The Clinician as Enslaver:
Pudd’nhead Wilson and the Rationalization of Identity

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Perhaps no other work better reveals the double-minded impulse in Mark Twain than does Pudd’nhead Wilson. Not only do twins make up the structural core of the tale, but the composition history of the novel is a case study in Twain’s narrative double-play. Beginning as Those Extraordinary Twins, a short piece centered around Italian-born Siamese twins, the project quickly developed into something more than Twain thought he could handle. What had originally started as a farce soon turned into a tragedy—“a most embarrassing circumstance,” according to its author (Pudd’nhead, 229). It was not one separate story, but two intertwined tales that “obstructed and interrupted each other at every turn and created no end of confusion and annoyance,” leaving Twain with a literary task of surgical proportions: “I pulled one of the stories out by the roots, and left the other one—a kind of literary Cæsarean operation” (229–30). Twain concludes his history of “jack-leg” composition by stating that the twins’ “story was one story, the new people’s story was another story, and there was no connection between them, no interdependence, no kinship” (303).

This last remark appears too emphatically dismissive to be dismissed, and if we were to take the author at his word, our reading of Pudd’nhead Wilson would be tragically abortive. If the tales of the twins—the Capellos in the farce as well as Tom Driscoll and Valet de Chambers in the tragedy—suggest anything, it is the impossibility of an autonomous identity. The two individual stories may have progressed along separate trajectories, but they nonetheless share a favorite Twain theme: twinning. The literal twins in Those Extraordinary Twins evolved into a series of thematic twins in Pudd’nhead Wilson, including Luigi and Angelo, Tom and Chambers, Tom and Roxy, Roxy and Wilson, Wilson and Judge Driscoll, and Wilson and Tom. But one of the most significant acts of twinning in the novel occurs within the single character of David Wilson. He embodies the two conflicting impulses of power that seem to permeate Twain’s later writings: the will to emancipate and the will to manipulate. As the
primary figure of authority in the text, David Wilson functions as the “extraordinary twin” of Twain’s revised tale and works as the philopena of power in Dawson’s Landing.¹

Many critics of Pudd’nhead Wilson have acknowledged the centrality of the twinning theme in the novel in terms of individual and societal identity in general. Arnold Weinstein, for instance, looking at society and identity within the novel argues that “the twinning principle is a way of making elastic what would be rigid, of spoofing what would be solemn, of annexing more space and having more fun in quarters that are pretty cramped and dull” (73).² And of those critics who have acknowledged the centrality of David Wilson in the novel, there is disagreement as to how he should be read. Most view Wilson in terms of either his intelligence or else the degree to which he lives up to the name pudd’nhead.³ However insightful these studies may be, the ambiguous nature of Wilson’s power in Dawson’s Landing has been by and large neglected. Yet whether as Columbo or as Barney Fife, Wilson unquestionably possesses some form of power, and it is this authority that best reveals Twain’s textual double-mindedness.

Some of the criticism concerning David Wilson suggests an innocent or benevolent character who functions as a figure of enlightenment and emancipation. Other readings of Wilson, however, suggest a more sinister or self-serving figure.⁴ But if doubleness or twinning lies at the heart of Pudd’nhead Wilson’s structure, then one would expect its title character to embody this in some way. However, some critics deny David Wilson the central focus that the novel’s title suggests. For instance, James M. Cox has stated that Wilson is an incomplete character, “little more than a massive plot device” who only functions as a part “of the plot machinery” (Mark Twain, 246). His “incompleteness,” for Cox, is also responsible for disrupting the “nature vs. nurture” dialectic that the novel sets out to explore (“Revisited,” 18). Likewise, Marvin Fisher and Michael Elliott point to Wilson’s inconsistencies as a reason to discount him as any type of hero. They argue, “It would be too much to insist that the bifurcated character of Pudd’nhead Wilson is thematically appropriate to the novel, but it is even less justifiable to view Wilson as a largely sympathetic character reflecting the author’s own opinions” (541–42). Both of these criticisms rest by and large on a letter that Twain wrote to Livy in January 1894 in which he recounts a Professor Powell telling him:

Pudd’nhead was clearly & powerfully drawn & would live & take his place as one of the great creations of American fiction. Isn’t that pleasant—& unexpected! For I have never thought of Pudd’nhead as a character, but only as a piece of machinery—a button or a crank or a lever, with a useful function to perform in a machine, but with no
dignity above that... Well, oddly enough, other people have spoken of him to me much as Prof. Powell has spoken. (*Love Letters*, 291)

Elsewhere, in his remarks on the novel’s construction, Twain says that Wilson “had to be brought in to help work the machinery” (*Pudd’nhead*, 303).

