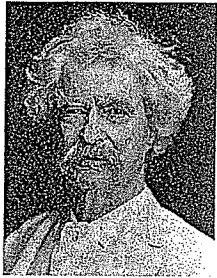


Two Ways of Seeing a River

Mark Twain



Mark Twain, the pen name of Samuel L. Clemens (1835–1910), was born in Florida, Missouri, and raised in Hannibal, Missouri. He created Tom Sawyer (1876), The Prince and the Pauper (1882), Huckleberry Finn (1884), and A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court (1889), among other classics. One of America's most popular writers, Twain is generally regarded as the most important practitioner of the realistic school of writing, a style that emphasizes observable details.

The following passage is taken from *Life on the Mississippi* (1883), Twain's study of the great river and his account of his early experiences learning to be a river steamboat pilot. As you read the passage, notice how Twain uses figurative language in describing two quite different ways of seeing the Mississippi River.

PREPARING TO READ

Our way of seeing an event or a place in our life often changes over time. Recall an important event or a place you visited in the past. Tell a story based on your memories. Has your view of this event or place changed over time? How?

Now when I had mastered the language of this water and had come to know every trifling feature that bordered the great river as familiarly as I knew the letters of the alphabet, I had made a valuable acquisition. 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 of 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 somber 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 bough 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.

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 shoaling up dangerously; 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 signs 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 has gained most or lost most by learning his trade?

THINKING CRITICALLY ABOUT THE TEXT

In the essay, Twain points to a change of attitude he underwent as a result of seeing the river from a new perspective, that of a steamboat pilot. Why and how do you think perspectives change? How would you characterize Twain's change of perspective?

QUESTIONS ON SUBJECT

1. What points of contrast does Twain refer to between his two ways of seeing the river?
2. What point does Twain make regarding the difference between appearance and reality, between romance and practicality? What role does knowledge play in Twain's inability to see the river as he once did?

- Now that he has learned the trade of steamboating, does Twain feel he has “gained most or lost most” (paragraph 3)? What has he gained, and what has he lost?

QUESTIONS ON STRATEGY

- What method of organization does Twain use in this selection? (Glossary: *Organization*) What alternative methods might he have used? What would have been gained or lost?
- Explain the analogy that Twain uses in paragraph 3. (Glossary: *Analogy*) What is his purpose in using this analogy?
- Reread Twain’s conclusion. (Glossary: *Beginnings/Endings*) How effective do you find it? Why does he switch the focus to a doctor’s perspective?
- In reflecting on his two ways of seeing the river, Twain relies on a combination of subjective and objective descriptions. (Glossary: *Description*) Identify places in the essay where Twain uses description. How does the inclusion of these descriptions enhance his overall comparison and contrast?

QUESTIONS ON DICTION AND VOCABULARY

- Twain uses a number of similes and metaphors in this selection. (Glossary: *Figures of Speech*) Identify three of each, and explain what is being compared in each case. What do these figures add to Twain’s writing?
- What effect do the italicized words have in each of the following quotations from this selection? What do these words contribute to Twain’s description?
 - “ever so *delicately* traced” (paragraph 1)
 - “shadow that *fell* from this forest” (1)
 - “*wrought* upon the river’s face” (2)
 - “show a *dissolving* bar” (2)
 - “get through this *blind* place at night” (2)
 - “lovely *flush* in a beauty’s cheek” (3)
- Refer to your desk dictionary to determine the meanings of the following words as Twain uses them in this selection: *acquisition* (paragraph 1), *hue* (1), *opal* (1), *rapture* (2), *romance* (3).

CLASSROOM ACTIVITY USING COMPARISON AND CONTRAST

Imagine that you have been asked to compare two places that have the same purpose. For example, you could compare your college cafeteria with your dining room at home, the classroom you are in now with another one on campus, or your dormitory lounge with your living room or den at home. What do you like about each place? What do you dislike? Compile a list of distinctive features for each place. Which features do the two places have in common? Which of these shared features offer solid opportunities for comparison? What did you learn about these two places from this exercise? Discuss your conclusions with your classmates.

