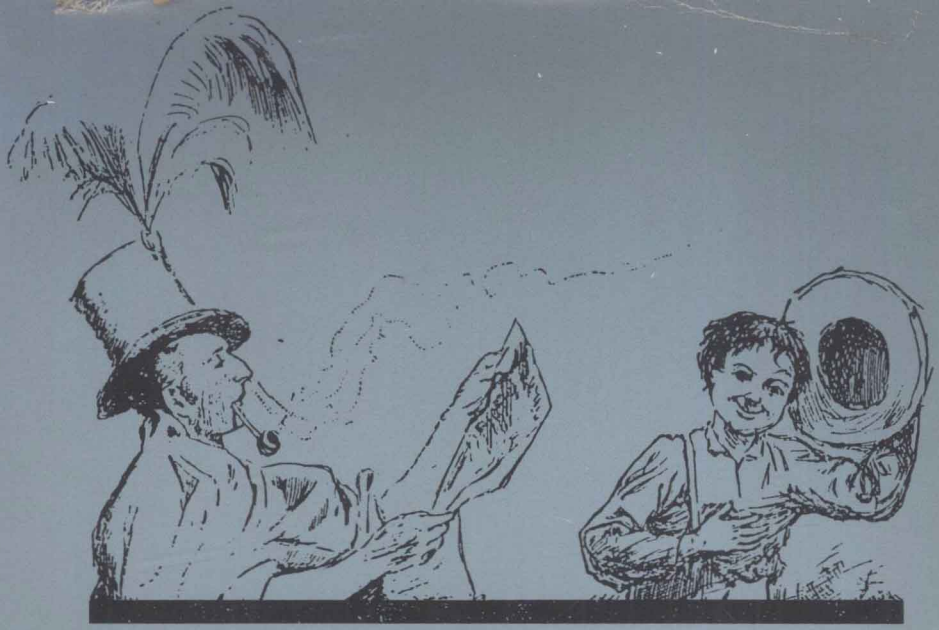

TWAIN'S HEROES

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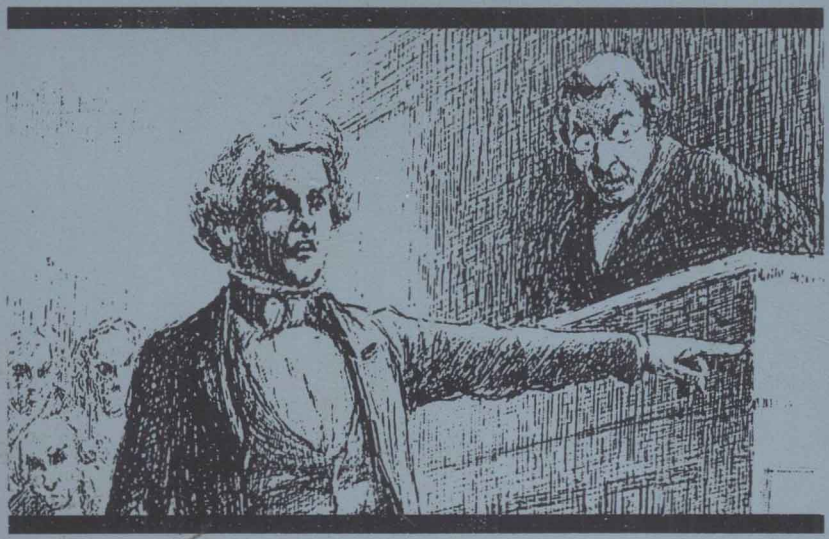

Andrew Jay Hoffman

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TWAIN'S HEROES TWAIN'S WORLDS

Mark Twain's
Adventures of Huckleberry Finn,
A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court,
and
Pudd'nhead Wilson

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Prologue

In one sense, I began this project more than ten years ago, when I was an undergraduate at University of Pennsylvania. I got what I thought of as My Big Break. Running Press, a small Philadelphia publisher, wanted to issue a representative collection of Mark Twain. The task ended up primarily in my inexperienced hands. Months of work became *The Unabridged Mark Twain*, a 1200-page paperback introduced by Kurt Vonnegut. Though a bargain of a book, the volume is not a reliable text. I must take blame for all its shortcomings, from the exclusion of *Pudd'nhead Wilson* to the embarrassingly frequent typographical errors. Mark Twain deserves better than the shabby treatment I gave him. Perhaps this study is my way of paying off my ten-year-old debt for the great pleasure and insight Twain has given me.

