

We the People Book Club

**PUDD'NHEAD WILSON**

Reading Guide





**MARK TWAIN'S** status as a stalwart in the American canon is a matter of pride, pleasure confusion, and consternation. A brilliant humorist, especially when making fun of people's pretensions, Twain is a social critic of the highest caliber. However, when Twain applies this same incisiveness to characters who have been afforded no social advantages, namely his black characters, even devoted Twain readers wonder if he really does understand the society he critiques or whether, just like other white American writers, his privilege blinds him to the real workings of race and power. The complexity of Twain's mind keeps us wondering, and the search for a resolution, perhaps fruitless, has led people to continue reading and writing about his works for more than a century.

Much of the modern controversy over Twain's legacy has focused on the racist language in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, where the serious question of race competes with the hijinks of a boy's adventure story, and frequent use of the n\* word competes with Huck's moral stance on slavery. In *Pudd'nhead Wilson*, Twain puts an enslaved person and the question of race at the center; they are the motors of the story, and because of this, we can see more clearly the capabilities and limitations of even one of the most critical and brilliant nineteenth-century American writers.

There were literary awards during Twain's career, but he did not win any of them. The highest official accolades he received were a couple of Honorary Doctor of Letters degrees from Yale and Oxford. Twain's accomplishments must be measured, rather, in the number of his stories that continue to entertain child and adult, scholar and casual reader alike. Perhaps a higher water mark than winning awards is having an award named after you. Since 1988 The John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts has given out the Mark Twain Prize for American Humor in honor of Twain's "uncompromising perspective of social injustice and personal folly."

---

## About This Book Club Reading Guide

Researched and written by Julia Davis (a 2018-2019 Fellow with the Practicing Democracy Project), this guide includes background on Mark Twain, an overview of *Pudd'nhead Wilson*, and observations on Twain's literary style. For your personal exploration and/or discussion with others in your book club, we include commentary on three themes. Questions within each will facilitate three approaches to the work: (1) your interpretation of the text, (2) your personal reflections inspired by your reading, and (3) practices for you to try that animate the novel's democratic values. The guide also includes ideas for further exploration; you might decide to engage these resources before or after your discussion.

---

## Background

**Samuel Langhorne Clemens**, who later renamed himself **Mark Twain**, was born on November 30, 1835, and grew up in Hannibal, Missouri. Twain's father died when he was young, leaving the family destitute. However, Twain seems to have enjoyed his childhood, and his adventures in bustling Hannibal, along the banks of the Mississippi River but out of reach of metropolitan St. Louis, provided settings and characters for his later novels.

Twain started out in the printing business, but found his first calling as a riverboat pilot, navigating the great Mississippi. These adventures were cut short, however, by the outbreak of the Civil War. After a brief (and perhaps cowardly) stint in a volunteer unit of the Confederate Army, Twain headed West to Nevada and California; he hoped to get rich as a miner but had to settle for becoming a well-known storyteller. He worked for a newspaper and became infamous for creating ruses, or, as we might say, telling lies — so the turn to writing fiction was a natural one (and one that skirted the libel laws!).

Twain liked to tell people that his pen name came from his days on the river, “mark twain” meaning the second mark on a rope measuring river depth. It is likely, however, that the name originated from his time carousing in western saloons, telling the bartender to “mark twain,” that is, mark down two drinks for him.

Twain wrote nonfiction travel accounts of his voyages abroad in the Mediterranean and of his travels on the Mississippi, but he is most famous for his novels *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* (1876) and *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884), the latter of which is strangely at home in both the children’s and the adult literature sections of the library. Few are the expressions of praise that have not been heaped on the affectionately shortened *Huck Finn*. Ernest Hemingway declared that all modern American literature comes from it. In it, Twain explores the deep sin at the heart of America through the eyes of a rascally young boy named Huck, who has befriended a runaway enslaved man named Jim. Told in Huck’s unschooled and sincere voice, it is full of the nostalgia for innocence that so characterizes the American literary imagination.

Mark Twain died on April 21, 1910 at his country home in Connecticut. He was preceded in death by his wife, Olivia Langdon, and by three of their four children.

