

The Fingerprints of Mark Twain's *Pudd'nhead Wilson*: Nurture versus Nature Against Racialized

Science

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Mark Twain engages with science throughout his literary works, and arguably, his most direct interaction with the scientific establishment can be seen in *Pudd'nhead Wilson*, both during its development and the novel itself. A story of twins switched at birth, the ruse is discovered through the use of differing fingerprints. While the details of the novel were materializing, Twain read a copy of *Finger Prints*, by Francis Galton. Twain soon decided to have fingerprinting be a feature of his novel (Stephen Railton). Francis Galton (1822-1911) was an English polymath who popularized the study of fingerprints, established the idea of nature versus nurture, known as the father of eugenics, and a proponent of scientific racism. Galton also engaged in studies of criminology using techniques such as composite portraiture. The connection between *Pudd'nhead Wilson* and Galton has been explored previously by scholars such as Michael Rogin. This thesis seeks to contribute to this connection through the visual aspects of both *Pudd'nhead Wilson* and Galton's scientific works. Many contemporary readers of *Pudd'nhead Wilson* would have encountered the story accompanied by illustrations. These illustrations can influence the readers' perception of the characters and the novella. *Pudd'nhead Wilson* was originally serialized from 1893–1894 in *The Century Magazine*, an illustrated monthly magazine that included six full page illustrations. The writings were then released as a novel in America in 1894 with “marginal” illustrations created by F.M. Senior and C.H. Warren. These two sets of illustrations provide important insight into how many contemporary readers in America would have

encountered the textual object. These illustrations can also differently influence how readers perceive the characters in a story in which the visuals and presentation of race are essential. In a story of switched identities amid fears of racial miscegenation, considering the visuals of the novella provide important insight.

Mark Twain's *Pudd'n'head Wilson* (1894) engages with fin de siècle discussions around nature versus nurture and the scientific community's role in perpetuating the pseudoscience of race. The novel follows the lives of two children: Valet de Chambre (Chambers) has 1/32 black ancestry and is born into slavery, fated to serve his master. Tom Driscoll is born to be the master of the house and is of completely "old Virginian ancestry" (Twain #). The two infant boys look very similar, and Roxy, an enslaved woman who is the biological mother of Chambers, decides to switch the two to give her son a better life.

Thus, the character who believes himself to be Tom Driscoll has been socialized to believe that he is white and has become a spoiled aristocrat. When Tom is a young adult, his father grants Roxy her freedom in his will. She is under financial strain close to retirement when the bank she patronizes fails. She decides to revisit her biological son and ask him for support. She tells him the truth about his ancestry and that he is her son and partially black. After being robbed, she blackmails him into financially supporting her. Considering Twain's motivations for writing *Puddin'head Wilson*, this financial plot is especially interesting. As Eric J. Sundquist puts it, Twain had "haste to produce a book that would ameliorate his financial problems" (Sundquist 46).

Under financial pressure, Tom decides to rob and murder his wealthy uncle. However, the blame falls on an innocent man, one-half of the twin Italian noblemen visiting the town. The mystery is solved by the novel's namesake, Puddin'head Wilson, a lawyer, and fingerprint hobbyist. His role in Dawson's Landing turns from town fool to detective-scientist. He had fingerprinted Tom and Chambers in their infancy and, with that knowledge, was able to prove that Tom was not only the murderer but living as an imposter. This deception was double fold: claiming a different name/identity and potentially the more egregious "crime", misrepresenting one's race.

This outcome also turns typical crime stories on its head. For writers like Arthur Conan Doyle, the typical culprit is the "outsider" or the traveler. Social and cultural anxieties of the late Victorian and early Edwardian eras are reflected in Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes stories. In many of Conan Doyle's stories, the culprit is an outsider or a traveler who disrupts the social order of the local community. This reflects the anxieties of the time about the threat posed by the influx of immigrants, the growth of cities, and the increasing mobility of people. By making the culprit an outsider, Conan Doyle highlights the perceived threat to society's stability and reinforces the idea that social order and stability are essential.

