

Huck's roles as defined by the river and the shore

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Whenever Huck Finn steers his raft from the free currents of the river to the brambles on the banks of the Mississippi he renews his interaction with the society of the American south. When Twain's narrative comes ashore with Huck, the narrative becomes centered on the roles Huck is expected to play, and the roles everyone around Huck is trying to play. Everyone seems to know what the roles are, but they are less sure if the people around them are filling the roles accurately. Speech becomes the primary means through which people investigate roles. The role-less river life becomes defined by silence in contrast to the constant questions on the shore. The roles played by the people Huck meets are centered around "the legend" that W. G. Cash speaks of: "the assumption that every planter was in the most rigid sense of the word a gentleman," and that any upstanding citizen was as well. The form of the gentleman was well defined, but no one's position as a gentleman was so defined. According to Cash, the people had an uncertainty that comes with making an assumption about one's own identity; the people of the south had "an uneasy sensation of inadequacy for their role." They needed to "drive home the perception of their rank and value" (69). Equally important was determining the rank of those around them, or the role they were trying to play, if it was not that of gentleman. Each time that Huck alights on shore there is almost immediately an interview of some sort, where his identity is mined. There is never a community in which he is allowed to stand as himself, quietly. At each town Huck is forced to verbally construct an identity for himself. Thus, the land is not defined only by speech, but by the interrogative pattern of speech; perhaps, as Cash says, "the Southern fondness for rhetoric" (51). Huck's interactions with adults are

always interrogatory ~~is~~ from Judith Loftus, the first woman he meets on his journey, to Sally Phelps, the last one. This quality of his interactions extends even to his relationship with other children. Huck tells us that the first moment Buck Grangerford gets Huck alone, he “ asked me what my name was,” and soon after “ asked me where Moses was when the candle went out” (162). While Buck may not be aware of his efforts, the riddle he asks allows him to place Huck in his understanding of the Christian chivalric code that Cash discusses. The first time Mary Jane Wilks speaks to Huck, she opens a long chain of questions with, “ Did you ever see the king?” (223). The constant interrogative dialogue of the shore is thrown into juxtaposition with Huck's life on the raft. Here there are no questions, and no sound. The days on the raft “ slid along so quiet and smooth and lovely” (177). Without dialogue, time on the raft has less form than time on the land, both for Huck and for Twain's narrative. Both Huck and Twain have the freedom to look around them. Whereas time on the land is filled with words, time on the raft is filled with sights. Huck goes into extended melodious descriptions beginning with lines like, “ the first thing to see, looking over the water, was a kind of dull line” (177). The visual world opens out from here. When roleplaying does invade the raft, in the form of the King and the Daupin, the interrogation of the land comes with it. After the faux-royalty's finish sharing their own stories, they immediately, “ asked us considerable many questions; wanted to know what we covered up the raft that way for, and laid by in the day-time instead of running ~~is~~ was Jim a runaway nigger?” (184). The King and Dauphin clearly have the shore disease of needing to place Huck and Jim in their rigid understanding of people. Because of the

form given to shore life by the dialogue, Huck's voice is frequently made peripheral during his forays off the raft. It is chained to explaining his identity in response to the questions of the townspeople, or describing in detail the behavior and anecdotes of these people. In the scenes where Sherburn delivers his diatribe to the town, Huck's voice is merely a conduit for Sherburn's voice for pages at a time, and we hear none of Huck's thoughts. Interestingly, it is only when Huck is allowed to be silent, when he reaches the raft, that his own voice is liberated. It is on the raft that he is allowed to look naturally at the world around him, rather than at the complicated systems of behavior being played out on the shore.