Roxana is treated poorly and escapes. Tom then needs to come up with the money to buy his mother back from her new master. Roxana wants Tom to ask his uncle for the money, but Tom refuses in fear that he will be written out of the will again. Instead, Tom tries to steal the money, but Judge Driscoll wakes and catches him. Tom kills Judge Driscoll. Later, Wilson is able not only to prove Tom killed Judge Driscoll, but that the babies were switched between their seventh and eighth month of life.

Roxana

Roxana is a slave, but she is only one eighth black, so she appears white. Roxana is a slave in the household of Percy Driscoll. When Roxana gives birth, she must get right back to work because her mistress gives birth on the same day. Roxana takes over the care of Thomas Driscoll because his mother dies within a few days, leaving her responsible for her own child as well the Driscoll child. Everyone comments about how similar the two boys are. One night, Roxana becomes frightened that her child will be sold down river. Roxana thinks about killing the baby and herself, but then realizes she can exchange her baby for the Driscoll baby. With the exchange, Roxana's baby can live to be a gentleman and never fear being sold down river.

Roxana is freed when Percy Driscoll dies and spends several years working on a steamboat as a chambermaid. When Roxana gets arthritis in her arms, she decides to retire only to discover the bank where she kept her savings has folded. Roxana returns to Dawson's Landing in the hopes that her son will provide for her. However, Roxana's child has grown up to be a cruel, spoiled young man. Roxana threatens to tell Judge Driscoll the truth about her son's birth unless he gives her half his monthly allowance. Roxana then schemes with her son to find a way to cover his gambling debts so Judge Driscoll will not cut him out of the will. Roxana even allows her son to sell her down the river in order to pay his debts. Eventually, however, the truth comes out and everyone learns what Roxana did.

Valet de Chambre

Valet de Chambre, or Chambers, is Roxana's son. Roxana worries about her son's fate as a slave and decides to switch him with Tom Driscoll in order to keep him from being



sold down the river. Thomas, the child belonging to Percy Driscoll and his wife, grows up as Chambers, the son of Roxy the slave. Chambers never learns to read or write and has the speech of a man who grew up in the slave quarters. Chambers is kind, generous, the kind of person who will grow up to be a fine man. However, Chambers believes himself to be a slave, therefore he behaves like a slave and is comfortable around other slaves. When the truth comes out and Chambers is returned to his rightful place, he does not fit in. Chambers is uneducated and unhappy in his new life despite the freedom and money it has given him.

Judge Driscoll

Judge Driscoll is Dawson's Landing's chief citizen. Judge is a wealthy man who never had children of his own. Therefore, when Percy dies and the judge inherits his son, the judge and his wife are thrilled to finally have a child to spoil. Judge Driscoll adores Tom, but becomes frustrated with the boy when he does not complete college and then develops a gambling problem. Judge Driscoll often threatens to write Tom out of his will, causing Tom to find other avenues to pay off his gambling debts. When Tom learns that he is really Chambers, the son of a slave, he becomes frightened of what might happen should his uncle learn the truth. Roxana puts Tom in a position where he must tell his uncle part of the truth, but Tom refuses. Instead, Tom attempts to steal from his uncle but is caught and forced to kill the man who has treated him with nothing but kindness. It is the investigation into Judge Driscoll's death that reveals the truth about Tom and Chambers and changes Wilson's reputation for the better.

Percy Driscoll

Percy Driscoll is the younger brother of Judge Driscoll, Dawson's Landing's most prominent citizen. Percy is a business man who spends most of his son's childhood trying to secure a land deal that has become complicated by a lawsuit. Percy Driscoll is Thomas Driscoll's father. Thomas is Percy's only living child, Percy having lost all his other children to childhood illnesses. Thomas is raised by Roxana, Percy's slave, because his mother dies in the days following his birth. Percy is not around his home often enough to notice when Roxana switches the two children. In fact, Percy never learns the truth. Percy dies from the stress of his business when Thomas is only fifteen. Percy dies deep in debt. Percy's estate is settled for only sixty percent of what is owed. When it is learned that Tom Driscoll is really Chambers, a slave, Percy's creditors insist on being allowed to sell Tom for the remainder of the debt. Tom Driscoll, aka Chambers, is sold down river, just as his mother once feared would happen.