If we are to take at face value Twain’s account, the question becomes whose acuity to trust: Powell’s (and the “other people”) or Twain’s? The answer, it would seem, is both. The professor is correct to have noticed in the character of Wilson an embodiment of the force or forces at work in the novel. A telltale sign of this, after all, lies in the fact that the title of the novel bears his name. Twain may have been, in his own words, a “jack-leg” novelist, but he probably knew what he was doing—consciously or unconsciously—in choosing a title for the finished work. Also, Twain is strikingly honest in his characterization of Wilson as a “piece of machinery.” On the level of plot, Wilson is a motivating force that drives the mystery underlying the novel. Yet he is at the same time a presence that reflects the greater workings of the text. Here Wilson functions as the symbolic microcosm of the entire narrative. His duplicity, the contradictory impulses of emancipator and enslaver, is not only at work within his character, but also serves to highlight the duplicity or twinnness at work within the larger text. What many Twain critics have failed to acknowledge is that the problem of Wilson as a “full” character is one and the same with Wilson as a figure of authority, or, put another way, of authority as it functions in the novel as a whole.

Twain’s fascination with authority and authority figures manifests itself in some of his earliest writings. The narrators of *The Innocents Abroad*, *Roughing It*, and *Life on the Mississippi* are all taken by—and at times in complete awe of—rulers of nations, stage drivers, and riverboat pilots, respectively. In his boyhood novels, Twain locates power and authority in major figures like Tom Sawyer (whose showmanship both playfully entertains and selfishly manipulates) as well as in minor characters such as Colonel Sherburn (whose commanding power over his fellow citizens impresses Huckleberry Finn, yet who at the same shoots a man in cold blood). Yet it is in his later fiction that Twain most fully confronts the dynamics of authority and its relationship to the culture of his time. In *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court*, *Pudd’nhead Wilson*, and the Mysterious Stranger manuscripts, he explores the darker side of power, not only the ways that it can be used to liberate and benefit society, but more disturbingly the ways in which it is handled in a duplicitous and Machiavellian manner. David Wilson stands out as perhaps one of Twain’s most mysterious of manipulative strangers in that throughout most of the text, he strikes the people of Dawson’s Landing (and the
reader) as a quiet, bumbling—and perhaps even gentle—citizen of the town. However, it is his most striking hobby, the seemingly innocent art of fingerprinting, that best defines him and helps legitimate a culture of injustice and oppression. Writing in a time that privileged individual industry and scientific inquiry, Twain suggests in Pudd’nhead Wilson that intentional or not, enlightened rational endeavors can have a subtle yet potentially devastating effect.

Mapping the character of David Wilson is a labyrinthine project filled with false leads and blind alleys, all of which frustrate the reader at every turn. Like Hank Morgan before him, he embodies contradictory impulses that never negotiate a synthesis and refuse to interpenetrate. Much like young Satan in the Mysterious Stranger manuscripts, he is of an indeterminate ethical character that combines justice and selflessness with an equal amount of ego-centered deviousness. He resembles, in other words, the Siamese twins in Those Extraordinary Twins. But whereas in the finished novel Twain was able to take the twins apart and make them into separate men, he augmented the duality of Wilson. Indeed, as one set of twins was divided into minor individual parts, another rose up through all the “confusion and annoyance” to take the center stage. In the case of Pudd’nhead Wilson, the study of the unlikely twins goes from being a humorous look at individual identity to a more solemn investigation into the fragmented and often duplicitous nature of authority.

For Twain, there is something both beautiful and sinister about fragmented identities. In A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court, Sir Kay is quick to notice in Hank something of a “horrible sky-towering monster” and a “man-devouring ogre” (31). The Capello twins are not only a farcical vehicle of amusement, but perhaps more significantly, an unnatural phenomenon that inspires both awe and trepidation. Twain describes “it” (in the singular, which rhetorically enhances the sense of abnormal otherness) as “the twin-monster” and he had planned in the original work “to exhibit that monstrous ‘freak’ in all sorts of grotesque lights” (Pudd’nhead, 303). In Those Extraordinary Twins when Luigi is acquitted for having kicked Tom at the anti-temperance meeting, Judge Robinson, an impartial man who “usually made up in good sense what he lacked in technique” (271), notices the dangers inherent in the town’s embrace of the twins. Coming as they do immediately after an otherwise comic courtroom scene, the judge’s solemn words take on a particularly striking resonance:

You have set adrift, unadmonished, in this community, two men endowed with an awful and mysterious gift, a hidden and grisly power for evil—a power by which each in his turn may commit crime after crime of the most heinous character, and no man be able to tell which
is the guilty or which the innocent party in any case of them all. Look to your homes—look to your property—look to your lives—for you have need! (279)

This disjunctive “evil” is nonetheless coupled with a facade of harmonious beauty and civility, something that commands admiration as it woos its audience. In *Pudd’nhead Wilson*, the twins are the toast of the town, and their manners and talents win over almost all of Dawson’s Landing. Their piano playing, for instance, enchants the guests at the Cooper’s party, leading them to feel that “all the music that they had ever heard before seemed spiritless prentice-work and barren of grace or charm when compared with these intoxicating floods of melodious sound. They realized that for once in their lives they were hearing masters” (94–95). This combination of artful performance and ethical indeterminacy, so much a part of *A Connecticut Yankee*, again comes up in the Mysterious Stranger writings. When Satan plays the piano in *The Chronicle of Young Satan*, Marget and Wilhelm feel that it was no music such as they had ever heard before. It was not one instrument talking, it was a whole vague, dreamy, far-off orchestra—flutes, and violins, and silver horns, and drums, and cymbals, and all manner of other instruments, blending their soft tones in one rich stream of harmony. (*Mysterious*, 93)

As Theodor describes, “it feels like music” being around Satan (54).

