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The Critical Response to *Pudd'nhead Wilson*: A Brief History and Current Issues

Mutsuo Fujisaki

After installed in *Century Magazine* from December 1893 to June 1894, *Pudd'nhead Wilson* in book form appeared in November 1894 simultaneously in the United States and in England. Twain included the farce of *Those Extraordinary Twins*, which he had deleted in the seven installments, with American edition and published it under the title, *The Tragedy of Pudd'nhead Wilson and The Comedy Those Extraordinary Twins*. His contemporary critics immediately responded to the tragedy mainly because they had already known it while serialized in the magazine in America, though they did not seem to be interested in the farce. They read the book in such a way as to emphasize issues of the reality of characters and the artistry of work and thought the characters were artificial and forced except Roxana, who was mostly regarded as the only figure that was depicted fully and truly. When it came to literary norm and an artistic unity, they expressed poignant criticism that, to choose one example, "the form in which it comes into the world may be so crude, so coarse, so erring from the ways of true classicism, so offensive to immemorial canons of taste" and went so far as to say that "it can not be called in any sense *literature*."¹⁾ A comparatively large number of critics manifested an interest in *Pudd'nhead* and made critical comments during the serialization in the magazine and just after the book's publication. But in the ensuing several decades it received little attention beyond a

1) "From *The Critic* (May 11, 1895)," in the Norton Critical Edition of *Pudd'nhead Wilson and Those Extraordinary Twins*, ed. Sidney E. Berger (New York: W. W. Norton, 1980), 216-217. The criticism reprinted in the Norton Critical Edition is cited in the following notes as NORTON. Quotations from this edition are cited parenthetically in the text.

slight treatment: it was regarded as an artistically inferior work measured by the standard of classicism or from an aesthetic point of view and therefore not worth analyzing enthusiastically.

About forty years after the book was issued, Bernard De Voto made the most comprehensively critical comment of the period. He pointed out “a theme completely tabooed in nineteenth-century American literature, miscegenation” and placed emphasis on slavery as an institution of the time.²⁾ His suggestion was perceptive and worth noting, but he did not push the analysis any further along this line.

A truly persuasive critical eye needed the perspective of more than half a century since the book’s publication. In the middle of 1950s and afterward *Pudd’nhead* began to receive due attention from critics. Among others, discussions by two distinguished critics, Leslie Fiedler and F. R. Leavis, greatly contributed to the elevation of *Pudd’nhead*’s position in Twain’s canon. In his article, Fiedler proceeds from a major premise that *Pudd’nhead* is superior to Twain’s masterpiece, *Huckleberry Finn*, in respect of morals because in his later work he avoids not only sentimentality but also “the immoral device of Tom’s revelation, the fake ‘happy ending’ of *Huck*.” He maintains that “the best way to understand *Pudd’nhead* is to read it as a complement to *Huckleberry Finn*, a dark mirror image of the world evoked in the earlier work.”³⁾

Thus Fiedler elevates *Pudd’nhead* to the level of *Huck*, discusses slavery and miscegenation and detects in Twain’s unconscious depth of mind “a buried ambivalence” based on the “archetypal symbolism of light and dark.” He states that Twain is not free from the prejudice that roots deeply in the American imagination: “black is the outward sign of inward evil.” According to Fiedler, the supreme achievement of *Pudd’nhead* is that Twain renders indignities imposed upon Tom and Roxana as an instance of “some universal guilt and doom.” In the tragic discovery scene between mother and son, when Roxana tells the truth that Tom is

2) Bernard De Voto, “Mark Twain’s Presentation of Slavery,” NORTON, 219-220.

3) Leslie Fiedler, “As Free as Any Cretur . . .,” NORTON, 221-222.

really a black slave, the horrible revelation shatters him. Then he sinks down in despair and thinks bitterly about his destiny. After discussing Tom's lament, Fiedler concludes that "the false Tom, who is the fruit of all the betrayal and terror and profaned love which lies between white man and black, embodies also its 'dark necessity.'"⁴⁾

It is clear that Fiedler interprets Tom's destiny on a symbolic and cosmic level. He raises *Pudd'nhead* from an artistically defective story to a morally fulfilled one, while making a cosmic tragedy out of a social injustice. In doing so he connects Twain's bias towards color not with the society in which he lives but with "archetypal symbolism" that "go[es] back through literature . . . and popular religion . . . to the last depths of the folk mind."⁵⁾ We must not forget, however, that the tragedy of slavery in a certain place and time could be blurred by reducing a great social problem to the sin of cosmic origin.

F. R. Leavis also finds a close relation between *Pudd'nhead* and *Huck* and maintains that it is necessary to appreciate the former in order to perceive the greatness of the latter. After quoting two paragraphs sketching the Mississippi from the first chapter of *Pudd'nhead*, he states as follows:

Here, quite plainly, speaks a proud imaginative delight in the memory of the great river; the great river as Mark Twain had known it in boyhood and in his piloting days; and in the memory, or vision, we feel the sense of freedom, beauty, and majesty that informs *Huckleberry Finn*; but there is something further: the passage unmistakably conveys the sense, sanguine and exalted, of an expanding and *ripening civilization*.⁶⁾ (italics mine)

In contrast to Fiedler, who is interested in universal guilt and doom

4) Fiedler, 227.

