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The Tragedy Of Pudd'nhead Wilson



Synopsis

Two half brothers look so similar as infants that no one can tell them apart. One, the legitimate son of a rich man, is destined for a life of comfort, while the other is condemned to be a slave as he is part black. The mother of the would be slave is also the nurse of the other; to give her son the best life possible she switches the two. Soon the boy who is given every advantage becomes spoiled and cruel. He takes sadistic pleasure in tormenting his half brother. As they grow older, the townspeople no longer notice that the boys look similar, and they readily accept that each is born to his station. A local lawyer, David Wilson has had a similar experience. On his first day in the village he made an odd remark about a dog, and the towns people gave him the condescending name of "Pudd'nhead". Although he was a young intelligent lawyer, he is unable to live down this name and toils in obscurity for over twenty years. Finally he is presented with a complex murder trial and is given the chance to prove himself to the townspeople and shake this unjust label. This complex murder mystery is a psychological study that explores how perceptions shape character. Twain combines biting satire, with his trademark scenes of farce and levity.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

It seems like hardly anybody reads Mark Twain anymore, which is a shame, because he has so much to say about American society and human nature. "Pudd'nhead Wilson" is unquestionably one of his greatest books, maybe even his best. It's at least the equal of "Huckleberry Finn," which I had the good fortune to read with a superb high school English teacher in 1975, a year before her department banned it from the school's curriculum because of its supposedly racist portrayal of

Jim. "Pudd'nhead Wilson" manages to be a social satire, a murder mystery, a compelling commentary on race and racism, a brief against slavery, a courtroom drama, and a lifelike portrait of a particular time and place in American history, all packed into a short novel of some 170 pages. The story moves along quickly, hilarious in places and appalling in others. It's hard to understand why this easy-to-follow, entertaining and instructive novel isn't more widely read and appreciated, especially given the importance of race as a topic for thought, discussion and historical inquiry in the United States. "Pudd'nhead Wilson" is set in a small Mississippi River town in the slave state of Missouri in 1830-1853. The critical event of the story occurs early on, when Roxy, a slave woman caring for two infant boys of exactly the same age, one her son and the other the son of one of the leading citizens of the town, secretly switches their identities. This deception is possible because her son is only 1/32 African-American and appears white (his father is in fact another leading citizen), yet by custom if not by law, the boy is a slave.

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