David Wilson is also a double-edged figure, a “monstrous” twin whose threatening qualities are not outwardly expressed in freakish or violent behavior, but subtly wrapped within an enigmatic demeanor. He simultaneously assumes two positions within the Dawson’s Landing community: as an outsider relegated to the margins and as an insider giving company to the most respected citizens within the society. His “half a dog” remark banishes him to the outskirts of professional respectability, where the citizens strip him of any prior identity and inscribe upon him the mark of a societal outcast: “Within a week he had lost his first name; Pudd’nhead took its place” (60). What is more, Wilson literally lives on the margins of the community. His house is just three hundred yards from the haunted house, “the last house in the town at that end” (111). With the haunted house being the location where the ex-slave Roxy takes refuge, Wilson’s position is just one step removed from both legal and cultural marginalization. Conversely, Tom, although a spoiled fruit of the local aristocracy, is nonetheless a member of the town’s cultural elite who holds Wilson in high esteem. Wilson also enjoys the company and the respectability of Judge Driscoll, “the person of most consequence in the
community” (86). A member of the First Families of Virginia, the judge symbolizes the aristocratic elite of the region, the icon of leisured privilege, the moral center of his society, and the foundation upon which law and respectability rest. His adherence to the chivalric code notwithstanding, Judge Driscoll also represents the intellectual elite of Dawson’s Landing. The Freethinker’s Society, “the old lawyer’s main interest in life” (86), is composed only of him and Wilson, and he is the only one in the town to appreciate Wilson’s ironic style. At the same time as he flounders along the periphery, Wilson’s association and friendship with Driscoll and Tom clearly place him within the social center of Dawson’s Landing.

The descriptions of Pudd’nhead Wilson likewise raise questions as to the determinacy of his character. Throughout the text he is defined in terms that are noncomplementary and at times downright contradictory. His larger intentions are never entirely clear in the novel, and the reader is rarely certain at any point whether Wilson is an ingenuous fool or a shrewd operator cognizant of his every move. Upon first entering Dawson’s Landing, he is described as possessing “an intelligent blue eye” whose twinkle reveals both a “frankness” and a “covert” quality (59). Wilson is a text incapable of being accurately read, a sphinx-like presence whose ambiguity disturbs and even threatens the tranquil order of the town. After he utters his ironic and highly enigmatic remark on owning and killing half of the barking dog, the townspeople “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” (59, emphasis added). Roxy, one of the most discerning, conniving, and outright formidable characters in the novel, states with much apprehension, “Dey ain’t but one man dat I’s afeared of, en dat’s Pudd’nhead Wilson” (73). She is “afeared” because of her inability to read Wilson with any accuracy, and she is forced to conclude that he is nothing less than a witch (74). The mystery breeds a feeling of monstrousness. Twain tells us that Wilson was “a cipher in the estimation of the public, and nobody attached any importance to what he thought or did” (87). This is not because he falls within the understanding of the town and comes up wanting, but rather, as with Roxy, he inhabits a realm entirely beyond the comprehension of everyone else.

Wilson’s ironic utterances—the half a dog comment and his calendar—are incapable of being read by the other citizens, for

irony was not for those people; their mental vision was not focused for it. They read those playful [calendar entries] in the solidest earnest, and decided without hesitancy that if there had ever been any doubt that Dave Wilson was a pudd’nhead—which there hadn’t—this revelation removed that doubt for good and all (86).
When Wilson tells Tom that he would have gladly foregone his defense of Luigi—his most significant first case in court and the one that eventually led to his nomination as mayor—for the sake of the Driscoll’s family honor, Tom is unable to comprehend why Wilson would give up the opportunity for personal notoriety so easily. Tom’s subsequent remark—“I believe you—upon my word I do. I don’t know why I do, but I do. Pudd’nhead Wilson, I think you’re the biggest fool I ever saw” (146)—suggests a failure on his part to read Wilson on a “literal” or more logical level; he is thereby able only to fall back on a groundless belief in Wilson’s motives, which he crowns with the inscription “fool.” Tom, himself no pudd’nhead, has no reason to doubt Wilson’s authenticity nor has he any reason not to doubt it, yet he believes him for lack of compelling evidence to the contrary. In almost every case, Wilson’s words and actions do not lend themselves to an authoritative reading, leaving the townspeople with nothing more than a foggy series of words—something uncanny, a cipher, a witch, a pudd’nhead, a fool—to account for his indecipherability. As a text, he eludes the interpretation of Dawson’s Landing, a circumstance that ultimately works to his benefit. Just as Hank Morgan “bosses” Camelot by manipulating what the people fail to grasp—a condition not unlike that of his archrival, Merlin—Wilson is able to pursue his esoteric hobbies and maintain his social position by remaining beyond the grasp of his neighbors’ interpretative skills. His source of his power springs from such mystery.

