

A Concept Analysis on Mark Twain's PUDD'NHEAD WILSON

(Using Penguin Classics 2004 edition with Chronology and Further Reading)

Organizational Patterns:

The novel Pudd'nhead Wilson is not solely focused on Pudd'nhead Wilson; in fact, the character Pudd'nhead is only a small, but essential, part of the plot. Subsequently, Pudd'nhead Wilson involves three individual stories. The first story is that of Pudd'nhead Wilson himself. The second story is about a racial switch between babies and their ultimate growth into manhood. Lastly, the third story is about a set of foreign twins who befriend the people of Dawson's Landing, Missouri. The transitions between these stories are abrupt; however, Twain allows a thread from the past story link the next together. Consequently, it is important for students to know that, although these stories are set off from each other, they all gradually overlap. Pudd'nhead plays a small part in the race switch; the race switch and Pudd'nhead play a small part in the twin story, and ultimately, all three stories are one.

Teachers should also point out that the entire novel is told by an anonymous narrator who sees into the mind of its characters. Because the same voice narrates the novel, the string of stories works well together.

Issues related to this Study of Literature:

Theme(s)

There are small themes that could be made of the discussion that Pudd'nhead Wilson encourages; however, there are four undeniably prevalent themes that can have sole focus:

1. Roxana, a 1/16 black servant, switches her 1/32 black baby boy (Chambers) for her master's white baby boy (Tom) in order to keep Chambers from being sold down the river. After this point in the novel, there is an ever present theme of what it means to be black, and what it means to be white. These babies appear to be the same skin color, yet, they are treated completely different. The novels "racial switch" storyline makes the reader asks questions such as: Who gets to decide how races are treated? Can an individual defy the odds or betray the expectations of his race? Should race matter in a society capable of equality? (chapter 3)
2. With a novel that is built around a baby switch, gambling, and murder, there is an inevitable theme that tries to define the boundaries of morality. Is Tom justified in selling his mother down the river? Did Tom murder Judge Driscoll in self defense? If so, does it matter that Tom was stealing at the time and killed because he was afraid of being arrested? Roxana and Tom felt validated in their actions; do you as a reader feel that they are too?



3. Family is usually a binding and loving support; in Pudd'nhead Wilson, however, family seems to tear apart the individual. What makes up a good family? What are Roxana and Percy Driscoll doing wrong as parents? Are they doing something wrong? Can family problems be blamed with the immorality present in the novel?
4. As student's work through the novel, ask them to figure out guidelines for judging an individual's nature; they will notice that Pudd'nhead makes judging a difficult task even as we see into the character's thoughts and intentions. Is Roxana wrong for wanting to save her child from a hard life? Is the South wrong for subjecting such a difficult decision on Roxana? Should Roxana take advantage of her son's wealth? Is it okay for Tom to sell his mother down the river when she poses a threat to him? Is saving our own neck more important than others? Are Roxana, Tom, Percy and other individuals "good" below the surface?

Setting

The majority of this novel takes place in Dawson's Landing, Missouri. This town is next to the Mississippi River and is fairly close to St. Louis ("half a day's journey by steamboat) where a couple of scenes take place (p1). The year is 1830 and slavery is still rampant. (setting laid out on p1)

The setting of the story is essential to understanding the customs of the characters. Mark Twain does a great job of enveloping the reader in the environment. The language, countryside, and characters are all specific to this region of the country. If it were not for Twain's nationalism, this book would not be as famous or feel as genuine. Subsequently, pre-reading activities involving the history of slavery, and the difference between slavery in the North and the South will help students be prepared for unfamiliar situations and terms.



Point of View

As mentioned above, the narration comes from an anonymous third person. This narrator displays the thoughts and actions of all of the characters we encounter, therefore, providing an unbiased view on all aspects of the story. The narrator never changes, even as the focus of the novel changes. The consistency and insight from the narrator can help your students decipher and judge the actions of the characters with their own criteria.

Foreshadowing

There are several occurrences of foreshadowing in the novel. Because the narrator is a third party that knows what a character *thinks* he will do, and what he ultimately *does* do, hints regarding future events can be seen throughout the text.

Foreshadowing seems to be important to the movement of the plot as the narrator shifts between the three different storylines. As the reader waits for the particular plot to come back, the feeling of suspense is prolonged.

Examples: “Poor fellow, he could not foresee that it was going to take him such a weary long time to do it” (p61).

“But that was a hasty conclusion” (p111).

“He was taking chances, privately, which might get him into trouble someday—in fact, *did*” (p 85).

Imagery

Twain uses imagery to enhance the vision of his settings. The detailed description of locations and circumstances allows students to more fully comprehend the happenings of the novel. If you provide images with these descriptions, however, the scenes may become even more real to them.