Luigi and Angelo Cappello

Luigi and Angelo Cappello are strangers from Italy who have come to stay in Dawson's Landing. The whole town is fascinated with Luigi and Angelo because they have never met anyone from a foreign country before, especially not two men who can call



themselves counts. Luigi and Angelo confess to Wilson, in front of Tom, that Luigi once killed a man who threatened to kill Angelo. Tom takes this information and twists it around to make it appear that Luigi is a coldblooded killer after Luigi embarrasses Tom in public. Judge Driscoll uses this information to discredit the twins during the campaign for mayor. Later, the twins are accused of killing Judge Driscoll when they are found standing over the body and Luigi's knife is discovered to be the murder weapon.

Pembroke Howard

Pembroke Howard is Judge Driscoll's best friend. Pembroke is Judge Driscoll's second when Judge Driscoll challenges Luigi to a duel for embarrassing Tom in public. Pembroke arranges the duel and then stands by while the two men fire guns at each other. Pembroke also witnesses Judge Driscoll's will when he decides to write a new will before the duel in case he is killed. Only Pembroke knows that there is a new will and Tom is still the sole heir. At least, he believes he is the only one with this information. However, Tom overhears a conversation between the two men and is aware of the new will.

Aunt Pratt

Aunt Pratt is Judge Driscoll's sister. Aunt Pratt is childless and widowed, therefore she lives with Judge Driscoll. When Tom comes to live with Judge Driscoll and his wife, Aunt Pratt also partakes in the happiness that swells in the household now that there is finally a child to care for. On the night that Judge Driscoll is murdered, Aunt Pratt is awakened by the sound of people running. Aunt Pratt goes into the sitting room and finds the twins standing over her brother's dead body. Aunt Pratt insists she did not hear a cry for help as the twins swear they heard. Aunt Pratt is one of the star witnesses against the twins in court. It appears that Aunt Pratt's testimony will hang the twins, but that is before Wilson brings his fingerprint evidence into court.

Widow Cooper and Rowena

The Widow Cooper has a room to rent in her house that has not been rented in more than a year. When Mrs. Cooper gets a letter asking that she rent the room to twins, she is excited. When the two men arrive, they turn out to be foreigners with titles. This is fascinating to all the people in town who come to visit the twins as soon as they arrive. However, this fascination quickly ends, leaving the widow Cooper as their only friend. Rowena is the widow Cooper's daughter. Rowena is a beautiful young woman who is very shy and destined to be an old maid. However, Tom Driscoll has a crush on Rowena. When Tom finds out that he was born Chambers, he decides he can no longer court Rowena.



Objects/Places

Cradle

Roxana is so afraid that her son will be sent down river that she exchanges him with the son of her master, placing her own son in the master's cradle at seven months of age. Roxana's son does not learn of this switch until he is in his early twenties.

Indian Knife

The twins are given a knife by an Indian king that Luigi uses to kill a man attempting to steal it from them. Tom steals the knife but cannot sell it because the twins notify every pawn broker in the area. Instead Tom uses it to kill his uncle, Judge Driscoll.

Judge Driscoll's Will

Judge Driscoll cuts Tom out of his will on several occasions because of his gambling debts and general dishonorable behavior. It is fear of this happening again that causes Tom to steal from his uncle, putting him a position where he feels he is forced to kill the old man.

Judge Driscoll's Cash Box

Judge Driscoll's cash box is found undisturbed beside his body the night he is killed, making the local law enforcement believe robbery was not a motive for the crime.

Women's Clothing

Tom uses old women's clothes to disguise himself when he commits robberies. Tom wears these clothes to escape his uncle's house the night Judge Driscoll is murdered.