## Overview

Published in 1893, *Pudd’nhead Wilson* takes place before the Civil War in the 1830s in a small slaveholding port town called Dawson’s Landing, Missouri. As the novel begins, a young New York lawyer named Mr. David Wilson moves to Dawson’s Landing. In his first interactions with the simple-but-self-important townsfolk, Wilson make use of ironic deadpan humor, and not understanding irony, the townsfolk brand him a fool. His assumed stupidity quickly earns him the name “Pudd’nhead” and tanks his hopes of setting up a successful practice. Marginalized in the town generally, Wilson is also somewhat of a marginal character in the novel, the main characters of which are an enslaved woman named Roxana and her son.

Roxy works in the house of Percy Northumberland Driscoll, brother of the town’s most illustrious citizen, Judge York Leicester Driscoll. Mr. Driscoll’s son, Thomas a Beckett Driscoll, and Roxy’s son, Valet de Chambres, are born at the same time and are both in Roxy’s care. Tom and Chambers (as they are later called) share more than a birthdate and a caretaker. They are indistinguishable without clothes. Roxy is considered black and thus enslavable by “a fiction of law and custom;” her skin is as white as her master’s. Roxy’s son, born of an affair with one of the town’s most esteemed gentlemen, passes as well as she does.

What sets the story in motion is the terror of a system that considers her an object and thus does not respect her family. The horrible thought that she could easily be sold and separated from her only family leads Roxy to do the one thing in her power: she switches the babies' clothing so that her son will grow up with the protections and advantages of being white. It works. No one notices.

However, her son becomes her master in more than name, causing his mother a very different kind of heartache. Subject to the privileges of whiteness, full of power and bereft of character, "Tom" develops into a racist monster who treats his own mother like a slave. Subject to the privations of slavery and racism, Chambers, bereft of power and full of character, becomes a kind and courageous young man a mother could be proud of.

From there a tale unravels that only Twain could twist and then untangle; we see what happens when a pair of Italian twins, the science of fingerprinting, and ancient codes of honor get mixed up in the story of a "white" master who finds out he is the son of a "black" woman.

### Genre, Language, and Structure

Twain uses a traditional linear structure, divided into chapters, to develop this novel. Unlike *Tom Sawyer* and *Huckleberry Finn*, *Pudd'nhead Wilson* is not told in the vernacular voice of the main character but relayed from an impersonal, omniscient, third-person perspective.

While the story of Roxy owes many of its elements to the genre of the slave narrative, and the subplot about the Italian twins borrows elements of romance, *Pudd'nhead Wilson* is ultimately a detective story. Wilson is the Sherlock Holmes who unlocks the mysteries of murder, theft, and identity, and it is perhaps for this reason that Twain decided to name the novel after this character, rather than Roxy or Tom.

While mystery explains the *form* of the story, its *purpose* places it squarely in the mode of satire. Twain made a living pointing out the foibles and pretensions of various groups of people, but he is particularly incisive when it comes to the ridiculous conventions of the American South. Twain's sentimentality for his Mississippi River boyhood is evident in the quaint picture he gives of the novel's setting, but any romantic feelings about life in an antebellum slave state are more than balanced by ridicule for the provinciality, small-mindedness, and violent nature of the culture. His sharp wit makes for laugh-out-loud moments and unearths the absurdity in what passes for system, convention, and common sense.

---

## Themes

---

If you were given the impossible project of defining the one preoccupation of American literature, you could certainly do worse than to say that it is all about identity. For a nation that began as a colony of the British empire and then asserted independence in what was essentially a Civil War that pit English families against one another, the question *Who are we?* is fundamentally American. Early colonial settlers suffered from a sense of provincial insecurity and responded by asserting they were rather more

English than the English. Early American writers like Emerson rallied young artists and writers to set aside the European inheritance and create unique American forms and expressions; the bounding enthusiasm in the verse of Walt Whitman can be seen as the unloosing of an energy and confidence long frustrated.

