

The Controversial Character of Roxy in Twain's *Pudd'nhead Wilson*

Jennifer Ervin

Mark Twain's *Pudd'nhead Wilson* is a novel that has received abundant criticism from the time it was written to the present day. Scrutinized from various perspectives and across a wide range of spectrums, it has sparked much controversy in the literary field. There are just as many critics who praise it, viewing it as a true work of literature and a classic, as there are those who criticize it negatively, referring to it as a melodramatic, structurally unsound, poorly written tale. The controversy steepens further: some have thought it a tragedy, others a farce; some have seen it as social commentary on slavery, while still others have seen it as a fable or parable. Even today, there seems to be a lack of consistency among critics as to whether it is a successful work of literature or an utter failure. Thus, it is no wonder that this novel would spark controversy about the characters in it as well.

One of the primary characters that critics disagree about is the one-sixteenth part Negro slave Roxy. Some have referred to Roxy as "a gross and comic Aunt Jemima" (Fiedler 222). Such critics have remarked that Twain's "handling of her suffers . . . from melodrama and sentimentality" (De Voto 219). However, other critics view Roxy as the "only character that is really striking" in the novel at all (Alden 215). The only thing critics can seem to agree on is that her character is clearly significant in driving the plot of the novel forward. Despite the disagreement and controversy, Roxy is far more than a just melodramatic character whose unrealistic nature jeopardizes the literary value of the novel. Instead, Roxy is a striking character who possesses complexities, which often arise from conflict between who she is as a person and who she is in society (a black slave).

Roxy is complex simply due to her physical existence. As a woman who is one-sixteenth black, she appears in all physical manners white. This simple fact complicates life for her. Because “the one-sixteenth of her which was black outvoted the other fifteen parts and made her a negro[,] she was a slave and salable as such” (Twain 16). Her life as a slave condemns her son to a life of slavery as well since he is “thirty-one parts white,” and a life of slavery poses imminent threats on a daily basis, such as being sold down the river (Twain 16). These imminent threats affect her day-to-day choices in life. Thus, her physical existence as a part black person causes her to live in slavery, which ultimately adds to her complexities as her entire life and thus entire character become shaped by it.

Roxy demonstrates complexities in her intelligence. While many slaves live their lives in much ignorance, Roxy displays not only wit but also sheer cleverness and resourcefulness. Her wit is revealed when she jests with another slave, Jasper, carrying on a “friendly duel” and saying, “If you b’longed to me I’d sell you down de revier ‘fo’ you git too fur gone. Fust time I runs acrost yo’ marster, I’s gwine to tell him so” (Twain 15). As evinced by this jesting match, she is smart, sassy, and sarcastic. Beyond her wit, however, she displays a sheer cleverness and resourcefulness. She successfully devises a plan to swap her baby with Driscoll’s baby in order to save her own baby from slavery (Twain 24). Her resourcefulness allows her to convince everyone that her own baby is Tom and that Tom is her own baby by “[undressing] Thomas a Becket, stripping him of everything . . . and [putting] his coral necklace on her own child’s neck” and by treating each child as if he was the other (Twain 24). Her resourcefulness and intelligence thus aid her in manipulating the social conventions surrounding slaves and masters to change the course of her son’s life.

Her intelligence is displayed in other ways throughout the novel as well, even in minor ways. While the entire town believes Wilson to be “a fool,” Roxy recognizes that he is truly “de smartes’ man in dis town” (Twain 26). Therefore, even though she is a slave, she possesses a discernment that many white, powerful people lack. Over and over again, she uses her intelligence resourcefully to profit herself. She tricks Tom by once again manipulating social conventions to gain some control over him:

Roxy knew her conquest was complete. She could have proved nothing to anybody, and her threat about the writings was a lie; but she knew the person she was dealing with, and had made both statements without any doubt as to the effect they would produce. (Twain 71)

Roxy knew that by social convention, Tom would be in significant trouble if anyone discovered he was actually Valet de Chambre. By combining her knowledge of Tom’s true identity with her discernment of Tom’s character and her understanding of social conventions, Roxy gained power over Tom multiple times in the novel. Thus, she is complex in that she displays a wit, intelligence, resourcefulness, and discernment that slaves (and some people in general) do not normally possess.

Complexities are evident in Roxy’s sense of morality as well. Her actions and reflections reveal “subtleties of conscience and ethical sensibility” (Leavis 239). When Driscoll accuses his slaves of theft, Roxy is the only slave who was truly innocent; “all were guilty but Roxana” (Twain 18). She refuses to violate her religion by stealing because of her conversion during a Methodist revival. However, her sense of morality is conflicted due to her role as a slave. Neither she nor any other slave thought it a sin to “smouch provisions from the pantry . . . or [smouch] any other property of light value” due to the “unfair show in the battle of life” (Twain

19). Despite that fact, she still holds to a code of morality that forbids her to steal in any large way. She also battles with her conscience when making the decision to swap the two babies. Here again her role as a slave influences her moral and ethical decisions. She at first seems unsure of whether or not swapping the babies is ethical and moral, yet the survival of her son presses her to follow through with her plan. In other words, because of her position as a slave and her son's like position, she is in a sense forced to value survival over morality. Still, her conscience bothers her about whether or not swapping the babies would be a sin. It is not until she remembers from a church sermon that "*white* folks has done it" that her conscience finally rests, giving her peace that it is the right and moral thing to do (Twain 24). Thus, Roxy's morality proves her complexity in that it causes conflicts between her conscience and moral code and her life as a slave.