Glass Slides

Pudd'nhead Wilson is in the habit of collecting people's fingerprints on small glass slides. Wilson uses this collection to figure out who killed Judge Driscoll.

Steamboat

Dawson's Landing is on the Mississippi River and is serviced by steamboats. After Roxana's owner sets her free, she becomes a chambermaid on a steamboat.



Gambling Debts

Tom robs the homes of his friends and neighbors in order to pay off gambling debts. Later Tom sells his own mother into slavery to pay the debts.

Haunted House

There is a house in Dawson's Landing that has the reputation for being a haunted house, therefore it is referred to as the haunted house. Roxana lives here for a short time when she first returns to Dawson's Landing and Tom uses the house as a refuge when he needs a place to be alone or to plan his crimes.

Palm Readings

One of the hobbies Pudd'nhead Wilson has indulged in over the years is palm reading. Wilson is good at reading someone's past in his palm, but struggles when it comes to reading a person's future.

Down River

The slaves of Dawson's Landing are afraid of being sold down river because down river is the Deep South where it is rumored that slaves are treated badly.

Dawson's Landing

Dawson's Landing is the name of the town on the Missouri side of the Mississippi River where this novel is set.



Themes

Racial Inequality

This novel is set in the 1830-50s, a time when slavery was legal and the war between the states was still several years away. During this time period, blacks were looked upon as property, things to be sold and traded, not as human beings. Even blacks who looked white but had some black blood were treated this way. Blacks were not taught to read or write, did not learn to speak with eloquence, or learn to behave with the manners expected of even the youngest white child. However, these blacks were expected to clean the homes of whites, to work their fields, and to raise their children. Blacks lived under the constant fear of being sold by their owners, sent to live where the rules were enforced with a whip, taken from their family and friends without notice and never knowing when they would see them again.

Roxana is a beautiful woman whose skin is white as snow, but because she has black blood is sold and traded like a slave. Roxana works for Percy Driscoll, taking care of his only surviving child. Roxana has a child the same day Percy Driscoll's wife gives birth and is expected to raise these children side by side, treating one like a prince, dressing him in expensive clothing and putting him to sleep in an expensive cradle, while the other is to be dressed in rags and sleep in an old crate. Roxana is frightened for her child, afraid that one day her master will decide to sell the child down river and send him to live with a master who will beat him. Roxana decides to trade the babies in order to prevent this from happening to her child. Instead her son is raised as the only heir to his father's estate, while the real Driscoll son is raised like a common slave.

The two boys could not be more different. Tom Driscoll is angry, dark, and cruel while Chambers is peaceful, kind, and generous. Tom treats the slaves, including his own mother, with distaste, acting as though they are all less than human. Tom is spoiled, given to excessive gambling without concern to who might pay his bill should he lose. The only time Tom thinks of others is when those others fail to give him what he wants. When Tom learns that he was born to a slave and has black blood, he is outraged, disgusted, and wants to die. Tom decides he must do all he can to hide the truth. The truth comes out in the end, however, and Tom finds himself sold down river, just as his mother always feared would happen to him.

Chambers, on the other hand, is a kind young man who has never treated anyone badly. Chambers is a devoted servant, working hard all day without complaint. When Chambers learns the truth about his heritage, he finds himself taken out of the only world he has ever known and dropped into a world that is unfamiliar. Chambers is rich and sleeps in a nice bed, but he cannot read or write. Chambers has a big house all to himself, but is more comfortable sitting in the kitchen with the slaves. Chambers loves church, but is not comfortable in the family pew, wishing instead he could sit in the back with the rest of the blacks. Chambers' life changes for the better, but it is not a life he wants nor knows how to handle. Chambers would rather remain a slave.



Reputation

When David Wilson first moves to Dawson's Landing, he makes a comment that causes people to think he is simple-minded. The comment is meant to amuse, but somehow comes out sounding ignorant. As a result, the town nicknames him Pudd'nhead. Wilson is a trained lawyer, but when he hangs out his shingle, no one is willing to hire him because they believe him to be stupid. Wilson indulges in other pursuits to survive, waiting nearly twenty years to prove his worth as a lawyer. When Wilson solves the murder of Judge Driscoll, everyone in town suddenly realizes that Wilson's nickname is not accurate and asks for his forgiveness. Wilson is now known to be intelligent and can succeed at being a lawyer.