David Wilson’s function as a plot device, or a “piece of machinery” as Twain put it, is likewise problematic. Those who see him as a manipulative or duplicitous figure base their readings on the perception that Wilson, to a large extent, understands the unlikely course of events in the novel and uses that knowledge to his advantage. In fact, an exciting way of approaching Wilson would be to read him as a detective figure quietly gathering clues in preparation for a final dramatic disclosure, and indeed, there are several passages in the text that convincingly suggest as much. The perceptive Roxy is “afeared” of Wilson and suspicious of his fingerprinting works, and Wilson senses this: “she thinks there’s some devilry, some witch-business about my glass mystery somewhere; she used to come here with an old horseshoe in her hand; it could have been an accident, but I doubt it” (83). It is almost as if the two were playing a cat-and-mouse game of detection, with each searching for clues and carefully scrutinizing the text of the other. Wilson is proud of his “inside knowledge” of Dawson’s Landing, his perception of things as they are and of which the other citizens fail to notice. After he spots the mysterious girl in Tom Driscoll’s bedroom window, he goes to the Driscoll house to get what knowledge he can from Tom’s widowed aunt, Mrs. Pratt. He questions her like a seasoned professional, an investigator on the trail of a lead:
Wilson did not ask if there was a newcomer in the house, but he asked questions that would have brought light-throwing answers as to that matter if Mrs. Pratt had had any light to throw; so he went away satisfied that he knew of things that were going on in her house of which she herself was not aware. (99)

Later, when Wilson attempts to read Tom’s palm, he turns to him and says, “Now, Tom, I’ve never had a look at your palms, as it happens; perhaps you’ve got some little questionable privacies that need—hel-lo!” (132). Tom jerks his hand away immediately, and Wilson never reveals what it is he saw, leaving the reader to suspect that there was more to that “hel-lo!” than he (or Twain) lets on. As with his tacit knowledge of the Driscoll household, Wilson seems to have spotted a clue within the fine lines—the script—of Tom’s palm, and the perceptive reader understandably would be tempted to suspect a sly “satisfaction” on Wilson’s part at having some knowledge to which Tom and the twins are not privy.

Another suspiciously telling moment occurs after the judge rebukes Tom for having taken the incident with Luigi into court. Dejected, Tom decides to turn to Wilson for some comfort. As he approaches the house:

Wilson heard footsteps at his threshold, then the clearing of a throat.

“It’s that fickle-tempered, dissipated young goose—poor devil, he finds friends pretty scarce to-day, likely, after the disgrace of carrying a personal-assault case into a law-court.” (144)

Not seeing him approach and without prior knowledge of his intended visit, how does Wilson know that it is Tom that is at his door? Wilson could have noticed him through the window or been told of his depressed condition, but neither of those possibilities are made explicit in the text. The only possibility short of extrasensory perception is that he knew, because of the aristocratic codes of honor, that Tom would be ostracized for taking the case into court and therefore strongly suspected that he would come around to receive solace, because Wilson “never failed in courtesy toward him” and is the only one to whom Tom can realistically turn (144). It is not that Wilson has set a trap for Tom, per se, but that he has comprehended the opportunities that Tom’s situation offered and is playing them for more information. After receiving him at the door, building upon the circumstance like a true detective, Wilson probes Tom for clues:

“Why, my boy, you look desolate. Don’t take it so hard. Try and forget you have been kicked.”
Without any hesitation, Wilson infers from Tom’s desolation some form of guilt and immediately links him, however tentatively, with the mystery girl whom he associates with the string of robberies. Wilson’s suspicions resurface when Tom actually discerns the trap that Wilson had laid for the thief of the twins’ knife. He thinks to himself, “Anybody with a reasonably good head would have thought of it. I am not surprised that Blake didn’t detect it; I am only surprised that Tom did. There is more to him than I supposed” (167). What may otherwise seem a casual observation becomes, in the context of similar suspicions, an ongoing exercise in acute speculation and carefully placed supposition. David Wilson, using his reputation as a pudd’nhead and working along the margins under the blanket of obscurity, follows his inklings and collects the evidence he feels will lead him to solve some vaguely defined mystery. He looks at Dawson’s Landing as a text to which he must apply his hermeneutic readings. If power stems largely from the ability to interpret texts, then Wilson stands as the town’s most likely candidate to authority.