Repayment of the debt has taken so long for two reasons. First, I needed to accumulate enough intellectual capital. Recently, the Graduate School of Brown University has given me the time to develop my early critical prejudices into well-grounded beliefs and then to work those beliefs into this book. But this manuscript would never have materialized without the second delay in repayment, a sort of mirroring in miniature of Mark Twain's experience. After graduating from the University of Pennsylvania, I went West, and in San Francisco broke into professional writing. I wrote and edited for publications up and down the West Coast, like Twain earning my livelihood with my pen. Later, I returned East and began working with magazine- and book-publishers of national stature. In time, though, Mark Twain's ghost rose like a band a collection lawyers before me, and I knew I must leave off mimicking Twain and repay the old debt.

In Mark Twain's three most important novels—*Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*(1884), *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* (1889), and *Pudd'nhead Wilson* (1894)—we can see an outline of historical movement. The heroes of these novels do not change very much within the confines of their own works, but as a group the nature of their heroism develops from work to work. We see through their struggles how Twain grappled with the problems heroes present. Mark Twain attempted, through these works, to find a kind of heroism which could at very least survive the world as he saw it. To give his heroes even a chance, he empowered them supernaturally. He idealized them, made more of them than simply realistic characters.

Huck Finn, Hank Morgan, and David Wilson are all symbolic heroes. They are not only flesh, blood, and human crises, but also human emblems—emblems, this book will try to show, of historical dimension. Working in the tradition of Southwestern humorists, Twain mixed the tall-tale heroics of oral storytellers with a nineteenth-century drive toward realism in narrative. The historically verifiable worlds of Twain's fiction strain the seams of their realism by containing their heroes, who originate in a different kind of literature. These characters strike a balance between their traditional heroism and the circumstances they find themselves in by becoming symbols of hope for release from the real worlds those circumstances depict.

I do not mean to say in this argument that Huck, Hank, and Pudd'nhead are simple allegorical figures. As we first encounter them they are very much characters in realistic fictions. But their power as characters outstrips the power each could possibly have as a representation of a single human being. They are heroes—not literary ones, ordinary men in extraordinary circumstances, but traditional ones out of myth and tall tales. They are extraordinary men in ordinary circumstances made extraordinary by their presence there. We see this clearly when we compare Twain's heroes to models of heroes. Huck Finn fits thoroughly into the constructed outlines of the traditional hero drawn for us in Lord Raglan's *The Hero* and Otto Rank's *The Myth of the Birth of the Hero*. Hank Morgan looks very much like the hero in Joseph Campbell's *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. But, even as heroes of the magnitude that fascinated Raglan, Rank, and Campbell, Hank Morgan and Huck Finn fail to perform as heroes in their realistic worlds. Although Twain

built into both of them the superhumanity of the traditional hero, it proves too much for each. At the end of their novels, they betray our trust in their heroism and fail to make material the hopes their heroism leads us to invest in them. Each failure pushed Mark Twain to revise his concept of the hero and finally drove him to construct David Wilson, a different sort of hero, perhaps an existential one, who could survive the world he lives in.