Examples: “Each of these pretty homes had a garden in front, fenced with white palings and opulently stocked with hollyhocks, marigolds, touch-me-nots, prince’s-feathers...” (p55)



“You will observe that these dainty curving lines lie close together, like those that indicate the borders of oceans in maps, and that they form various clearly defined patterns, such as arches...” (p216)

“A giant eruption, like that of Krakatoa a few years ago, with the accompanying earthquakes, tidal waves, and clouds of volcanic dust, changes the face of the surrounding landscape...” (p118)

Irony

Mark Twain’s novels have always had an element of humor in them; this novel is no different. The humor is provided by many ironic statements and situations. Some of these ironical statements also display the ignorance of the character involved.

Examples: “If the twins could do but some crowning act...something in the nature of an electric surprise. Here a prodigious slam-banging broke out below” (94). (Dramatic-the sentence preceding was just suggesting such a thing happen)

“Tom had managed to endure everything else, but to have to remain publicly and permanently under such an obligation as this to a nigger—this was too much” (p80). (Situational-Tom is the “nigger”)

“Tom forged a bill of sale and sold his mother to an Arkansas cotton-planter...” (p175). (Situational-Roxana’s only goal was to save Tom from being sold down the river but he had no problem doing so to her)

Simile

The use of similes only adds to the color and imagery of the novel. Often, the simile is also a cultural saying, or the thoughts of a quirky countryman. These similes enhance the novel because of the cultural background they provide.

Examples: "Whale 'em till dey backs is welted like a washboard" (p182).

"Wallerin' aroun' in de dust like a spider dat's got crippled"
(p183).

"It's like drowning with a life-preserver in my reach" (p155).

Affective Issues Related to the Work:

In this novel, Tom, Chambers, and Pudd'nhead have the most relatable characteristics and storylines. There may be a little of all of us in each of these characters.

Tom – Although Tom is given a better life than other's (such as slaves), his life is not void of trials. It is not uncommon for people to look at other's lives and assume that they "have it easy". The grass is always greener. Tom may have been raised as the "white" and free son, but he struggles with vice and crime (for which he must suffer). Throughout the story, nevertheless, Tom keeps up the privileged and wealthy persona. Students who have this reputation, a reputation of wealth, popularity, skill, etc, feel a similar pressure to be the happy individual that people assume them to be. Like Tom, students may act rashly in order to break out of their mold. Similarly, some may have the persona of being a rebel and may feel a need to stay within this role even though their conscience tells them otherwise. Tom's bad example, of never being the person he knows he should, can motivate students to be true to themselves and not "get sold down the river".

Chambers – In comparison to Tom, Chambers was forced into a role in which he felt he fit. Chambers' life was hard as a slave, but he makes the best of his life, stays positive, and stays true and self-respecting. He never acts out and feels comfortable with the cards that life has dealt him. There are many students that will feel this way as well. They may not be Mr. and Mrs. Popularity but they are content with the life that they have. If they begin to feel the pressure to be otherwise, Chambers' example may remind them that everyone has trials and no matter what circumstance they live in, it is their character that matters, not their social class.

Pudd'nhead – Pudd'nhead may be the most relatable character in that he has been labeled at an early stage of the story and struggles to prove that he is otherwise throughout the rest of the novel. In secondary school, it is not difficult to be labeled, either by a group of friends, interest, skin color, or nickname. Pudd'nhead is not a Pudd'nhead at all; however, until he achieves something extraordinary, no one will believe otherwise. This problem is similar to Tom and Chamber's; however, his circumstance has more to do with his personality, than his skin color or class, which can be even more trying at times. Tom and Chambers belong to a group; Pudd'nhead is singled out, which makes his life seem lonelier. Student's will struggle to be part of a group throughout their school career, slowly they may strive to be more of an individual, but the honest will admit that being an individual surrounded by friends is the ideal life.

Pudd'nhead is robbed of this chance from the beginning but he can give student's hope as he rises above an early judgment and proves his peers wrong.

-How do we stay strong in the face of judgment and adversity?
Should we be judgmental ourselves if others are judgmental to us?
Is it possible to be an individual within a group? Do others' opinions matter?

Vocabulary Issues:

There may be several issues with the vocabulary in this book. Pudd'nhead contains a strange slang by the townspeople, a difficult vernacular from the slaves, and large literary words in which students may be unfamiliar. Some of the time-specific language is given a number and explained in the back of the book under "Notes"; most of the new vocabulary goes unexplained.

Slang examples: "skinflint" (p191)
"teetotaler" (p133)
"blatherskite" (112)
"lummo" (p60)

(The slang does not need to be given as vocabulary words because they are no longer used; however, giving them a list of the words with their definitions before each reading assignment, might help students comprehend the text better.)

Slave examples: "You's lyin' agin, sho'" (p188)
"En I didn't care no mo', nuther..." (p183)
"Shet down dat light a little" (p182)
"Look-a-heah, what 'uz I tole you" (p108)

(This vernacular does not introduce new words; it changes and shortens them, making the dialogue difficult to read. Chapters that contain a lot of this type of dialogue would probably work best when read out loud by the teacher.)

Literary examples: "Shrewd ingenuities" (p206)
"Soliloquised" (p197)
"Proclivities" (p128)
"Ostensible" (p102)

(These words would work best for the unit vocabulary list. Words such as these are applicable to not only this book but to future readings and speech.)