But the above were privileged identity struggles within the community of whiteness. The original sins of slavery and genocide forced questions whose answers were far more consequential. *What do these differences in skin color mean?* Crucially, the original sin of slavery required justification in a so-called Christian country. Black-white identity questions were summarily answered, in one way or another, to support the system that was making wealth for the country: the economy was based on the objectification of one race for the enrichment of another, and the theory that backed up this system had to become common sense. Thus, by the nineteenth century, the difference of appearance between blacks and whites had legitimized enslavement because those differences had been codified as “race.” White and black “blood” were fundamentally different and led to the need to enslave the (purportedly) mentally limited but physically advantaged black population.

*Pudd'nhead Wilson* fully engages with questions of identity by interrogating the assumption that “blood” means anything at all, whether you are claiming superior “breeding” through aristocratic descent from the First Families of Virginia (FFVs), or superior “race” through an all-white ancestry that protects your “blood” from the taint of blackness.

---

## Identity: Race

A Twain uses the character of Roxy to spin a tale that illustrates the absurdity of race, which in his time was codified in law and considered to be a fact rooted in biology. Roxy is a white slave by appearance and a black slave by “fiction of law.” Neither makes any sense. Twain doubles the absurdity immediately after the introduction of Roxy by juxtaposing her black baby, who is even whiter than she is, and Judge Driscoll’s white baby; the “fiction of law and custom” distinguishes where nature has not: they are identical, but one is born enslaved and one free. When Roxy switches the babies, Twain alerts us that he will refer to baby Chambers as Tom and baby Tom as Chambers, and from then on, it is so, again highlighting the interchangeability of black and white in terms of innate “character.”

The point of Twain’s ruse is, of course, not to decide who should and should not be a slave or to police the color line. Twain is not without racism himself, but his choice of satire positions him on the other side of the status quo. The point is to ask the question, “Does race make us who we are?” Are the differences between us “fixed in nature,” as Thomas Jefferson believed? Intending only to protect her son from a cruel system in which he can be sold down the river, Roxy sets up an experiment that puts this question to the test.

Chambers and Tom become who they are due to work, food, and treatment by others. The “aristocratic” and white Chambers is fed mush, is worked hard, and is punished for overstepping his bounds; as a result, he becomes a black slave: strong, meek, and kind. Tom is showered with attention, fed the best food, and undisciplined despite being fractious and mean; as a result, he becomes a white master: irritable, overbearing, capricious, and vicious.

The fiction of race is powerful enough even to conquer the relationship between a mother and her child. Racism is so thick in this culture that Roxy adapts to her own ruse.

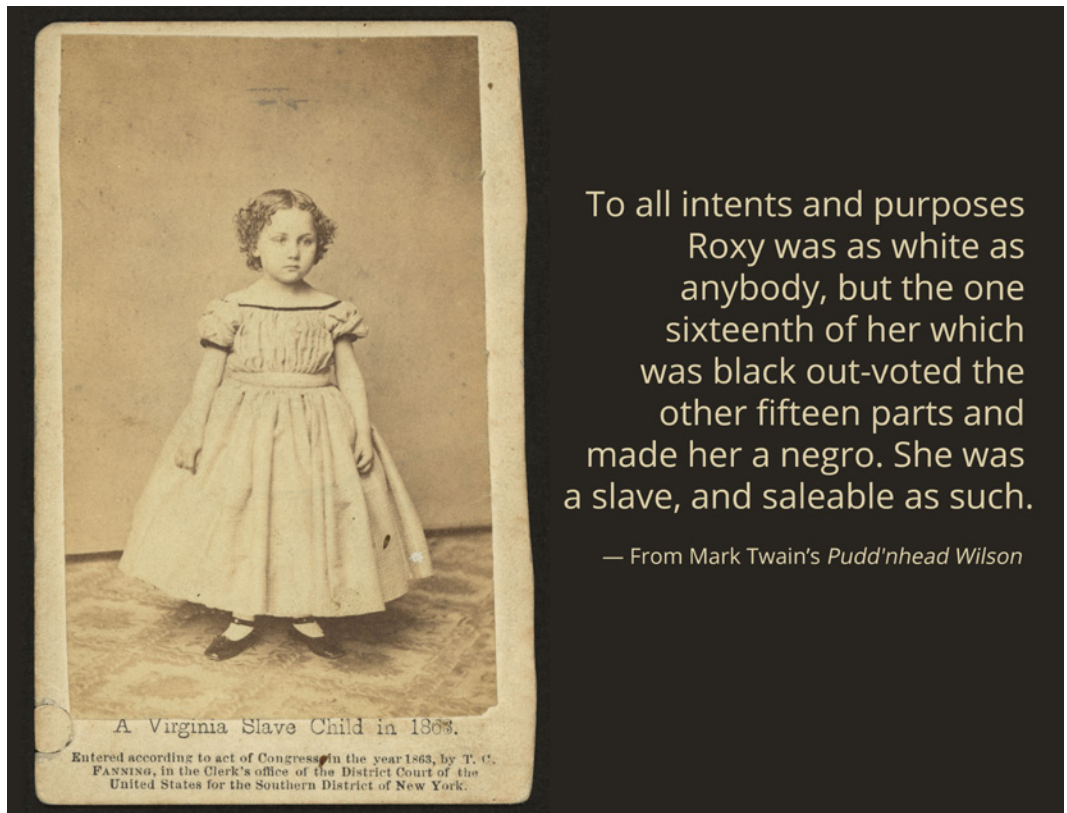
“By the fiction created by herself, he was become her master; the necessity of recognizing this relation outwardly and of perfecting herself in the forms required to express the recognition, had moved her to such diligence and faithfulness in practicing these forms that this exercise soon concreted itself into habit; it became automatic and unconscious; then a natural result followed: deceptions intended solely for others gradually grew practically into self-deceptions as well ...”