5) Fiedler, 227.

6) F.R.Leavis, "Mark Twain's Neglected Classic: The Moral Astringency of *Pudd'nhead Wilson*," NORTON, 233.

rooted in American imagination, what interests Leavis most is concrete reality of daily life in a "ripening civilization," such as comes from England and Europe. He sees in Dawson's Landing "a society that has kept its full heritage of civilization,"⁷⁾ and in the center of tradition exist Judge Driscoll and the other F. F. V. aristocrats who have a complex ethical background. But when he takes at face value Twain's praise of the aristocrats and claims that "Mark Twain unmistakably [sic] admires Judge Driscoll and Pembroke Howard,"⁸⁾ one cannot help saying that Leavis is too naive or too much biased to aristocracy to see the satire in Twain's description of the Virginian aristocrats.⁹⁾

While admitting the work's defects from an artistical point of view, Fiedler and Leavis direct their attention to the symbolic and ethical aspects of the story, in which, according to them, are described a cosmic tragedy and a complex tradition in American society. It should be noted that they provided a valuable point of departure for the critics to come thereafter, though they, in their different ways, misunderstood some of Twain's social criticism and irony.

Fielder makes another contribution to the understanding of the work. He points out, as one of the artistic defects, two contradictory plots crossed midway through the story—the tragedy of Tom and the melodrama or detective story of Pudd'nhead, and, he argues, after the tragedy is subdued by the melodrama the story itself finally ends as Pudd'nhead's success story:

This tragic inevitability is, however, blurred by the demands of the detective story with which it is crossed. The tragedy of Tom requires

7) Leavis, 234.

8) Leavis, 237.

9) Fiedler, though not so naive as Leavis, notes Twain's ambivalent feeling toward aristocracy: referring to the chivalric code, he says, "The 'serious' Twain was, however, as incapable of doubting the code as Tom Sawyer; he could mock it only in pure farce, when he felt it perfectly clear to every one that he was just kidding." (Fiedler, 225)

that he expose and destroy himself; the melodrama of Pudd'nhead Wilson requires that he reveal and bring to justice the Negro who has passed as white; and Twain decided finally that it was Pudd'nhead's book—a success story.¹⁰⁾

The argument about two plots is so persuasive that many critics follow this line, and in the early stage, James M. Cox discusses the interaction between the two plots to a fuller extent than Fiedler does. He regards them as not only contradictory but closely related to each other in the story's organic structure as a whole.

One of the most noticeable differences of approach between Cox and Fiedler is that the former pays due attention to *Those Extraordinary Twins* that shares the long title under which the author published the book for the first time. By taking into consideration the whole situation in which Twain composed the story, Cox goes a step further than Fiedler. He takes notice of what Twain calls “a kind of literary Caesarean operation” (119) and explains the process in which the original story is finally divided into two.

First of all, he saw his chief character as a stranger—not simply within the framework of the novel, but to himself as writer. Second, the entire narrative is seen as an unwilling action which, intruding from the background into his creative consciousness, comes to dominate the conscious narrative which evoked it. Third, this unconscious narrative is termed a tragedy, not a comedy, not humor. Finally, the novel is curiously and strikingly figured not as the child of the farce but as the *mother* from whom the child—the farce—is forcibly extracted.¹¹⁾

Going along this line of argument, one can easily be led to an opinion that the discrepancy in the narrative itself—*Pudd'nhead*—is not so much an

10) Fiedler, 227-228.

11) James M. Cox, *Mark Twain: The Fate of Humor* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1966), 227.

artistic failure as a matter of authorial intention, whether conscious or otherwise.

Tom is regarded as black "by a fiction of law and custom," (9) which, fabricated by the white, works as a system of deceptive racial classification and helps to legalize the institution of slavery. Tom is thirty-one parts white, which, according to Cox, embodies the long history of miscegenation that white men have tried to conceal because the blood mixture is "their own covert affirmation of the inexorable bond between the races." Roxana's success in switching her own baby with her master's infant son "functions as the comic equivalent of historic possibility" of passing the color line.¹²⁾ And the fact that Tom can easily go to the other side of the line blurs the clear separation between white and black essential to the system of slavery and, therefore, threatens the order of the white society. Thus Twain first tries to expose "the shabby moral structure" by revealing the racial mixture in the slave holder's society through Roxana-Tom's plot, but in the middle of the story he represses his original intention by Pudd'nhead Wilson's plot. Cox states that "Pudd'nhead and his plot enact a slavery under cover of an antislavery sentiment," and that "Pudd'nhead ultimately upholds the slave society by avenging the murder of the charitable foster father."¹³⁾

Up to this point, Cox's argument about two contradictory plots is in the similar line of Fiedler's. But he goes beyond his precursor by focusing on the relation between the plot and the mechanical character of Pudd'nhead. When he asserts that "the form which the character [Pudd'nhead] imposed upon the action was extremely constrictive," he sees the author's own intention behind Pudd'nhead's repressive role: "the stranger [Pudd'nhead] is, after all, the embodiment of the disillusion which came to have such dominion over Mark Twain's inventive life."¹⁴⁾

A conference was held in March 1987 at the University of California,

12) Cox, 229.