However, in Puddin'head Wilson, rather than being the culprit, the "outsider" Italian is an innocent person, wrongly accused. The usage of the outsider Italian brothers in *Puddin'head Wilson* likely does not overlap with Sherlock Holmes stories' preoccupation with strangers. This inclusion of the Italian

twins may be less of a critique of xenophobia and more of a reference to a set of Italian “conjoined” twins that captured the popular imagination known as the brothers Giovanni and Giacomo Tocci. This fascination speaks to Twain’s interest in the oddity, especially in science and medicine. That curiosity likely led him to pick up a copy of Galton’s *Fingerprints*.

The “real” Tom Driscoll is restored as an heir and is recategorized as white. He is distressed by this new role, however. Having been socialized as Black, he feels largely uneasy in white society. At the same time, as someone perceived as white, he is also excluded from the Black community in Dawson’s Landing. The fake Tom, known now as Chambers, is released from prison only to be enslaved. He is sold “down the river” to recoup the creditors of his father’s estate. A feeling is created at the ending of this novella that everything is in its “right place,” having figured out the two people’s true “race.”

Another change in social position is seen with Puddin’head Wilson, having uncovered this deception, now rising to a place of social prominence in the town of Dawson’s Landing. This speaks to the rewards and incentives that exist for white people to help maintain the status quo of race, slavery, and discriminatory structures. These dramatic changes to the social station of the characters also overlap with Galton’s interest in the extremes of society. Galton was interested in studying the most “prestigious” of society, typically composed of educated, white English men, himself included. On the other end of this spectrum is examining individuals on the “lower” extreme, including the sick, criminals, and Jewish people. Galton, a cousin of Charles Darwin, was a proponent of eugenics, believing that the human species could be improved through selective breeding. He believed in innate, hereditary qualities that determined intelligence, behavior, and criminality. Contrast this with Cesare

Lombroso, an Italian criminologist and a contemporary of Galton. Lombroso was interested in the “average” of humanity and viewed the average or “normal” as most desired. He believed that criminals were “born criminals” and that their criminality was a result of atavistic traits inherited from their primitive ancestors. These ideas are reflected in the character of Tom Driscoll in *Pudd'nhead Wilson*, who is described as having “criminal features” and is ultimately revealed to be the true criminal in the novel. The overlap of the two academics is the belief that criminal nature can be inherited and identified through physical characteristics. Twain lambasts this idea through the lens of race, showing just how precarious the social hierarchy of race was in Southern society in the 19th century. These ideas are reflected in the character of Judge Driscoll in *Pudd'nhead Wilson*, who believes in the superiority of his white race and considers Roxy, the enslaved woman he owns, to be inferior. The dramatic changes to the characters are also a satire of a school of thought more similar to Galton, with the “low” in society ending up in high standing and vice versa. The changeling plot is used to critique the notion of race as a fixed, inherent characteristic and to challenge the idea that criminality can be determined by physical traits.

This novella is an interesting piece in the history of science as a marked change in how crime is examined with a view of criminality through the lens of poverty, faulty “breeding”, and racialized physical “defaults” to a new form of forensics to establish criminality through physical evidence. These are not mutually exclusive, with the physical evidence viewed at times as an indicator of not only crime but the criminology of the individual. Fingerprinting was a very new technique at the time.