Yet, despite the many clues as to Wilson’s insightfulness, there remain the persistent reminders of his naïveté in the face of his environment. For every hint that Wilson may be onto something, there is an equally strong suggestion that he is actually fumbling around the periphery of the mystery until an answer suddenly and fortuitously drops into his lap at the end. Immediately after he links Tom’s misery to the mysterious girl, Justice Robinson and Constable Blake arrive to discuss the string of recent thefts. When Blake tells him that a woman was spotted at the scene of the latest crime, “Wilson thought of the mysterious girl straight off. She was always in his mind now. But she failed him again” (148, emphasis added). Likewise, in the face of his ever-growing suspicion of Tom, Wilson is nonetheless easily struck dumb when his suppositions are foiled. After Tom surmises Wilson’s trap for the thief of the exotic knife and ridicules the plan as misguided:

Tom sauntered away. Wilson felt a good deal depressed.

He hardly knew what to think. He was loth to withdraw his faith from the twins, and was resolved not to do it on the present
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indecisive evidence; but—well, he would think, and then decide how to act. (169)

The clues to the mystery remain outside of Wilson’s perception, and he appears not so much a careful reader of possibilities as he does an unimaginative and single-minded thinker. Why else would Tom’s dismissal of his trap cause him so suddenly to feel “a good deal depressed”? After Tom misleadingly suggests that the twins lied about the knife being stolen, Wilson is quick to drop his own theory and agree with Tom’s. “I believe [the twins] had it,” he says to himself, for “if it had been stolen, the scheme would have restored it, that is certain. And so I believe they’ve got it yet” (169). The textual hints of Wilson’s discerning suspicions drop off after this episode, and it is not until Judge Driscoll’s murder that he once again pursues the ongoing mystery. (In fact, Wilson seems to drop the case entirely during this interim; his only actions during this time consist of winning the mayoral election and serving as a second to Luigi in his challenge to Driscoll.) Even after the murder, it is only by an act of chance—Tom imprinting the glass slide—that Wilson stumbles upon the answer. The solution comes to him, as through a passive act of accepting divine grace, and in this light the reading of Wilson as a duplicitous manipulator becomes suspect. One can imagine Wilson after this episode, whacking his forehead with the palm of his hand saying to himself, “Of course! Why didn’t I think of that before?!” Perhaps Wilson is, after all, a pudd’nhead. Those who read David Wilson as a smooth, covert operator must account for these lapses in reason and intention. Besides, there is a larger question that continues to elude satisfactory answers within the critical community: if indeed Wilson is a conscious manipulator of events or an ambitious opportunist, then why does he wait twenty-three years to make his move? Even given the possibility that there were no avenues for social improvement, advancement, or redemption in Dawson’s Landing during this long time and while in the prime of his life—highly unlikely—one would nevertheless have to question Wilson’s judgment for remaining idly in obscurity for so long.

If David Wilson is a philopena, a nut with two kernels, he is a most difficult one to crack. But whereas the contents or intentions remain shrouded in mystery, as possible as they are enigmatic, the husk retains more of a definite form. Whatever reasons Wilson may have for working within the social and legal structures of Dawson’s Landing, it is difficult to deny that he represents some form of authority within those very structures. Either as a manipulative opportunist or an unwitting lackey of the status quo, Wilson wields an impressive amount of power, enough to get him noticed by the ruling elite and enough to influence profoundly the town’s course of events.
What he performs, in essence, is a delineation of the cultural and political boundaries within the town, much in the way the First Families of Virginia once outlined honor and the aristocratic foundations of slaveholding society. It is most significant to note that every job and hobby in which Wilson engages involves some form of boundary drawing: as a surveyor he marks the borders of property; as an accountant or conveyance agent he directs the transfer of ownership; as a palm reader he outlines the contours of personal history; as a fingerprinter he establishes the limits of identity; and as an attorney he establishes the perimeters of justice. In other words, his authority rests not only on his ability to interpret the texts of Dawson’s Landing, but also, perhaps most significantly, in the ability to establish his own readings—his delineations of cultural and political boundaries—as authoritative.

What seems to disturb readers the most about David Wilson is that, however indirectly, he uses this critical authority to reestablish the assumptions of racial inequality—thereby reinforcing the structures of slavery—and does so by using rational tools of identification. One would expect that coming from “the interior of the State of New York” (58), a hotbed of antislavery and liberal reform in mid-nineteenth-century America, Wilson would work towards or at least sympathize with the cause of abolition. His ironic calendar, for instance, is filled with stinging commentary and downright condemnation of a nation trapped within the contradictions of its selective freedom. As Forrest Robinson reasonably surmises, “Mark Twain never says so, but the Pudd’nhead afloat in his imagination must certainly have views about the cruelty of slavery, and about the absurdity of its persistence in America” (“Disorder,” 43). Yet there is no indication that Wilson considers Tom Driscoll’s case within the larger context of racial oppression, a peculiar oversight for a man whose aphorisms are so observant about cultural inconsistencies. By the end of the novel, the overwhelming implication is that Wilson feels no sense of social responsibility, that he operates largely within a purely quantitative realm. The boundaries that he draws spring not from the soil of commitment but emanate from a mere manipulation of facts and numbers.