The racist beliefs of the white culture that surrounds her demand that Roxy treat Chambers, her black son, as her master. Since she must act like a slave would to a master, the fiction of his new identity becomes real — through habit and enforced social behaviors. The power of racist culture overcomes what she knows to be true.

A similar change comes over Tom when Roxy finally reveals to him that she is his mother. His “blood” does not change in that moment, of course, but overbearing and privileged Tom suddenly finds himself ashamed, unconfident, and humble, giving way to white folks and avoiding shaking hands: “He presently came to have a hunted sense and a hunted look, and then he fled away to the hilltops and the solitudes. He said to himself that the curse of Ham was upon him.”

Raised white his whole life, in a moment Tom becomes black, recast in the fiction of race. One of the powerful aspects of the *Pudd'nhead* story is that, even as it dispenses with the belief in innate difference, it emphasizes the ultimate power of the fiction of race. Debunked in Tom's own life experience as a “successful” white master, it lives on as a story, as the story that the culture needs to explain itself. Twain emphasizes the power of the social construction of race to shape lives in the absence of any fact. One flourish in particular drives this point home: Tom's internalized racism, though short lived, is powerful enough to make him not only hate himself but hate the white man, his uncle.

At this point in the narrative, Twain adds a final nuance to his answer to the question of identity. Personality is a result of nurture, not nature, but this does not mean that humans are easily changed: traits that are conditioned may become as fixed as DNA. Tom's self-perception as a black man is short lived because it comes up against the conditioning of his life since the switch: “the main structure of his character was not changed and could not be changed.” Nurture becomes nature.



THINK

1. Some biographers emphasize Twain's progressive views on race. Discuss some moments from the novel that felt particularly farsighted and some that seemed to reveal the limitations placed on Twain's intellect by time, place, and privilege.

2. Consider the fact that Twain wrote *Pudd'nhead* after Reconstruction in a period of backlash and Jim Crow. Why did he choose to set the novel before the Civil War in the context of a slaving town? How might the novel actually be about 1893, not the 1830s?

REFLECT

3. What moments in the novel made you feel uncomfortable, either with what was being expressed or how it was being expressed? To what do you attribute these feelings of discomfort? What do they teach you about yourself?

4. What are your thoughts about the nature vs. nurture debate? What experiences have led to your conclusions about the roles of nature and nurture in identity?

PRACTICE

5. Beliefs enforced through education, economic pursuits, religion, the arts, media, and more can become fixed in a culture as if they were its DNA. Identify a racist belief or practice that manifests in a subtle way in your culture. Find a way to call attention to it, to satirize it, showing its absurdity and the violence it does to logic.