Tom Driscoll is known to be a gentleman because of his last name. Tom is a cruel man, selfish in many ways with a gambling habit that constantly threatens to cause his uncle to disinherit him. However everyone looks to Tom as a respected member of society. They respect Tom so much that when he begins robbing everyone blind, no one stops to wonder if Tom might be committing these crimes. Instead, they discuss their plans for catching the robber right in front of Tom, unwittingly warning him away from their carefully constructed traps. It is not until Wilson sees Tom's fingerprints in the aftermath of his uncle's murder that he finally discovers the truth.

When the twins, Luigi and Angelo, come to Dawson's Landing, everyone is fascinated with them because no one of their stature has ever come to Dawson's Landing before. However, when Tom begins to spread rumors about them, this fascination quickly turns to speculation. Tom tells his uncle that Luigi is an assassin. Judge Driscoll begins a smear campaign against the twins during the mayoral race and spreads this rumor Tom has begun. Soon the twins' reputation becomes such that they feel they must hide in their boarding room rather than face the wrath of a frightened city. Luigi is expected to call Judge Driscoll out for his statements, but everyone knows the judge will not face Luigi on a field of honor because of his reputation as an assassin. Therefore, when Judge Driscoll is found dead with a knife Luigi has admitted to owning, it does not take long for the residents to believe Luigi guilty of the crime.

Betrayal

Tom is Judge Driscoll's nephew and only relative, short of his widowed sister, therefore he is the most precious person in Judge Driscoll's life. However, Tom is a constant embarrassment, constantly gambling away money he does not have and refusing to act honorably in public. Judge Driscoll threatens over and over again to cut Tom out of his will, but loves the young man so much that he cannot make himself follow through on his threat. However, Tom is not really Judge Driscoll's nephew, but was switched with another child when he was a baby. When Tom learns this, he attempts to behave to keep his mother from telling Judge Driscoll he is a slave child, not the judge's nephew.

In order to keep the judge from knowing about his gambling debts, Tom robs the homes of his friends and neighbors, stealing from them so that he can pay his debts. Tom is



desperate to keep the judge from learning about his debts or about his birth. However, when Tom cannot pay his debts, his mother suggests that he sell her as a slave. Tom sells his mother down river, which is the worst thing a man can do to a slave, betraying her trust. When his mother escapes her new owners, Tom makes an agreement with her master to return her. Tom's mother learns about this betrayal and forces Tom to buy her back. However, to do this, Tom must go to his uncle for the money. Tom refuses, but his mother threatens to tell his uncle the truth. Instead, Tom tries to steal the money, but his uncle wakes and Tom is forced to kill him. Tom has committed the ultimate betrayal against his uncle, and it is a crime that will lead to the whole town learning the truth about Tom and the baby whose place he took in the cradle.

Style

Point of View

The point of view of this novel is third person omniscient. The narrating character shifts from time to time, from Tom, to Roxana, to Wilson. This point of view allows the reader to see the events through the eyes of the narrating characters and to also see their emotion and their thoughts. This novel's point of view is unique, however, in that it also contains the authorial voice. In this novel, although the narration is seen through the eyes of the characters, there are times in which the narration pulls back and a new, unidentified voice speaks directly to the reader. This voice belongs to the author, giving the reader information to understand the setting and to follow the movement of the plot.

The point of view of this novel works because it allows the reader to see the story through the eyes of the most important characters, including Tom and Wilson. If the story were told only through Tom's eyes, the reader might not see how the crime was solved. If the story were told only through Wilson's eye, the reader would not have been present during the murder of Judge Driscoll or have understood why the murder took place. The authorial voice adds a dimension to the story that modern novels do not include, giving it a sense of a story being told rather than a drama unfolding, and adding a sense of humor to the overall story in order to lighten the serious tone of the novel.