Background Knowledge:

In order to have a more complete understanding of the novel, students must have a background informed of the slavery situation in the late 1800s. Along with slavery comes the treatment and separation of the different races during this time. Throughout the novel, the word "nigger" is used; students need to know why this word was necessary to include in the novel and what kind of implications it had in the 1800s compared to today. Also, students should have some understanding of the popular way of life back in this time period (countrymen, agriculture, etc). If the pre-reading lessons focus on these two topics, students should not have any problem understanding the context and events of the novel.

Implication for Students of Diversity:

In the twenty-first century, society tends to be more accepting of different cultures and races than they were in 1830. It is important to discuss the influence of respect and point out that Pudd'nhead stands as a bad example of the acceptance for diversity. The word "nigger" should in no way be used again, even though it is in the novel. The fact that each character in the novel has an individual identity, shows that race does not matter and it should not matter in the classroom either. All cultures have been of equal benefit to today's society.



There are no characters with disabilities in Pudd'nhead Wilson; however, the fact that Pudd'nhead is treated as though he does have a disability shows the cruelty of such judgments. Is it right to give people titles? It is right to discriminate between race, social class, IQ, or physical ability? How can someone justify their prejudice actions and how do we avoid or prevent them from continuing? In the classroom (and out), everyone is equal.

Gender Issues:

Gender is not a strong issue in the novel; however, there may be two arguments to bring up about gender. There is a fairly noticeable absence of women throughout the book except for Roxana. Does the absence of women imply something significant about the female role in 1830? The second issue that can be discussed is Roxy's role as a maternal figure. Roxy has very strong maternal instincts, but being the only strong female character in the novel, she is simultaneously portrayed as fairly selfish and pathetic. What is Twain trying to say about women through the character of Roxy?

The Central Question or Enduring Issue:

There are numerous ethical and literary issues in this novel; nevertheless, I feel like the most central question is: How do I define and maintain an individual identity when others are constantly attaching me to a stereotype?

-Pudd'nhead is pegged with his unfortunate name from the beginning of the novel and 20 years later has still not managed to break free. His confidence, however, does not wane and a silent determination pays off as he shows his peers how unlike a Pudd'nhead he truly is. (p224)

-Letting the things of the world get the best of him, Tom falls victim to the money/power that is available to him and, simultaneously, the immorality as well. Tom could have been a respectable and proper gentleman if he had the willpower and example to do so. Unfortunately, his conscience was weak and rather than give heed to its promptings, Tom ignores his inner individuality. The world does not need conformity, but rather united, moral, conscious individuals. (p226)

-Chambers is faced with a dilemma at the end of the novel. He has grown up as a slave, but now must enter the "white" world. Upon entering, he finds that people look at him a different way and have different expectations; no sees the individual, they see a white man who talks like a slave. Chambers chooses to remain with the slaves, where any stereotype has been erased between friends. (p225)

Individuality is a struggle that people go through throughout most of their life. Students/young adults especially struggle with this issue as peers try to pull their personalities and morals in different directions. As this novel shows, it is important to remain an individual and most certainly staying true to your conscience will pay off in the end.

Research Issues/Project Ideas:

Research ideas-slavery, race, individuality, late 1800's, fingerprinting

1. Research the history of slavery in the United States; discuss laws, hardships, jobs, how to gain freedom, etc.
 - For a quick presentation, give students the background of a slave: his/her name, where in the US he lives, what kind of plantation they work for, the level of leniency of their boss, etc. and have them create a mock day-in-the-life of this slave. What might his daily tasks be? What would happen to him if he broke rules? What kind of clothes does he wear?
2. Discuss the purposes of fingerprinting. Research when it was truly invented and by who.
 - Bring plexiglass to school and have students do the same procedure that Pudd'nhead has his fellow countrymen do: run their fingers through their hair and press their fingers to the glass (maybe choose only one finger on each hand). Point out and observe the uniqueness of each fingerprint. Speculate what might happen with the fingerprints throughout the novel.
3. Talk about the conflict of individuality in the novel.
 - Have students ask their peers and themselves what makes them unique. Have them write a short paper on how they can stay an individual and grow into even better individuals as they continue through life. Does anyone in the novel seem to go through the same process? How?
4. Discuss the setting of the novel and its important role in both slavery and the plot.
 - Help students make a map of Missouri, mapping out the major cities involved in the novel and the Mississippi river. Also include major crops that slaves were hired to cultivate.

Informational/Functional Texts:

-Maps: Students can understand the geography and setting of the area if a map of the United States or Missouri area is put up in the classroom. They can visualize the travel of the characters and how the location may affect the characters and storyline.

-Emancipation Proclamation: By looking at this document, students can learn what rights were eventually restored to slaves and realize what was not available before this message was issued.

http://www.archives.gov/exhibits/featured_documents/emancipation_proclamation/

-Website or books with late 1800's customs: clothes, lifestyle, etc.

<http://entertainment.webshots.com/album/560024700DMjepH>



