

# Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for Pudd'nhead Wilson by Mark Twain

## Book Information

Mark Twain, Pudd'nhead Wilson

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Interest Level: UG

An intellectual has a penchant for amateur detection.

**Topics:** Classics, Classics (All); Community Life, Social Iniquities; Mysteries, Murder; People, Slaves; Popular Groupings, College Bound

## Main Characters

Colonel Cecil Burleigh Essex the father of Roxana's child

Count Angelo Capello one of the Italian twins

Count Luigi Capello the Italian twin who duels with Judge Driscoll

David "Pudd'nhead" Wilson the socially laughable lawyer whose strange habit of fingerprinting the citizens of Dawson's Landing helps reveal Tom as Judge Driscoll's killer

Judge York Leicester Driscoll the town's finest citizen, who is killed by Tom

Percy Northumberland Driscoll Roxana's master and Chambers's real father

Rachel Pratt Judge Driscoll's childless sister, who lives with him

Roxana a slave woman who switches the identity of her son, Valet de Chambre, with that of her master's son, Thomas a Becket Driscoll

Thomas a Becket Driscoll (Chambers) the son of Percy Driscoll, who is switched during infancy with Roxana's son, Valet de Chambre, and is forced to live as a slave; he is called Chambers throughout most of the novel

Valet de Chambre (Tom) Roxana's son, who is switched during infancy with Percy Driscoll's son, Thomas a Becket Driscoll, and who eventually murders Judge Driscoll; he is called Tom throughout the novel

## Vocabulary

**caste** a social class based on heredity, profession, or wealth

**chattel** an article of property; a slave

**palmistry** the practice of telling fortunes from patterns on the hand

**pantograph** an instrument used to copy a figure or picture to any desired scale

**transient** passing through from one place to another

**usurp** to take over

## Synopsis

*Pudd'nhead Wilson* takes place in the small town of Dawson's Landing, Missouri, from 1830 to 1853. In the beginning of the story, Roxana, a slave who is only one-sixteenth black, begins to worry that her newborn baby would someday be sold "down the river," a fate worse than death to the slaves of that area. She decides to switch the identities of her son, Valet de Chambre, with the master's son, Thomas. The wife of Percy Driscoll, the master, had died, and Percy was unable to tell the difference between the two babies because they both looked white. However, David "Pudd'nhead" Wilson, a local attorney who is mocked by the city for his eccentricities, has included the babies in his study of fingerprinting. He takes the boys' fingerprints at five months and seven months. Roxana switches the boys' identities after eight months and allows Wilson to fingerprint them again without completely understanding the trouble this could cause.

The new "Tom Driscoll" grows up in a wealthy and privileged household, where his every whim is indulged. The new "Valet de Chambre," called Chambers, grows up as a slave to Tom and suffers physical and verbal abuse from his young master. Roxana never tells her son, who is now her master, that he was born a slave. When Percy Driscoll dies, Roxana is granted her freedom, and she goes to work on a riverboat. Tom is sent to live with a childless uncle, Judge Driscoll, who also buys Chambers as his slave.

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Judge Driscoll continues to indulge Tom, who grows up to be a selfish and manipulative man. One of Tom's worst habits is gambling. He has lost and continues to lose money to the embarrassment of the uncle. To repay his debts, Tom has resorted to stealing from his neighbors. Due to Tom's squandering and selfish behavior, he is written out of the uncle's will. Tom is eventually put back into the will, but three months later, he finds himself back in debt. To complicate matters, Roxana returns to Dawson's Landing and tells Tom the truth about his identity. Tom is flabbergasted and consents to give his mother fifty dollars a month to keep the truth secret.

During this time, foreign twins have come to visit Dawson's Landing. The twins, Luigi and Angelo Capello, become the toast of the town and are entertained by the finest citizens. The twins impress the townspeople with exciting tales of their past, and they are invited to attend all sorts of social events. At a meeting of the "rum-party," Tom becomes drunk and insults Luigi. Luigi responds by kicking him. Tom takes the man to court and wins a small settlement for battery. When Judge Driscoll learns of the event, he is horrified that Tom did not challenge Luigi to a duel, as is the custom for honorable men. Judge Driscoll challenges Luigi himself, and the men have their battle. Neither is fatally wounded, so the men understand that it is their duty to try to kill one another on sight.

Tom becomes desperate for money to settle his debts, and Roxana allows Tom to sell her as a slave. Tom deceives his mother, however, by selling her to a plantation in Arkansas instead of a Northern farm. With the money, Tom is able to square his accounts. Tom is to buy his mother out of slavery eventually, but she escapes on her own after being mistreated. Roxana is furious with Tom for selling her "down the river" and for lying to her. She warns him that if he does not get enough money to buy her freedom, she will reveal his identity. Tom decides to rob the uncle and sneaks into his own home disguised as a woman. When Judge Driscoll sees Tom and tries to apprehend him, Tom kills him with a knife he had

stolen from Luigi. Tom escapes to St. Louis and learns that Luigi has been charged with the murder.