Puddin'head Wilson was originally serialized from 1893–1894 in *The Century Magazine*, an

illustrated monthly magazine with six full-page illustrations by staff artist Louis Loeb. These full-page illustrations were preceded by a photo of Samuel L. Clemens himself, setting up readers to encounter the story of *Puddin'head Wilson* through a visual and textual interface. The writings were then released as a novel in America in 1894 with “marginal” illustrations created by F.M. Senior and C.H. Warren. The style is notably different in these two sets of illustrations. An important note, especially in representing race through skin tone, is that the marginal illustrations were done without shading. This means the color palette was reduced to pure black or pure white without the ability to shade. Characters are represented with skin tones as dark as the printing ink or as light as the paper color. The simplistic style of illustration echoes the lack of nuance in the view of race in the 19th century in the South. One is either white or Black, with anxiety being produced when an individual is not easily categorized. *The Century* representation of Roxy, drawn by Louis Loeb, can be seen in Figure 1.



Figure 1. Illustration of Roxy and the children. (Louis Loeb. “The tragedy of Pudd’nhead Wilson; and the comedy Those extraordinary twins,” <https://twain.lib.virginia.edu/wilson/pwillshp.html>)

This representation of Roxy matches the textual description of a woman who looks white but lives her life as a domestic enslaved person, caring for children. Without context, an unknowing eye could look at the image as a representation of white domesticity and not even realize that she is an enslaved woman. This underlines fears at the time that an individual could “pass” as white despite Black

ancestry if the social order of slavery and race were not implemented. Readers can also see how similar the two young children are and how easily they could be “switched.” Roxy appears as a “proper” woman with a full dress and long hair adorned and maintained. While she strikes a maternal image, standing above the babies with her hands on her hips conveys a sense of power and decisiveness over these young children’s lives. With the image’s composition, it is as though “nature” through Roxy’s genetics looms above “nurture,” as shown by the two babies on the chairs reaching up toward her. There is an expectation in this society that Black enslaved women are subservient to all white people, even infants. This image subverts those expectations, with Roxy looking down at the children and not in the process of caring for them.

Twain’s inspiration for the novel’s plot came from seeing the Tocci twins and conceiving the idea of two drastically different personalities occupying the same body. Parts of this original idea remain in the companion story of the *Extraordinary Twins*. In Pudd’nhead Wilson, these two different personalities turned into an enslaved child and a white child switched at birth, as a changeling plot. Puddin’head Wilson intersects with many of Galton’s interests, including race, heredity, nature versus nurture, and photography and visuals as means to understand criminality, which can be put into conversation with the illustrations that accompany the story.

The illustrations in both the serialization and the first novel printing have to convey the appearance of the characters as well as showcase the plot device of the fingerprints. The marginal illustrations

demonstrating this practice of “palmistry” can be seen in the 1894 book printing (Figure 2). The label “palmistry” speaks to Twain’s interest in the occult or difficulty in categorizing this new line of inquiry.

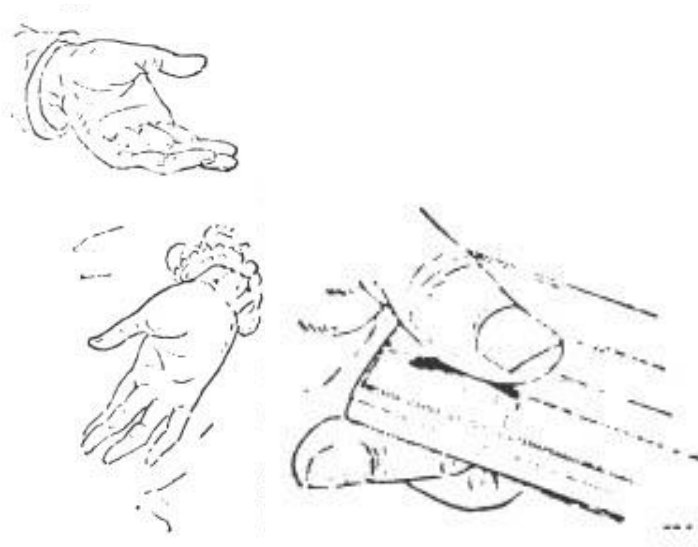


Figure 2. Illustrations demonstrating palmistry and the recording of fingerprints found in the margins of the original 1894 edition pg. 30. (F.M. Senior and C.H. Warren. “The tragedy of Pudd’nhead Wilson ; and the comedy Those extraordinary twins,” Scan courtesy of the New York Public Library.