Hank Morgan may strut (or stumble) into Camelot as an ambitious investor, full of fanfare and grandiose showmanship, but David Wilson’s is a more subtle entrance. He arrives in Dawson’s Landing as something of a social scientist, a clinician willing to use the region as his laboratory. The activities with which he occupies himself reveal a variety of experimental interests, especially in the area of human identity. Branded as a pudd’nhead and relegated to the outskirts of the legal profession, Wilson “interested himself in every new thing that was born into the universe of ideas, and studied it and experimented upon it at his house” (Pudd’nhead, 61). Palmistry is one of the “fads” that interests him, but to the other one
he gave no name, neither would he explain to anybody what its purpose was, but merely said it was an amusement. In fact, he had found that his fads added to his reputation as a pudd’nhead; therefore, he was growing chary of being too communicative about them. . . . He often studied his records, examining and poring over them with absorbing interest until far into the night; but what he found there, if he found anything, he revealed to no one. (62)

His secretive experimentalism and unqualified acceptance of his “pudd’nhead” facade reveal a cold clinical detachment that refuses any taint of real social engagement. It is of no importance that Wilson’s glass slides and grease-prints will undermine Roxy’s personal attempt at racial restitution or reaffirm the rule of the Southern aristocracy. He functions in both an amoral and apolitical manner. Unlike the Connecticut Yankee, Wilson does not work from an ambiguous ideology of liberation, but finds his value in the facts themselves, a pure and ideal science free from any compromising political baggage. His irony, then, reads not as a progressive critique of the southwestern region in particular (and America in general), but as a disengaged and aloof analysis of the social data. This may have been what Twain meant when he spoke of Wilson as a “piece of machinery” within the novel. Whenever Wilson does engage in ethical or criminal distinctions—for instance, when he berates Tom for neglecting the chivalric code or vows to convict him as a murderous “miserable dog” (208)—he does so not out of any deeply felt sense of a greater good, but according to the convictions of his friend Judge Driscoll (convictions, as expressed in his calendar, that he does not share) or out of purely competitive motives. Read in this light, any attempt to brand him as a primarily altruistic or duplicitous figure fails to take into consideration the “scientific” nature of his actions.

Even in the climactic trial scene, Wilson orchestrates his prosecution in an empirical manner. The courtroom of Dawson’s Landing becomes for him a personal laboratory of human behavior. Like many Twain characters, indeed much like Twain himself, Wilson can deftly manipulate the attention of his audience and does so for highly dramatic effects. During one telling moment of the murder proceedings,

Wilson stopped and stood silent. Inattention dies a quick and sure death when a speaker does that. The stillness gives warning that something is coming. All palms and fingerballs went down, now, all slouching forms straightened, all heads came up, all eyes were fastened upon Wilson’s face. He waited yet one, two, three moments, to let his pause complete and perfect its spell upon the house. (217)
These actions could well describe the Yankee’s, except for one important difference: Hank’s “effects” spring largely from a desire for individual recognition. He admits at one point, “I never care to do a thing in a quiet way; it’s got to be theatrical, or I don’t take any interest in it” (Yankee, 309). There is a highly personal and self-gratifying side to his theatrics; they bring a feeling of omnipotence that borders on the perverse: “How did I feel?” Hank asks immediately after he levels knight-errantry with a flourish of his dragoon revolvers. “Ah, you never could imagine” (393). Wilson, by contrast, has almost no ego investment in his courtroom theatrics. Any enjoyment he may experience comes not from the inflation of his reputation but in the confirmation of his hypotheses. The trial scene is primarily a laboratory experiment, a series of variable manipulations throughout which Wilson watches Tom to see if his words and actions produce their desired effects and thereby affirm his suspicions. “Wilson,” after proposing that the mysterious girl is actually a man disguised as a woman, “had his eye on Tom when he hazarded this guess, to see what effect it would produce. He was satisfied with the result, and said to himself, ‘It was a success—he’s hit!’” (Pudd’nhead, 215). After he promises to produce the murderer before the stroke of noon, “Wilson stole a glance at Tom, and said to himself: ‘He is flying signals of distress, now’” (217–18). At no time during the proceedings is there any indication of pleasure, no display of the smug or perverse gratifications that so characterize Hank. Even after Wilson wins the case and becomes “a made man for good” (224), the reader is left without the slightest hint of any emotional disposition or psychological tension. We know almost nothing of him outside of his behavior, the objectifiable shell of his character. The only time the reader is privy to the inside of his mind is when he is weighing evidence and deducing his hypotheses. The omniscient narration of the story, at least in this case, invites such a limited perspective. (It is significant to note that in the context of Twain’s major later fiction, almost all of which was written in the first person, Pudd’nhead Wilson stands as an anomaly. Hank Morgan and No. 44, like Wilson, are highly puzzling figures, but their character ambiguity is a result of different literary techniques. Hank is the narrator of Connecticut Yankee, but his heteroglossic voice places him all over the social and political landscape. In most of the Mysterious Stranger works, on the other hand, Twain employs a narrative strategy that he had earlier used to great effect: a young vernacular voice. Focusing through the innocent eyes of August [or Theodor], Twain places No. 44 [or Young Satan] at a highly effective literary distance. In Pudd’nhead Wilson, the stylistic medium is the message. Twain dissects Dawson’s Landing just as Wilson solves the murder: with a cold clinical detachment.)