Complexities also arise with regard to Roxy's emotions. She has "gusts of passion or of despair [along with] her vanity, her mother love, and the glimpses of nobler feelings that are occasionally seen in her elementary code of morals" (Alden 215). It is this range of emotions that some critics point to in order to argue that Roxy is nothing but a melodramatic, sentimentalized character. However, embedded in this range of emotions is the complexity of human nature, for almost all humans possess a wide range of emotions that are at times conflicting.

Two primary emotions that conflict within Roxy are her love and compassion for Tom as her son and her vengeance against his cruelty as her master. It is her love and compassion for her son that initially prompt her to swap him with the true Tom so that "no man kin ever sell mammy's po' little honey down de river" (Twain 24). Even "with all her splendid common sense and practical every-day ability, Roxy was a doting fool of a mother" (Twain 30).

Consequently, her motherly devotion to Tom ends up leading her down a path of self-deception, through which she inevitably allows herself to be treated cruelly by him, even when he is just a child. This fact reveals the conflict between Roxy's intelligence and her motherly devotion, which later develops into the conflict between her hatred for Tom as her master and her love for him as her son:

Sometimes she could not go to sleep, even when worn out with fatigue, because her rage boiled so high over the day's experiences with her boy. She mumble and mutter to herself: "He struck me, en I warn't no way to blame – struck me in de face, right before folks. En he's al'ays' callin' me nigger-wench, en hussy, en all dem mean names, when I's doin' de very bes' I kin. Oh, Lord, I done so much for him – I lift' him away up to what he is – en dis is what I git for it. (Twain 35)

Therefore, Roxy bounces between these two emotions, motherly devotion and vengeance, throughout the novel due to the complexity of her situation; she loves her son and wants to see him prosper, yet she hates the cruel master he has become. At times, she declares that she could never love him. Then at other times, she professes her love for her child, "[pouring] out endearments upon him" (Twain 137). Even after the ill treatment Roxy has received from Tom, she still possesses a strong motherly devotion to him. In order to help him out of debt, she offers to be sold back into slavery, a huge sacrifice for her since she is now free, declaring that there is nothing "a mother won't do for her chile" (Twain 138). After he deceives her, however, and sells her down the river, her vengeance rages again. Therefore, the conflicting emotions Roxy experiences due to her positions as a mother and a slave and subordinate to her son substantiate the complexity in her character.

Roxy is clearly a character who portrays many of the complexities found in human nature, including intelligence, wit, and resourcefulness; morality and conscience; and conflicting emotions. Those that view her as overly dramatized and sentimentalized are missing out on the fact that the characteristics she displays are those that ultimately “make her very human, and create a sympathy for her in spite of her unscrupulous actions” (Alden 215). In other words, she is in some ways a comment on the complexity of human nature, especially with respect to who individuals are and whom society influences or forces them to be. Even Twain himself seemed to view her as a complex and strong character who can take control. About Roxy he wrote, “Before the book was half finished [Roxy was] taking things almost entirely into [her] own hands and working the whole tale as a private venture of [her] own – a tale which [she] had nothing at all to do with, by rights” (Twain qtd. in Gerber 364). Her character seems anything but weak, and she not only drives the plot but also adds to the commentary the novel seems to be making, whether with regard to slavery, society, or human nature in general. Roxy is truly a complex character with many layers that develop from her life as a woman tainted by a few drops of black blood.

Works Cited

- Alden, William Livingston. “From *The Idler* (August, 1894).” *Pudd’nhead Wilson and Those Extraordinary Twins: Authoritative Texts, Textual Introduction, and Tables of Variants Criticism*. Ed. Sidney E. Berger. New York: W.W. Norton, 1980. 215.
- De Voto, Bernard. “Mark Twain’s Presentation of Slavery.” *Pudd’nhead Wilson and Those Extraordinary Twins: Authoritative Texts, Textual Introduction, and Tables of Variants Criticism*. Ed. Sidney E. Berger. New York: W.W. Norton, 1980. 219-220.

- Fielder, Leslie. "As Free as Any Cretur . . ." *Pudd'nhead Wilson and Those Extraordinary Twins: Authoritative Texts, Textual Introduction, and Tables of Variants Criticism*. Ed. Sidney E. Berger. New York: W.W. Norton, 1980. 220-229.
- Gerber, John C. "Pudd'nhead Wilson as Fabulation." *Pudd'nhead Wilson and Those Extraordinary Twins: Authoritative Texts, Textual Introduction, and Tables of Variants Criticism*. Ed. Sidney E. Berger. New York: W.W. Norton, 1980. 360-370.
- Leavis, F. R. "Mark Twain's Neglected Classic: The Moral Astringency of *Pudd'nhead Wilson*." *Pudd'nhead Wilson and Those Extraordinary Twins: Authoritative Texts, Textual Introduction, and Tables of Variants Criticism*. Ed. Sidney E. Berger. New York: W.W. Norton, 1980. 229-242.
- Twain, Mark. *Pudd'nhead Wilson*. New York: Pocket Books, 2004.