These heroes do not fail under their own weight; they fail in context. *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* starts in the northern Missouri river town of St. Petersburg and moves more deeply into the American South of the 1830s. That decade is the centerpiece of what many post-war historians have cast as an American idyll, Jacksonian Democracy, when the Jeffersonian ideal of a nation of free and equal men seemed, if not actual, at least within grasp. Huck Finn himself is a Jacksonian ideal: a spirit short on breeding and long on character, determined to do more than survive. He wants to thrive as an independent and natural man in a world of independent and natural men. This is the Huck Finn who vows to go to hell rather than turn in his friend Jim. Mark Twain, a student of history, knew Jacksonian Democracy to be a myth, knew it perhaps only with the benefit of hindsight, but knew it by his intimate experience with its reality. This marvelous era of human development existed, if it did at all, only by virtue of another institution: slavery. Huck faces and defeats the "sivilized" dragons which challenge his individual moral development, but the human horror of slavery, which generates the dragons and which as a system outlasts and outwits Huck's morality, keeps him ever on the edge of darkness. In the end, the darkness swallows him, just as the issue of slavery swallowed the high hopes of the 1830s and 1840s. To live at all among people, Huck must take part in their romantic fantasies about their world. Huck goes through a symbolic death to escape his father and avoid playing in any more of Tom Sawyer's moronic romances. But at the end of his book, he hopes to emulate his father's propensity to evil and he not only joins into Tom's game, but also becomes Tom Sawyer himself, at least in name. Instead of simply springing Jim and leaving, Huck bows to Tom and plays out the new romance to the hilt. And instead of ending the novel thriving, our hero ends tarnished and lost to us. Huck *had* to end this way, not because of his heroic character, but because of historical necessity. Slavery was the dark underside of a nation of

free and equal men; slavery in the end defeats Huck. Twain cast Huck as a symbol of the Jacksonian Democratic ideal and, as the ideal fails, so must Huckleberry Finn.

In *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*, Mark Twain moves from the conflicts of his boyhood to those more immediate to him. Much more a psychological hero, according to Joseph Campbell's design, than Huck Finn, Hank Morgan starts his history by calling himself an American and then issues a boast which America itself could have made in the late 1880s:

> My father was a blacksmith, my uncle was a horse doctor, and I was both, along at first. Then I went over to the great arms factory and learned my real trade; learned all there was to it; learned to make everything: guns, revolvers, cannon, boilers, engines, all sorts of labor saving machinery. Why, I could make anything a body wanted, anything in the world, it didn't make any difference what; and if there wasn't a quick new-fangled way to make a thing, I could invent one. (4)

Like Hank, America made the best armaments and heavy machinery in the world and we were looking for ways to prove it. Hank Morgan gets the chance in sixth-century England, and he proves it conclusively: In a day and a half he owns half the country and lives at a level just below King Arthur. He dominates his world successfully. The Connecticut Yankee manipulates the world according to his own egotistical image.

In time, though, Arthur's world proves less malleable than the Yankee thought. It snaps back at him; even his most faithful aide tells him that the end "would have come on your own account, by and by." The Yankee responds to the attack against him with the same technology that prompted the attack, resentfully taking back all he has given and then destroying what is left. By the end, this man we cheered with abandon kills 25,000 people without remorse, without even a second thought. What Twain gives us in *A Connecticut Yankee* is a history of what America has repeated several times since in small and backward countries around the world, with the Indians as Twain grew up, in Mexico while Twain wrote the novel, and soon after in the Philippines. What Mark Twain saw, and why Hank Morgan too had to fail, was that Industrial America is also Imperialist America, and even a hero of Hank Morgan's proportions could not find a way out of that identity.

Huck Finn and Hank Morgan are both traditional heroes in what our historic imagination has taught us to think of as heroic times. But history is never simple, and neither are its symbols. As the heroic times failed us, in their undersides of horror and violence, so must the heroes who symbolize those times. This left Mark Twain with a problem: what kind of hero will not fail in the world as we know it? In the years after the publication of *A Connecticut Yankee*, Twain experimented with futuristic fiction, imagining impossible or faintly possible worlds.