<https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=nyp.33433074940903&view=1up&seq=30>)

Examining the illustrations accompanying different versions of the novel brings a new element to Twain’s criticism of the visual categorization of race depending on the artist’s choices in representing the different characters. The ambiguity of racial identity is either underscored or completely done away with, according to the illustrative model. The analysis of these illustrations then lends itself to considering the impact on readers’ interpretation. The novel specifically criticizes and satirizes the so-called “one drop rule,” meaning that even one drop of “Black” blood would mean that the person is Black. This rule was also profit-motivated because it favored having as many people enslaved as possible

and coincided with the switching of typical patriarchal patronage to that of the mothers only in the system of slavery. The legal system enforced racial categorization through tools such as birth records and the census and was supported by scientific institutions. Tom murders his rich uncle, Judge Driscoll, who served as a tool in this system of violent categorization and enslavement. This murder is playing out of racial ambiguity, literally killing the legal system that perpetuates the system of race in America.

It plays with phenotypic presentation versus our social categorization and shows how fragile the “color line” is. Roxy is $\frac{1}{16}$ black and has a fair complexion and straight brown hair. She appears at first glance more white than Black, as Twain describes, “To all intents and purposes Roxy was as white as anybody, but the one-sixteenth of her which was black outvoted the other fifteen 33 parts and made her a negro. She was a slave, and saleable as such” (Twain 32-33). Despite an outward appearance making her “as white as anybody,” the one-sixteenth of her Black ancestry overpowers the rest, resulting in her enslavement. The marginal illustration of Roxy can be seen in Figure 3.



Figure 3. Illustration of Roxy found in the margins of the original 1894 edition, pg. 32. (F.M. Senior and C.H. Warren “The tragedy of Pudd’nhead Wilson; and the comedy Those extraordinary twins,”

Scan courtesy of the New York Public Library.

<https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=nyp.33433074940903&view=1up&seq=34>)

The contrast between this version of Roxy’s appearance and the enslaved people who are perceived as Black can be seen in Figure.



Figure 4. Illustration of Roxy and other unnamed enslaved people being interrogated by Judge Driscoll found in the margins of the original 1894 edition, pg. 37 ([F.M. Senior and C.H. Warren “The tragedy of Pudd’nhead Wilson; and the comedy Those extraordinary twins.”](#)) Scan courtesy of the New York Public Library.

Mr. Driscoll is interrogating his enslaved people over missing sums of money. As Driscoll assumes, “Necessarily the thief must be one of his negroes.” (Twain 27). The difference between Roxy and the other enslaved people is stark; beyond the coloring (or lack thereof) to mark skin tone, Roxy wears more complex garb with a fine dress. She also wears shoes, unlike the youngest boy to the far right. The enslaved woman second to the right is also wearing more clothes meant for labor, including an apron, a hair covering, and having her sleeves rolled up, which are all inconsistent with Roxy’s presentation. These differences in appearance work to differentiate Roxy, but still, she is lined up with the other enslaved Black people as a potential criminal. While Roxy can be perceived as white, Mr. Driscoll has no problem categorizing her with other Black individuals.

The resulting crimes and both twins' responses to their social roles also bring into question the discussion around nature versus nurture that was raging at the time. With Chambers' crimes, the question remains whether his criminality and character flaws resulted from his Black ancestry or his socialization as a member of entitled White nobility. For the "real" Tom, however, he struggles to overcome "nurture" to accept his "nature" as a fully White man. Not all traits of Chambers are negative, though, as "Tom" attends Yale University, showing that a man with Black ancestry, when given a chance, can succeed in higher education.