---

## Identity: Nobility

The belief in “blood” and “breeding” shapes the power dynamic between black and white through the discourse of race: one race being superior to the other. It also shapes power dynamics within the white community through the discourse of noble lineage. Just as race was created to separate whites from blacks in the division of labor, so nobility was created to lift certain whites over others. It is strange that the democratic country that overthrew its monarch for being a monarch would recreate aristocratic structures, but this is perhaps another sign of the insecurity of white European identity in the New World. Traditions die hard if for no other reason than they give one a sense of mooring in a changing world.

In Dawson’s Landing the lineage of note is descension from the First Families of Virginia (FFV), American nobility based on Virginia having the earliest settlements. Like race, this aristocracy is a pure creation but one with immense power. If you had this blood, you were accorded more respect in town, and this respect must be upheld through a spotless reputation. The twins are elevated from foreign curiosity to venerated diplomats when the townsfolk learn of their noble status as counts. The town’s foremost citizens — Judge Driscoll, his brother and Tom’s father Percy Driscoll, and Pembroke Howard — all claim the nobility of Virginian ancestry. The twins and these august citizens enjoy a recognized superiority based on their noble ascent.

As it turns out, this expression of the belief in “blood” and “breeding” also gets satirized in the life of Roxy’s son Tom Driscoll. As the presumed heir to Percy and Judge Driscoll’s Virginian family line, Tom has “the true old blood” that must be expressed in the code of personal honour. Hearing that Tom took Count Luigi to court, in countermand of the code of honour, Judge Driscoll rehearses the moment Tom, a white man, humiliatingly, kneels to Roxy in supplication:

“Say it ain’t true, Pembroke; tell me it ain’t true!” he said in a weak voice.

“There was nothing weak in the deep organ-tones that responded:

“You know it’s a lie as well as I do, old friend. He is of the best blood of Old Dominion.”

“God bless you for saying it!” said the old gentleman, fervently. “Ah, Pembroke, it was such a blow.”

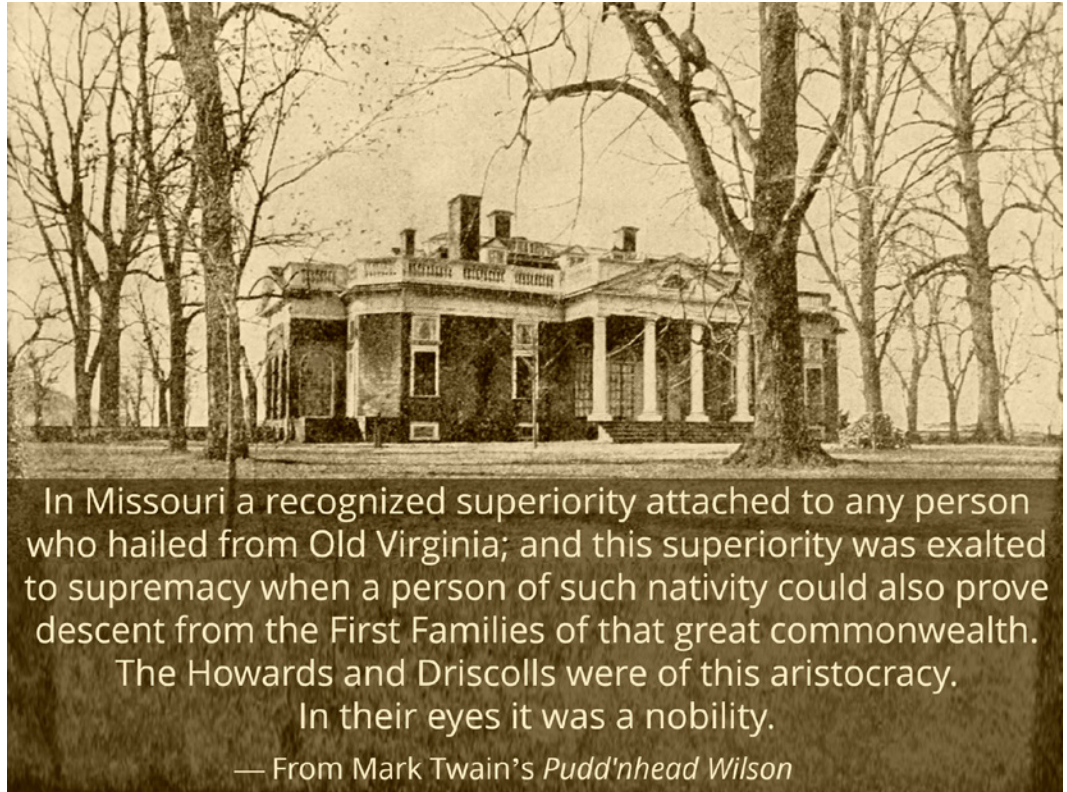
His relief is not simply the restoration of belief in his adopted son but the salvation of a belief system that makes sense of his life, a belief system based on the innate superiority of “that blood of my race.”