He also wrote one more major novel. In it, he went not to the future but back to the territory he had mined with such sadly moving results in *Huckleberry Finn*. *Pudd'nhead Wilson* seems to take us back to the Mississippi River valley and the pre-Civil War South, but this world does not look or feel like the world we found in *Huckleberry Finn*. Its ironic and inactive hero appears heroic in terms the twentieth century understands much better than the nineteenth ever could.

David Wilson refuses the mold of the traditional hero. Nothing magical happens to him his entire life. He wears no disguises, creates no unusual occurrence, never leaves Dawson's Landing. The only significant action he takes—solving the murder of Judge Driscoll and revealing the true identity of the murderer—only serves to restore, not to change, the social order, albeit with him now at its head. At the novel's opening, Wilson arrives in an odd and in some ways magical world, where few people are what they seem and where "an invisible dog" barks disagreeably behind the facade of peaceful homes. Though unwelcome—an ironic joke the townsfolk do not understand casts him immediately as a pudd'nhead—he stays. For more than twenty years Wilson, trained as a lawyer, earns a little money from surveying and accounting and makes a life for himself by his interest "in every new thing that was born into the universe of ideas." Yet at the end of the novel he is "a made man for life," mayor of the town, successful lawyer, leading citizen.

The novel, however, sometimes published under the title *The Tragedy of Pudd'nhead Wilson*, does not leave readers cheering. Though David Wilson does not disappoint us in the way Huck and Hank do, he does not exactly satisfy us either. The townsfolk, who at the novel's start dubbed Wilson "Pudd'nhead," take on the title themselves at the end. Yes, David Wilson leads Dawson's Landing,

but what sort of success can we call running a town full of idiots? A tragic one, Twain implies, but, tragic or not, it is the only sort of success the world allows. To make this point more painfully clear, Twain includes in his novel a traditional hero against whom we can compare David Wilson: Roxy. She constantly takes action against an unjust world: she switches her slave child for the master's, goes on a journey, engineers all her son's crimes which the novel gives us reason to believe are acts of retributive justice against the oppression of slavery. But Roxy ends like Huck and Hank, only worse; she is reduced from a "majestic" creature to a cringing hopeless one. Against this failure Twain sets David Wilson, who takes no action but socially acceptable ones, who patiently abides ridicule and obscurity, who creates for himself his own life with hair oil and bits of glass. His heroism is limited to understanding identity through fingerprints and to retaining his authenticity in a world unaccustomed to it.

Twain began with Huckleberry Finn, a traditional hero in an historically real world. In the isolation of the river his heroism inspires, but transferred to the real world it disgusts. Huck cannot fight Tom Sawyer's romantic visions, and he cannot compete with the system of oppression which that romance supports. He heads off to the territories, a failed hero. A turn to the present gave Twain no easier ride. Hank Morgan, less traditionally heroic but still a fine example of at least one model of the hero, seems capable of conquering a world. More than seems, he does conquer it; but he cannot govern it. He wants to change people at their roots and has only technology to help him. In the end, he has only technology to fall back on and only revenge as a motive. He destroys himself, the world he created, and very nearly the world he wanted to change. In David Wilson, Twain found a new sort of hero. Wilson promises nothing; anything he achieves makes us admire him. And what he achieves, aside from solving the mystery of Dawson's Landing, is simple survival. His world is absurd, a circus of Italian twins, dueling noblemen, human devils and imitation whites, and all Wilson need do to succeed in it is be himself. So: Huck Finn, a democratic hero, cannot survive the undemocratic world; an emblem of Jacksonian Democracy, he is destroyed by that which destroyed what he represents. Hank Morgan, a technological hero, cannot survive the untechnological world; an emblem of Industrial America,

he is destroyed by ego, both his own and that which fueled our Gilded Age return to the childish exuberance of "Manifest Destiny." And David Wilson? An existential hero, a foreshadowing, perhaps, of a world Mark Twain never saw, except in his dark imagination.