If, as the title suggests, Pudd’nhead Wilson functions as the pivotal presence of the novel, then his emotional and moral vacuity raises serious
questions as to the nature of his authority. His is a collector consciousness that highly privileges rational order, types, and classifications but is blind to its own ethical underpinnings. Law, for Wilson, is not so much a career as it is, along with fingerprinting and palmistry, a hobby. His “records” of imprinted glass as well as the evidence he gathers for the trial are nothing more than collected objects devoid of their moral import. They are collected merely for the sake of collection. They are similar to Stein’s butterflies in Joseph Conrad’s *Lord Jim* which serve as objects of beauty that are mounted with a pin, former lives frozen in time for the sake of observation. Wilson attempts to “pin down” human identity through his collection of fingerprints:

Every human being carries with him from his cradle to his grave certain physical marks which do not change their character, and by which he can always be identified—and that without shade of doubt or question. These marks are his signature, his physiological autograph, so to speak, and this autograph cannot be counterfeited, nor can he disguise it or hide it away, nor can it become illegible by the wear and the mutilations of time. This signature is not his face—age can change that beyond recognition; it is not his hair, for that can fall out; it is not his height, for duplicates of that exist, it is not his form, for duplicates of that exist also, whereas this signature is each man’s very own—there is no duplicate of it among the swarming populations of the globe! (215–16)

By reading fingerprints and palm lines, one can begin to crack the code of personality. Much like the records of racial ancestry that the South used as a basis of slavery, Wilson’s “records” of imprinted glass slides are human identities objectified and sterilized, labeled in indelible ink and alphabetically placed in a box for safe storage. Under the scrutiny of the magnifying glass, the person becomes depersonalized. What is most significant is that Wilson uses the slides to undermine the novel’s one profound act of redemptive decentralization: Roxy’s cribside appropriation of the ancient house of Driscoll. By switching the cradles of Tom and Chambers, she frees identity from its cultural and racial moorings, showing it to be a dynamic process of self-creation filled with absolute possibility. As with the foundations of legitimacy within the slaveholding South, Roxy’s switch is an exercise in spurious seizure, a “fiction created by herself,” whose power is irresistible even to its own creator: Roxy becomes “the dupe of her own deceptions” and comes to believe in the legitimacy of her own creation (77). The real tragedy of this tragic novel is not only the reaffirmation of slavery within the community, but the ultimate triumph of Wilson’s deterministic fingerprinting over Roxy’s constructed fiction.
In many ways, David Wilson’s actions anticipate the highly empirical and mechanistic philosophy espoused by the Old Man in *What Is Man?*, a text begun only four years after the publication of *Pudd’nhead Wilson*. The Old Man’s primary assertion to his young interlocutor, that human beings are nothing more than machines, is merely the next logical step from Wilson’s courtroom conclusions. As the reputed pudd’nhead suggests through his fingerprint studies—not to mention through his calendar entries—ideas such as free will, virtue, vice, and honor are delusions, abstract rationalizations for the disquieting fact that human behavior and identity are completely determined. Wilson states this bluntly in one of his most-quoted calendar entries: “Training is everything. The peach was once a bitter almond; cauliflower is nothing but cabbage with a college education” (84). This comedic aphorism—comedy itself being a highly manipulative rhetorical act—fits well within the premises of *What Is Man?*, as when the Old Man unambiguously maintains, “From the cradle to the grave, during all his waking hours, the human being is under training. In the very first rank of his trainers stands association. It is his human environment that influences his mind and his feelings, furnishes him his ideals, and sets him on his road and keeps him in it” (759). Yet whereas the latter’s assertion is couched in a detached, almost nonthreatening Socratic demeanor, Wilson’s “bitter almond” of a calendar entry is as jarring as it is terse. As with most of the other entries, it is a stinging reminder of the stark, highly rational worldview hidden behind the ambiguous façade of a deterministic messenger.

Such an attitude would make sense in a nation increasingly prone to the scientific explanation of social and economic phenomena. Twain was painfully aware of the changes under way in late-nineteenth-century America. The decades following the Civil War paved the way for vast industrialization, unbridled wealth, and dreams of a social utopia—at the same time it nurtured social Darwinism and the rise in modern (at times overly determined) psychology—the miasmic combination that Twain aptly termed “the Gilded Age.” Progress was a double-edged sword that brought with it unexpected possibilities. In *A Connecticut Yankee* Twain shows how technology, the potentially redemptive handmaid to liberal democracy, can quickly turn into a horrific sideshow. In *Pudd’nhead Wilson*, the stakes become higher because they involve the very organizing principles of a rapidly changing society. Twain did not live to see the full tragic implications of his times, but by the turn of the century he was certainly aware of the potential dangers that lay on the horizon. The increasing rationalization of everyday life fed into his ever-growing fears of a purely determined identity. As Wilson wryly suggests through his calendar entries, the forces of societal transformation are many times the harbingers of individual stasis. They are what can allow a young scientifically minded
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lawyer toiling in obscurity to rise to a position of authority and, by the very means of his practice, to imprint his community into a new state of existential slavery.