When the rumor proves true, when Judge Driscoll must accept that Tom does not live by honor but by lies, theft, and shenanigans, he falls from grace. At this moment, a late nineteenth-century reader might have been able to see proof of the theory of blood: Tom is not honorable because he is not in fact of noble blood but tainted by black blood. However, Twain does not allow this slippage into essentialist thinking because, before Tom reveals this ultimate dishonor to his uncle, the reader learns that Tom *is*, in fact, of noble descent. Roxy assures him, “You ain’t got no ‘casion to be shame’ o’ yo’ father, I kin tell you. He wuz de highest quality in dis whole town — ole Virginy stock. Fust famblies, he wuz.”



As it turns out, neither Tom's Old Dominion lineage nor Tom's  $\frac{1}{32}$  of black "blood" protect him from the predations on character of being rich, white, and in charge.

It is important to note, though, that each time Twain calls out the fictitiousness of blood — whether in the discourse of race or the discourse of nobility — he also calls attention to the *salience* of the belief. Fiction becomes fact, perception is reality, and social constructs are hard to deconstruct.



THINK

1. Why do you think it was important for Twain to satirize the pretensions of nobility, a preoccupation not limited to this novel?

REFLECT

2. What belief system helps you make sense of life's vicissitudes or allows you to invest life with meaning? What limitations or uncomfortable commitments does this belief give rise to?

PRACTICE

3. So often, traditions become venerated because they exclude, not because they include. Identify a traditional practice within your family or community that gains status from some form of exclusion. Resolve to restructure the tradition so that its celebration is also a celebration of truly democratic ideals.

---

## Violence

Societies with steep hierarchies have the potential for great violence. Inequality breeds injustice, which prevents peace. Dawson's Landing, symbolic of the whole South though milder than "down river," is marked by the violence inherent in slavery and the violence built into the aristocratic code of honour.

Practically from the switch, Tom is violent with Chambers; this is his presumed right as a white person and a master. The violence is part of conditioning Chambers to his status as slave and as such is as casual and necessary as teaching an assistant the ways of the office. Driscoll even beats Chambers for defending himself against Tom's violence: "He told Chambers that under no provocation whatever was he privileged to lift his hand against his little master. Chambers overstepped the line three times, and got three such convincing canings from the man who was his father and didn't know it, that he took Tom's cruelties in all humility after that, and made no more experiments." The violence is intended to keep people in their places in the forced labor hierarchy: the slave must endure it and the master must dole it out. In a society in which slaves outnumber masters, this violence keeps the system "safe."

Twain puts rather more focus on the violence built into the code of honour. Status as a noble gentleman requires following this code even if it countermands one's religion; the code is a higher authority than God, perhaps because following the code is more germane to manicuring one's social status than following, in this case, Jesus. Pembroke Howard, the judge's best friend, darling of the people, and "authority on the 'code,'" is "a man always courteously ready to stand up before you in the field if any act or word of his had seemed doubtful or suspicious to you, and explain it with any weapon you might prefer from brad-awls to artillery."

