

Name: _____ Class: _____

Two Ways of Looking at A River

By Mark Twain
From "Life On The Mississippi" • 1883

Samuel Clemens (1835-1910), best known by his pen name Mark Twain, was an American author and humorist. Twain was raised in Missouri and worked for some years as a riverboat pilot on the Mississippi River. The following passage is taken from Life on the Mississippi (1883), a memoir of his days as a steamboat pilot before the American Civil War. As you read, take notes on Twain's use of imagery and how it changes throughout the passage. ;

[1] Now when I had mastered the language of this water and had come to know every trifling¹ feature that bordered the great river as familiarly as I knew the letters of the alphabet, I had made a valuable acquisition². But I had lost something, too. I had lost something which could never be restored to me while I lived. All the grace, the beauty, the poetry, had gone out the majestic river! I still kept in mind a certain wonderful sunset which I witnessed when steamboating was new to me. A broad expanse of the river was turned to blood; in the middle distance the red hue brightened into gold, through which a solitary log came floating, black and conspicuous; in one place a long, slanting mark lay sparkling upon the water; in another the surface was broken by boiling, tumbling rings that were as many-tinted as an opal; where the ruddy flush was faintest was a smooth spot that was covered with graceful circles and radiating lines, ever so delicately traced; the shore on our left was densely wooded, and the somber³ shadow that fell from this forest was broken in one place by a long, ruffled trail that shone like silver; and high above the forest wall a clean-stemmed dead tree waved a single leafy bough⁴ that glowed like a flame in the unobstructed splendor that was flowing from the sun. There were graceful curves, reflected images woody heights, soft distances, and over the whole scene, far and near, the dissolving lights drifted steadily, enriching it every passing moment with new marvels of coloring.



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1. **Trifling (adjective):** lacking in significance or value
2. **Acquisition (noun):** something gained or acquired
3. **Somber (adjective):** dark and gloomy; of a serious and/or sad cast
4. **Bough (noun):** a branch of a tree

I stood like one bewitched. I drank it in, in a speechless rapture. The world was new to me and I had never seen anything like this at home. But as I have said, a day came when I began to cease from noting the glories and the charms which the moon and the sun and the twilight wrought upon the river's face; another day came when I ceased altogether to note them. Then, if that sunset scene had been repeated, I should have looked upon it without rapture and should have commented upon it inwardly after this fashion: "This sun means that we are going to have wind tomorrow; that floating log means that the river is rising, small thanks to it; that slanting mark on the water refers to a bluff reef which is going to kill somebody's steamboat one of these nights, if it keeps on stretching out like that; those tumbling 'boils' show a dissolving bar and a changing channel there; the lines and circles in the slick water over yonder are a warning that that troublesome place is shoaling⁵ up dangerous; that silver streak in the shadow of the forest is the 'break' from a new snag and he has located himself in the very best place he could have found to fish for steamboats; that tall dead tree, with a single living branch; is not going to last long, and then how is a body ever going to get through this blind place at night without the friendly old landmark?"

No, the romance and beauty were all gone from the river. All the value any feature of it had for me now was the amount of usefulness it could furnish toward compassing the safe piloting of a steamboat. Since those days, I have pitied doctors from my heart. What does the lovely flush in a beauty's cheek mean to a doctor but a "break" that ripples above some deadly disease? Are not all her visible charms sown thick with what are to him the sign and symbols of hidden decay? Does he ever see her beauty at all, or doesn't he simply view her professionally and comment upon her unwholesome condition all to himself? And doesn't he sometimes wonder whether he had gained most or lost most by learning his trade?

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5. **Shoal (verb):** to become shallow

Text-Dependent Questions

Directions: For the following questions, choose the best answer or respond in complete sentences.

1. PART A: Which of the following best describes how years of piloting a steamboat has affected Twain? [RI.3]
- A. He has lost his youthful sense of adventure on the Mississippi.
 - B. He has lost his appreciation of the Mississippi River's beauty.
 - C. He has strengthened his ability to poetically depict the Mississippi.
 - D. He has memorized the Mississippi River like the back of his hand.

2. PART B: Cite one example of evidence from the text that supports your answer to Part A. [RI.1]

3. PART A: As used in paragraph 2, the word "rapture" most nearly means: [RI.4]
- A. Overwhelming awe and emotion
 - B. Curiosity and keen interest
 - C. Indifference or a lack of concern
 - D. Unspeakable horror

4. PART B: Which of the following phrases from the paragraph BEST supports the answer to Part A? [RI.1]
- A. "I stood like one bewitched. I drank it in..."
 - B. "never seen anything like this at home"
 - C. "began to cease from noting the glories and the charms"
 - D. "should have commented upon it inwardly"

5. Compare the tone of Twain's first description of the river in paragraph 1 to the description in paragraph 2, and explain how this shift contributes to the central ideas of the text. [RI.4] [RI.6]

6. Which of the following best summarizes how the narrator feels about doctors? [RI.3]
- A. He regrets not pursuing medicine himself, preferring to have lost the beauty of people over the river.
 - B. He admires them for looking past the natural beauty of the human body in order to perform their medical duties.
 - C. He pities doctors' loss of human beauty for the sake of their professions, just as Twain lost his appreciation of the river.
 - D. He pities doctors' sterile professions, void of the natural beauty that Twain experienced daily as a steamboat pilot.