13) Cox, 244-245.

14) Cox, 245-246.

Santa Cruz, and based on discussions then devoted entirely to *Pudd'nhead Wilson*, a collection of essays was published in 1990. Susan Gillman, one of the discussants and editors of the book, remarks in the introduction on the reason of having the conference: "It was precisely *Pudd'nhead Wilson's* reputation for disorder, and the cultural implications of its relative critical neglect, that inspired the interdisciplinary conference."¹⁵ And the following quotation from the same introduction helps us to understand their critical stance in dealing with *Pudd'nhead Wilson*.

What are now regarded as its leading critical features were once dismissed as the signs of its failure: we read the incoherence in Twain's narrative not as aesthetic failure but as political symptom, the irruption into this narrative about mistaken racial identity of materials from the nineteenth-century political unconscious. Instead of searching for a hidden unifying structure, as did a previous generation of New Critics, the scholars in this volume are after what Myra Jehlen calls "the novel's most basic and unacknowledged issues." We do thus share the earlier critical passion for detection, although we are not similarly inclined to dismiss evidence of authorial intention. Most of the essays in this volume are subtextual studies which seize upon the text's inconsistencies and contradictions as windows on the world of late-nineteenth-century American culture. The collection as a whole seeks to make the strata of Mark Twain's political unconscious available for critical scrutiny.¹⁶

A number of contributors to the collection, following Cox's lead, develops the idea of two contradictory plots—race-slavery and murder mystery—which Fiedler advanced. In Gillman's view, to choose one example, Twain presents the crisis in American race relations first, which

15) Susan Gillman, Introduction, *Mark Twain's "Pudd'nhead Wilson": Race, Conflict, and Culture*, eds. Susan Guillman and Forrest G. Robinson (Durham: Duke UP, 1990), viii.

16) Gillman, vii.

he then denies by means of Pudd'nhead's repressive plot; his denial and repression reflect the racist sentiment in the society of late-nineteenth-century America. Therefore, it is important to examine "the context of the cultural circumstances" that produced the text.¹⁷⁾ If the text is not something produced by the integrity of imagination but linked closely to the historical period in which it is produced and which in itself contains contingent matters, then, to quote from Myra Jehlen's article, "the ideologies of race and sex that Mark Twain contended with in this novel were finally not controllable through literary form. They tripped the characters and tangled the plot."¹⁸⁾ Her argument not only explains the text's disorder but accepts it as the right and natural outcome. And if we locate the author at the center of the racist culture and take it granted that he is not entirely free from the cultural bias, it follows that the repressive plot of Pudd'nhead reflects Twain's own ambivalence about racism.

Shelley F. Fishkin, in her *Was Huck Black?*, focuses on Twain's mental attitude toward black people and examines "the ways in which African-American voices shaped Twain's creative imagination at its core." She gathers unpublished or ignored materials on his responsiveness to African-American people to discuss the role their voices played "on a subliminal level in Twain's consciousness."¹⁹⁾ She notes as follows:

Twain's writing on the subject of race remains complex and ambiguous, but these unpublished comments absolutely contradict the simplistic contention that he assumed "the existence of a natural racial hierarchy" and accepted "as a premise the biological inferiority of Negroes."²⁰⁾

17) Gillman, "'Sure Identifiers': Race, Science, and the Law in *Pudd'nhead Wilson*," Gillman and Robinson, 87.

18) Myra Jehlen, "The Ties that Bind: Race and Sex in *Pudd'nhead Wilson*," Gillman and Robinson, 105.

19) Shelley Fisher Fishkin, *Was Huck Black?: Mark Twain and African-American Voices* (New York: Oxford UP, 1993), 3-9.

20) Fishkin, 125-126.

Pudd'nhead Wilson is attracting critical attention more than ever and this is proved by the fact that discussions were devoted entirely to the text at the UCSC conference. At the conference they proposed a new approach from such cultural categories as race, class and gender, attaching importance to subtextual studies. Their fundamental contention is that the inconsistencies and contradiction in the text are closely linked with the world that produced it. Their approaches are instrumental in understanding the problems which *Pudd'nhead* presents from a broader point of view. But by placing emphasis on the text as social production, they tend to underestimate the issue of author's idiosyncrasy. It is necessary to examine his ambivalence about racism more closely, and in order to maintain an adequate balance between author and society we should take into consideration, as a point of departure, Fishkin's claim that Twain's creative imagination was shaped by Afro-American voices at its core.