The commitment to violence is such that, for a gentleman like Judge Driscoll, litigation is cowardly because it replaces the personal violence of the code of honour with the abstraction of the law. The satire is rich here. "Civilization" progresses as we repress violent urges, and the code of honour, truly feudal, endangers this civilization. Yet the most respected citizens support the ritualized murder of the code. Note the additional irony: Judge Driscoll and Pembroke Howard are both legal professionals who think personal disputes are better settled with weapons. Especially impressive in the preparations for the duel between Count Luigi and Judge Driscoll, Twain's satire argues that the culture of violence engendered by aristocratic pretensions is simply barbaric. Wilson explains the "logic" to Luigi: "The unwritten law of this region requires you to kill Judge Driscoll on sight, and he and the community will expect that attention at your hands — though of course your own death by his bullet will answer every purpose."

In the end, it is not the duel that kills Judge Driscoll. He is murdered — by a man desperate not to be found out as black and thus subjected to the violent system of race.

The unwritten law of this region requires you to kill Judge Driscoll on sight, and he and the community will expect that attention at your hands — though of course your own death by his bullet will answer every purpose.

— From Mark Twain's *Pudd'nhead Wilson*



THINK

1. It is the reason and science of Pudd'nhead Wilson, not the violence of the FFVs or slaveholders, that brings resolution to the story. Do you think this is why Twain named the story after Wilson, to emphasize a point about logic prevailing over violence?

REFLECT

2. Some of the violence in the novel is so casually presented. For instance, the chairman of the rum club describes "our ever-glorious organization" as "the paradise of the free, the perdition of the slave." The slogan treats the ruination of enslaved blacks in the Caribbean so slightly that it effectively erases the violence completely. In your own current contemporary culture, what forms of violence are presented or treated with such dismissal that they go unnoticed or unaddressed?

PRACTICE

3. In what public ways (short of publishing a novel!) might you call attention to the violence that is widely acceptable or goes unnoticed? Plan a compassionate action that aims to relieve violence by informing and raising consciousness.

---

**Other Reading Guides for the We the People Book Club:**

*The Grapes of Wrath* by John Steinbeck

*The Underground Railroad* by Colson Whitehead

*A Good Man Is Hard to Find* by Flannery O'Connor

Selected Poems of Walt Whitman and Maya Angelou

*Tenth of December* by George Saunders

*Gilead* by Marilynne Robinson

*Puddnhead Wilson* by Mark Twain

*The Fire Next Time* by James Baldwin and

*Between the World and Me* by Ta-Nehisi Coates

*Ceremony* by Leslie Marmon Silko

*The Sympathizer* by Viet Thanh Nguyen

*The Partly-Cloudy Patriot* by Sarah Vowell

*Their Eyes Were Watching God* by Zora Neale Hurston

---

Download Reading Guides at [SpiritualityandPractice.com/WethePeopleBookClub](https://www.spiritualityandpractice.com/WethePeopleBookClub)

---



The **We the People Book Club** is a year-long program contemplating America's past and possibilities as presented by classic and contemporary literary voices. It is a part of The Practicing Democracy Project, a collaboration between **The Center for Spirituality & Practice** and the **Fetzer Institute**.

**The Practicing Democracy Project** offers resources to strengthen and deepen the way we live out democracy. These spiritual practices help us do the work both in ourselves and in relationship with our neighbors and communities.

Some practices enhance or support the essential civic virtues and qualities of American democracy, such as respect and service. Others help us deal with problems and obstacles that depress democracy, such as anger and rigid thinking.

The Project offers spiritual practices and resources for all of us — from advocacy and civic organizations to congregations and companies.

**For more information on the Project, visit [PracticingDemocracy.net](https://PracticingDemocracy.net).**

All commentaries, reading guide questions, and practice suggestions for the We the People Book Club are copyright 2018 by Spirituality & Practice (**[SpiritualityandPractice.com](https://www.spiritualityandpractice.com)**), a multifaith website presenting resources for people on spiritual journeys. Julia Davis, a 2018-2019 Fellow with the Practicing Democracy Project, wrote this Book Club Reading Guide.

*Pudd'nhead Wilson* book cover image courtesy of Penguin Classics (**[PenguinClassics.com.au](https://www.penguinclassics.com.au)**).