Setting

The novel is set in the small town of Dawson's Landing on the Missouri side of the Mississippi River. Dawson's Landing is comprised of a group of private homes and a single street of businesses, making it a town in which everyone knows everyone else. The setting is intimate, but still includes the romance of the Mississippi River that is often included in Mark Twain novels. The novel is also set in the 1830s-1850s, a time when slavery was still legal and no one questioned the morality of owning another human being.

The setting of the novel is important for two reasons. First, the setting is a small town, giving the novel an intimate setting that allows for a small number of main characters to interact in such a way as to not confuse the reader. The small town setting has an impact on the plot for many reasons. The small town allows Wilson to be branded unintelligent, limiting his career options and giving him time to study fingerprints, which will lead to the discovery of Judge Driscoll's murderer and Wilson's redemption. The small town also allows the rumor mill to affect the lives of each of the town's citizens, including the twins, leading to the fiasco that caused the twins to be tried for murder. The second reason the setting is important is the time period in which it is set. The novel is set during the time of slavery, making the core situation, the switching of the two babies, probable. If the novel had been set in modern times, the mother's reason for the switch would not have been realistic.



Language and Meaning

The novel was written more than a hundred years ago, during a time when language was more than just a means to express oneself or to tell a story. Mark Twain uses language in this novel as more than just a device, but with a clear love for the English language and a desire to make his words jump off the page. Twain uses humor and sarcasm in a way that modern writers can only hope to achieve, designing sentences that leap off the page and paint a picture that the reader can actually see. Twain also uses a technique in his dialogue that imitates the uneducated language of the slaves, torturing phrases and words until the reader feels as though they are actually hearing a young slave woman talking to her white, educated son. Finally, Twain uses certain words which might be considered vulgar by the modern ear, but were once considered common language.

The language of this novel works because it is suited to the time in which it was written. Twain is a master of the language, using words and phrases that might not seem familiar to the modern reader, but tell a story that is beautifully crafted and easily understood. The language in this novel is not simple, but not complicated, a language that even the youngest reader will understand if willing to have a little patience. The dialogue is unique and can be difficult to read, but gives the novel a sense of authenticity that makes the differences between the races leap from the pages.

Structure

The novel is written in twenty-one chapters and a conclusion. Each chapter begins with a quote from Pudd'nhead Wilson's calendar, a calendar he designed and wrote himself. The chapters all tend to be fairly short, with the exception of a few longer chapters, keeping the pace of the novel quick. The story is told in a linear fashion with the exception of several chapters in the middle that move back in time to catch the reader up on the back story relating to Tom's biological mother.

The main plot of the story follows Tom Driscoll, the young son of a local business man. Tom has a gambling problem that is complicated when he learns that he was switched with another child as a baby and is really the son of a slave. Tom finds himself blackmailed by his own mother to behave, but finds this a difficult way to live. Tom eventually is placed in a position where he must kill his uncle or be revealed a thief and a slave. A subplot of the novel deals with the man whose name is the title of the novel. Pudd'nhead Wilson is an intelligent young lawyer who has the unfortunate reputation for being unintelligent, causing him to wait twenty years for his first legal client. However, it is Wilson who solves the biggest crime to ever take place in their small town, the murder of Judge Driscoll, Tom's uncle.



Quotes

"The 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," Chapter 1, p. 3.

"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 affective antediluvian methods; so the cradles were empty," Chapter 1, p. 5.

"Percy Driscoll slept well the night he saved his house-minions from going down the river, but not wink of sleep visited Roxy's eyes. A profound terror had taken possession of her. Her child could grow up and be sold down the river! The thought crazed her with horror,"
Chapter 3, pp. 12-13.

"This history must henceforth accommodate itself to the change which Roxana has consummated, and call the real heir 'Chambers' and the usurping little slave 'Thomas à Becket'—shortening this latter to 'Tom,' for daily use, as the people about him did,"
Chapter 4, p. 17.