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Parts of this argument have been made elsewhere. The only full-length study of Mark Twain's heroes is *Unpromising Heroes: Mark Twain and His Characters*, by Robert Regan, which argues that the author repeatedly placed ordinary people in extraordinary circumstances, making heroes out of unpromising materials. The book does not argue any relationship among these surprising protagonists, nor does it take into account Rank's, Raglan's or Campbell's studies of the hero. Several books on Twain himself document his concern with politics, his anguish over slavery and American imperialism, and his knowledge of history. Most important among these are Roger B. Salomon's *Mark Twain and the Image of History*, Thomas Blues' *Mark Twain and the Community*, Philip Foner's *Mark Twain: Social Critic*, Bernard De Voto's *Mark Twain's America*, and James M. Cox's *Mark Twain: The Fate of Humor.*

I have not yet seen a book or article that shows how well Huck Finn fits into the traditional model of the hero, though several, such as "Huck Finn as Existential Hero" by Arthur Asa Berger and "Huckleberry Finn and the Tradition of the *Odyssey*" by Jack Solomon, touch on the subject. Several articles have noted the outlines of Jacksonian Democracy in Huck, and virtually everyone who has written on the novel has wrestled with the painfully unsatisfying ending. Nothing yet published, however, links these considerations. The fit between the story of Hank Morgan in *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* and the psychological model of the hero drawn by Joseph Campbell appears original with me. Many critics have seen the emblematic quality in the Yankee, for example Deborah Berger Turnbull in "Hank Morgan as American Individualist" and Lorne Fienberg in "Twain's Connecticut Yankee: The Entrepreneur as Daimonic Hero" come to mind. The political nature of the novel escapes few critics, but perhaps Nancy Oliver's "New Manifest Destiny in *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's*

Court" states the connection I see between the Yankee and imperialism most succinctly. Henry Nash Smith's penetrating *Mark Twain's Fable of Progress: Political and Economic Ideas in "A Connecticut Yankee"* also addresses political issues. Much of the criticism on *Pudd'nhead Wilson* considers the dramatic problem of finding the locus of the novel's tragedy and the attendant problem of finding a hero. I have seen very little on David Wilson's existential qualities, though Forrest Robinson's *In Bad Faith* will lead scholars to more thorough consideration of existentialism in Twain. Critics have been much more responsive to Roxy's complex role as near-tragic near-hero than to David Wilson's heroics. The dark absurdity of Wilson's world and his resulting awkwardness have been described by Clark Griffith in "*Pudd'nhead Wilson* as Dark Comedy" and by George Spangler in "*Pudd'nhead Wilson*: A Parable of Property", among others.

Readers will notice that my critical slant differs from that which informs most Twain criticism. I have very consciously turned my back on biographical criticism, which has held on as the mainstay of scholarly writing about Mark Twain since De Voto's *Mark Twain's America* and Van Wyck Brooks' *The Ordeal of Mark Twain*. Perhaps this biographical list to the critical ship goes back earlier, to William Dean Howells' *My Mark Twain*, or even comes out of Twain's own remarkable popularity while he lived. I still find Mark Twain personally fascinating; my slant away from biographical criticism in no way rejects Twain, the significance of his authorship, or the intriguing connections so many scholars have excavated between the life and the work.

I have two reasons for withholding support for the biographical approach, in most cases. First, I believe that, because of it, Twain criticism has become stalled in the past decade. The line of inquiry has run dry. The image of Mark Twain gone West for half a life as Huck Finn and East for half as Tom Sawyer no longer stimulates the critical imagination. Twain's bifurcated self has been made to account for so much in Twain's fiction that the fiction itself risks being lost in this simplistic code. The skeleton key of "divided Twain" threatens to turn the wonder of entering the maze of Twain's work into a walk down a well-lit corridor. The books under consideration here still deliver a startling punch to first-time readers. Twain has been one of the best selling authors throughout

the twentieth century. His books continue to resonate in subsequent readings. But much of the criticism seems to have gotten caught in a biographical trap which simply does not answer the fundamental question facing any critical inquiry: why does this phenomenon have so strong an effect? The "doubled-up-Twain" litany offers good answers, but not final ones. I have turned my back on this kind of criticism—not completely, but as much as I am able—because only by conscientiously exploring new critical lines might we come up with new answers.