Luigi's trial begins, and Wilson finally gets his chance to practice law as the foreigner's lawyer. The entire town, except Wilson, believes that the twin is guilty. While studying the fingerprints of the crime scene, Wilson stumbles upon the truth of Tom's identity. The next day in court, Wilson reveals his discovery and the entire town is stunned. Chambers is restored to his status granted by birth, and Tom is found guilty of murder and sentenced to prison. However, Tom's creditors persuade the Governor to pardon him, as he is a slave and is more valuable if he can be sold. At the end of the novel, Tom is sold down the river, just as his mother had feared.

## Open-Ended Questions

Use these open-ended questions as the basis for class discussions, student presentations, or extended writing assignments.

### Initial Understanding

When Luigi kicks Tom, Tom takes the man to court to settle their dispute. Tom's uncle is disgusted and humiliated by Tom's action. Why do you think Tom resists challenging Luigi to a duel like his uncle wants him to? Do you think the judge's method of dealing with the offense is more honorable than Tom's?

*Tom is a coward as well as being selfish and manipulative. He knows that Luigi has already killed one man, and he is afraid that, in a duel, he would become the second man killed by the foreigner. Tom is not bothered by his own reputation and does not feel the need to prove himself as a gentleman (which he definitely is not). Judge Driscoll, on the other hand, believes that his reputation and honor are his most important possessions. He prefers dying a hero to living like a coward and steps in to challenge Luigi in Tom's place.*

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## Literary Analysis

This story is set in Dawson's Landing, Missouri, from 1830-1853. Why do you think Twain uses this setting for the story?

*Mark Twain grew up in Missouri and was very familiar with the culture of this type of community. He was very knowledgeable about the Mississippi River and steamboats, and the Missouri setting allowed him to incorporate this knowledge in the story. Missouri was also a slave state at the time of the story, although it was a Northern slave state. By setting the novel in Missouri, Twain was able to incorporate the threat of "being sold down the river," which plays a vital role in the story's plot.*

## Inferential Comprehension

In the middle of the story, Tom learns the truth about his identity. What effect does this information have on Tom?

*Tom is shocked to learn that he is really Roxana's son, not Percy Driscoll's heir. Though not much of his selfish and manipulative behavior changes, Tom is affected by the news. He begins to question the differences between whites and blacks. Tom's stature and confidence also changes. He begins to move and act as if he were a slave and socially inferior to other whites. Though he is affected, these changes eventually fade as the shock of the news wears off.*

## Constructing Meaning

*Pudd'nhead Wilson* is filled with interesting characters. From murder to blackmail, some of the characters in this novel commit heinous crimes. In your opinion, which character commits the most reprehensible crime? Why?

*The answers to this question will vary. Some students may feel that Roxana committed the worst crimes. They may believe that without her act of switching the babies, many of the other crimes would not have happened. Roxana also blackmails her own son in order to gain more money. Other students may think Tom is the character who committed the worst crimes. He steals, lies, and manipulates his own friends and neighbors. Tom also mistreats Chambers with physical and verbal abuse and even sells his mother. He kills the judge without hesitation and then stands by as an innocent man is tried for his crime. The greatest crime of all in the story, however, may be society's enslavement of an entire race of people.*

## Teachable Skills

**Understanding Literary Features** One of the themes in this novel is the debate over the roles of nature and nurture in personality development. With the act of switching the babies, it is difficult to know if their character traits were influenced more by heredity or by conditioning from the outside world. Ask your students to research this topic. One possible source for information could be *Walden Two* by B.F. Skinner. Then, stage a debate about this topic in your classroom.

**Responding to Literature** In the beginning of the novel, Roxana switches the babies of Tom and Chambers, an event which changes their lives forever. Ask your students to consider what it might feel like to discover their identity is not what they had been told. Then, ask them to write a response about how they think they would feel if this were the case.

**Making Predictions** Tom's and Chamber's lives change dramatically when Roxana switches their identities. Ask your students to consider what

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might have happened if Roxana had never committed this act. Have the students write a short story that presents their prediction.

**Understanding Hist./Cultural Factors** In this novel, Pudd'nhead Wilson uses the technique of fingerprinting. Based on his research and work, the killer of Judge Driscoll is brought to justice. Invite a local forensic expert, professor, or police officer to speak to your class about the process of fingerprinting. Then have your students inspect their fingerprints as the citizens in the novel did. Ask them to write a response to their findings.