"Mrs. York Driscoll enjoyed two years of bliss with that prize, Tom; bliss that was troubled a little at times, it is true, but bliss nevertheless; then she died, and her husband and his childless sister, Mrs. Pratt, continued the bliss-business at the old stand. Tom was petted and indulged and spoiled to his entire content or nearly that."
Chapter 5, p. 23.

"It was a proud occasion for the widow, and she promised herself high satisfaction in showing off her fine foreign birds before her neighbors and friends—simple folk who had hardly ever seen a foreigner of any kind, and never one of any distinction or style."
Chapter 6, p. 28.

"Roxy's pet castle—an occasional dollar from Tom's pocket—was tumbling to ruin before her eyes. She could not abide such a disaster as that; she couldn't endure the thought of it,"
Chapter 8, p. 35.

"For as much as a week after this, Tom imagined that his character had undergone a pretty radical change. But that was because he did not know himself," Chapter 10, p. 45.



"What a time of it Dawson's Landing was having! All its life it had been asleep, but now it hardly got a chance for a nod, so swiftly did big events and crashing surprise come along in one another's wake: Friday morning, first glimpse of Real Nobility, also grand reception at Aunt Patsy Cooper's, also great robber-raid; Friday evening, dramatic kicking of the heir of the chief citizen in presence of four hundred people; Saturday morning, emergence as practicing lawyer of the long-submerged Pudd'nhead Wilson; Saturday night, duel between chief citizen and titled stranger, Chapter 15, pp. 73-74.

"Ain't you my chile? En does you know anything dat a mother won't do for her chile? Dey ain't nothin' a white mother won't do for her chile. Who made 'em so? De Lord done it. En who made de niggers? De Lord made 'em. In de inside, mothers is all de same," Chapter 16, p. 80.

"The real heir found himself rich and free, but in a most embarrassing situation. He could neither read nor write, and his speech was the basest dialect of the negro quarter," Conclusion, p. 114.

"As soon as the Governor understood the case, he pardoned Tom at once, and the creditors sold him down the river," Conclusion, p. 115.



Topics for Discussion

What is this novel about? Why is the novel titled Pudd'nhead Wilson when Wilson is a minor character for the majority of the novel? Who is Tom Driscoll? Why is the novel not named for him? How does Wilson get the reputation of being unintelligent? Does Wilson deserve this reputation? Why does the reputation not change for more than twenty years? What finally causes the reputation to change?

Who is Tom Driscoll? Who is Tom's mother? Why did Tom's mother switch him with another child? What was Tom's mother hoping to accomplish with this change? Did she achieve her desired end? Why or why not?

What does Tom's behavior toward his uncle say about his birth? What is Twain trying to say about slavery? Does Twain mean to imply that a child of a slave will always behave unlawfully? If so, why? Do you believe this to be true? Would Tom's life have turned out differently if his mother had not switched him with the real Tom Driscoll? How? What does this story say about the theories regarding nurture versus nature?

Why does Wilson collect fingerprints? Why do most people in town believe this to be an amusing pastime? Why do people agree to allow Wilson to take their fingerprints if they think it is a silly game? Why does Wilson take so many samples from Tom and Chambers when they are babies? What purpose does this serve? How does this help Wilson solve the mystery of who killed Judge Driscoll?

Why does Tom sell his mother down river? Why is Roxana so afraid of being sold down river? Does the reality live up to the assumptions? Why does Roxana run away? What does she hope will happen when she finds Tom? Does Tom help Roxana? Why? Would Tom have helped Roxana if she did not threaten him?

Who are the twins? Why are the people in town so fascinated by the twins when they first come to town? Why does the town turn on the twins? Are the twins responsible for the turn in their reputation? If not, who is? Why is Luigi accused of killing the judge? Did Luigi intend to kill the judge? Why or why not?

Discuss irony. How many examples of irony can you find in this novel? What is ironic about Roxana blackmailing Tom? What is ironic about Tom's conviction for murder? Is there irony in the way the town treats Wilson? List all the examples of irony in the book that you can think of.