NOTES

1. “Philopena,” a nut with two kernels, is a word used by Tom Driscoll to describe the Capello twins at the rum party meeting (Pudd’nhead, 135). It aptly describes Luigi and Angelo, but it would work as an even stronger image in the case of Wilson, especially since in Pudd’nhead Wilson Twain admittedly de-emphasized the role of the twins and brought to center stage that of Wilson. In a study of Twain’s authority figures, the idea of a two-kerneled nut has particular resonance.

2. See also George E. Marcus, who explores the racial fragmentations of Roxy, Tom, and Chambers; John Carlos Rowe’s psycholinguistic analysis of Pudd’nhead and Roxy (Custom-House); and Nancy Fredricks’s discussion of the novel’s symbolic and ironic rhetorical modes of representation.

3. For a concise listing of those critics who emphasize the pudd’nhead side and the non-pudd’nheaded side of Wilson; see Caron (453, n.2).

4. Those who read Pudd’nhead more “optimistically” are George M. Spangler and Stanley Browden. Critics who to take a more sinister view of Wilson’s duplicitous exploits in Dawson’s Landing include Eberhard Alsen, John Carlos Rowe (“Fatal Speculations”), James E. Caron, and Forrest G. Robinson (Bad Faith and “Disorder”).

5. For a more detailed analysis of equivocal authority figures in the Mysterious Stranger manuscripts, see my essay “Terrible Dreams of Creative Power.”

6. Although it is advantageous at times to distinguish between the identical twins of Pudd’nhead Wilson and the Siamese twins of Those Extraordinary Twins—especially in terms of compositional development—a more general consideration of the twins between both works is necessary in order to understand the twin phenomenon as a whole, much in the same way that a study of the Satan figure among all the Mysterious Stranger manuscripts is more revealing than one within a particular fragment. Besides, Twain did decide to publish in 1894 a single volume, The Tragedy of “Pudd’nhead Wilson” and the Comedy “Those Extraordinary Twins,” suggesting in some way his reluctance to stand entirely on the finished novel alone.

7. Eberhard Alsen argues that this passage effectively demonstrates Wilson’s deviousness in masking his deeper motives behind a screen of good intentions. While in many ways convincing, Alsen’s assessment fails to take into account the possibility that Wilson, in a naive or pudd’nheaded way, actually believes that the case was carried out with Judge Driscoll’s prior knowledge. Alsen’s reading, as insightful as it may be, is nonetheless an exercise in second guessing, in ways similar to the readings the townspeople give to Wilson. This, I believe, is the only
way one can approach the enigmatically constructed Wilson: through a series of readings that turn back upon themselves and contain within their not so enigmatic structure the source of their own undoing.

8. Alsen, in a “careful analysis of the text,” uses this passage to “prove” the undeniability of Wilson’s deviousness. He introduces his argument by way of stating, “For when he [Wilson] sees Driscoll walk toward his house that evening . . .” (327). In fact, Twain never reveals that Wilson sees Tom coming. There are a couple hints that he could see him approaching if he had wanted to—Tom “moped along the lane past Pudd’nhead Wilson’s house” and finally walked up “on the inhabited side of Wilson’s house” (144)—but Twain is never clear as to what Wilson actually sees, thereby throwing into question Wilson’s knowledge of Tom at the door. One may be tempted to attribute this ambiguity to sloppy writing on Twain’s part, to which the “jack-leg” novelist may grudgingly submit. But read on another level along with equally ambiguous passages, Wilson’s “perception” here insinuates a detective-like acuity that a cursory reading would fail to grasp. This analysis may seem an academic exercise in splitting hairs, but it is precisely the text’s invitation to split hairs that leads to a double reading. Twain’s indeterminacy, as I will continue to argue, suggests a duality of Wilson’s function as a figure of authority that refuses closure. Alsen’s confident reading, however persuasive it may seem at first, is nevertheless premature.

9. Compare Wilson’s nameless “amusement” with Hank Morgan’s secretive games of sorcery. Both represent a pillar of centralized authority: those who have the knowledge have the power.

10. In many ways, Wilson’s records are the darker expression of Hank Morgan’s search for the “one microscopic atom in me that is truly me” (Yankee, 162).

11. These (at times) are the views shared by Wilson’s precursor, Hank Morgan. “Training—training is everything,” asserts the Yankee. “[T]raining is all there is to a person. We speak of nature; it is folly; there is no such thing as nature; what we call by that misleading name is merely heredity and training. We have no thoughts of our own, no opinions of our own: they are transmitted to us, trained into us” (Yankee, 162). The difference between these two characters is that throughout A Connecticut Yankee, Hank vacillates in his view of human nature, at times seeing in it a faithless determinism and at others a hope for individual possibility. By contrast, David Wilson’s clinical demonstrations leave little hope for free will.

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