My second point is that we read *from* a time, not *of* a time. Considering fiction as a primary document of the age in which it is written has proved tricky for historians, new and otherwise. Using a novel to understand history must of necessity produce as many difficulties as using history to understand a novel, looking at a piece of fiction as a sort of expression of the age in which it is written. We are hampered by distance: between our time and the author's, between the author and the time he or she writes of, and between the author and his or her own time. Biographical criticism attempts to fill that last chasm, but its information and efforts can never equal the task. As Twain himself said to introduce his autobiography, what someone does comprises only a tiny fraction of a life; what passes through a mind makes up the most of it, and that can never be fully recorded. Trying to place a work of fiction in the time from which it comes is a monumental and in my view mostly hopeless task. I frankly enjoy reading that sort of criticism, for its speculative value. Informed imagination can be tremendously satisfying. But the only historical position we can honestly take on a work of fiction is our own. We weren't with the writer when his ink hit the paper, nor were we alive when the books made their big splash. But we are alive now, and, when Mark Twain writes about the Mississippi Valley before the Civil War, we construct our image of the world he describes as much from the vision of that time and place that we have gained elsewhere as from Twain's own words. I can argue that David Wilson is an existential hero because readers of the book know what an existential hero is. A glance at a time line informs us Twain would not have known the word; but a reading of *Pudd'nhead Wilson* shows us he would recognize the ideas. Or even if he wouldn't, what difference does it make, if *we* understand the tale's workings that way? We read the book today. The book will

be read tomorrow only if it has meaning for tomorrow's readers. Looking back to the time of the book's publication will help only if yesterday means something to tomorrow.

I neglect textual criticism in these pages, but I cannot withhold praise from the crew at The Mark Twain Project at the Bancroft Library at the University of California at Berkeley. Their magnificent editions become the standard the day they're published. These dedicated people also offer tremendous help to struggling scholars hoping to paw through Twain's letters, manuscripts, and memorabilia. I want to extend my special thanks to Victor Fischer and Robert Pack Browning, who bestowed their cordiality and assistance as though it honored them to do so.

This sort of criticism could be called anthropological or experiential. I am concerned with the shape and feel of the works in the context of conventional knowledge. Huck Finn leaves the impression as being something more special than what the rag-tag juvenile-delinquent pubescent objective description of him suggests. What contextual information contributes to the perception? Our knowledge of heroes and their powers, for one thing. I use Lord Raglan's *The Hero* not as an expression of truth about the hero but as a document of that knowledge, a true context for *Huckleberry Finn*. Why does the territory through which Huck takes his trip feel so historically real? Because our own histories of that time describe it just as Twain does. Is it just Hank Morgan's bouts of rage and egotism which make him seem to represent more of a generalized psyche than a real person? Joseph Campbell's *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* compiles the knowledge we have about heroes and the psyche; his perspective alerts us to the context in which we read Hank's story. My concern is thus both with the experience of reading and with the culture in which we read. The books under consideration here are both documents of contemporary culture and personal voyages for readers who enter them. My concern for the many contexts of the cultural experience of reading Mark Twain shares as much with Michel Foucault's *The Archaeology of Knowledge* as with Clifford Geertz's essays in *Local Knowledge* and *The Interpretation of Cultures*. Readers familiar with Geertz and Foucault will have no trouble spotting their influence on my work: in my insistent contextualizing of the fiction in the readers' paper trail we call criticism, and in my shifting of perspective when another offers a clearer view. I make no apology if you find the result personal and

idiosyncratic. I only hope that you grow to share my idiosyncrasies through your personal experience with this critical rereading of the works of Mark Twain.

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No, that's not true. I have another hope: that Twain—whether he is enjoying the climate in heaven or the company in hell—stamps this effort PAID IN FULL.

Contents

Part I

Adventures of Huckleberry Finn