Early in the novella, Twain breaks down the source of these racial categories and the resulting hierarchy. Roxy and her child being categorized as Black involves "fiction of law and custom" (Twain #). Twain states that these racial categories result from governmental law and control, supported by social custom. There is nothing objective as the basis for strict racial categorization, and even the establishment, seen to be incredibly logical and based on argumentation, "the law," rests upon a structure of "fiction."

The connection between someone's visual appearance, criminology, and race explored in *Pudd'n'head Wilson* was also of interest to Francis Galton. Galton's composite photography combined multiple individuals into a singular blended image. Galton studied multiple aspects, including whether or not there was a "sick" or "criminal" archetype that could be identified in physical features.

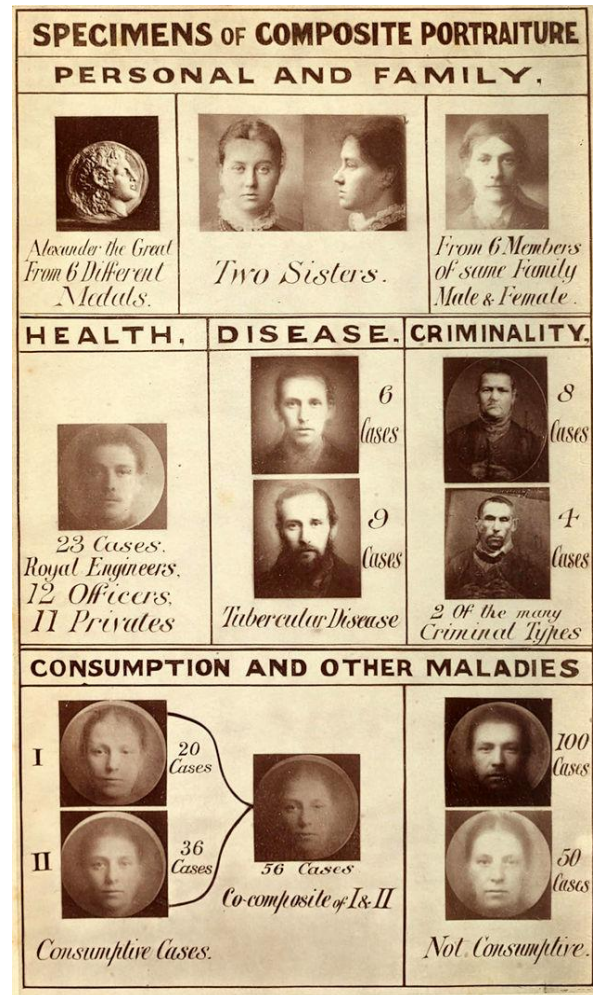


Figure 5. A listing of the different “specimens” analyzed through composite photography. Illustration plates, p.7 of *Inquiries into Human Faculty and its Development* 1883

Photos or portraits of the author are common among Galton and Twain’s works. A biography of Francis Galton written in 1930, *The Life, Letters and Labours of Francis Galton*, by Karl Pearson, starts with a photo of Galton, but the image immediately preceding the text is a portrait drawn by his niece.



Francis Galton in later life. From a sketch by his niece, Miss Eva Biggs (Mrs Ellis).

Figure 6. Portrait of Galton reproduced in Karl Pearson's 1930 *The life, letters and labours of Francis Galton*

With the biography published before World War II and the full horror of the implementation of extreme eugenics, a much softer, familial picture of Galton is presented. Showing Galton in his later life, with part of the biography touting his “labours,” this portrait paints a man still hard at work, leaning over his most recent writing deep in thought. The reader is primed to view Galton as serious and professional, so they may assume Galton’s work is well-researched.

Galton undoubtedly shaped Mark Twain's Pudding-head Wilson, at least in terms of palmistry and fingerprinting, and perhaps contributed to ideas about heredity, race, and crime.

Works Cited:

Pearson, Karl, 1857-1936. The Life, Letters And Labours of Francis Galton. Cambridge [Eng.]:
University press, 191430.