WRITING SUGGESTIONS

- Having read Twain’s essay, you now understand how it is possible for a person to have two different views of a single scene, event, or issue. How might experience or perspective change the way we view something? Write an essay modeled on Twain’s in which you offer two different views of a scene, an event, or an issue. You might consider a reporter’s view compared with a victim’s view, a teacher’s view compared with a student’s view, or a customer’s view compared with a salesclerk’s view.
- Write an essay in which you use comparison and contrast to help you describe one of the following places or another place of your choice. (Glossary: *Description*)
 - a place of worship
 - a fast-food restaurant
 - your dormitory
 - your college library
 - your favorite place
 - your college student center
 - your hometown

Of Weirdos and Eccentrics

Pico Iyer



*Pico Iyer is one of the most popular travel writers at work today. "Travel," writes Iyer, "is how we put a face on the Other and step a little beyond our secondhand images of the alien." Born in 1957 to Indian parents, Iyer graduated from Eton, England's most famous preparatory school, and took both his bachelor's and master's degrees from Oxford University in 1978 and 1982, respectively. He also has a master's degree from Harvard University. What is particularly noteworthy about Iyer's travel writing is that he crosses ethnic and cultural barriers with an easy and natural style, taking note of both the borders and the essences of the countries he visits. Critics hailed his first travel book, *Video Night in Kathmandu and Other Reports from the Not-So-Distant Far East* (1989), for its humor, perception, and personal reflection. This success was followed by *The Lady and the Monk: Four Seasons in Kyoto* (1991); *Falling Off the Map: Some Lonely Places of the World* (1993); *Tropical Classical: Essays from Several Directions* (1998); *The Global Soul: Jet Lag, Shopping Malls, and the Search for Home* (2000); and *Sun After Dark: Flights into the Foreign* (2004). Iyer is also the author of two novels — *Cuba and the Night* (1995) and *Abandon: A Romance* (2003).*

*While many people are quick to lump eccentrics and weirdos into the category of "strange" people, Pico Iyer does not agree. In the following essay, which first appeared in *Time* on January 18, 1988, Iyer explores the essential differences between eccentrics and weirdos and what these characters can tell us about society at large.*

PREPARING TO READ

Identify someone you know or have read about whom you would label an "eccentric" and another whom you would label a "weirdo." What, for you, are the essential similarities or differences between these two people? Explain.

Charles Waterton was just another typical eccentric. In his 80s the eminent country squire was to be seen clambering around the upper branches of an oak tree with what was aptly described as the agility of an "adolescent gorilla." The beloved 27th lord of Walton Hall also devoted his distinguished old age to scratching the back part of his head with his right big toe. Such displays of animal high spirits were not, however, confined to the gentleman's later years. When young, Waterton made four separate trips to South America, where he sought the wourali poison (a cure, he was convinced, for hydrophobia), and once spent months on end with one foot dangling from his hammock in the quixotic hope of having his toe sucked by a vampire bat.

James Warren Jones, by contrast, was something of a weirdo. As a boy in the casket-making town of Lynn, Ind., he used to conduct elaborate funeral services for dead pets. Later, as a struggling preacher, he went from door to door, in bow tie and tweed jacket, selling imported monkeys. After briefly fleeing to South America (a shelter, he believed, from an imminent nuclear holocaust), the man who regarded himself as a reincarnation of Lenin settled in Northern California and opened some convalescent homes. Then, one humid day in the jungles of Guyana, he ordered his followers to drink a Kool-Aid-like punch soured with cyanide. By the time the world arrived at Jonestown, 911 people were dead.

The difference between the eccentric and the weirdo is, in its way, the difference between a man with a teddy bear in his hand and a man with a gun. We are also, of course, besieged by other kinds of deviants—crackpots, oddballs, fanatics, quacks and cranks. But the weirdo and the eccentric define between them that invisible line at which strangeness acquires an edge and oddness becomes menace.

The difference between the two starts with the words themselves: eccentric, after all, carries a distinguished Latin pedigree that refers, quite reasonably, to anything that departs from the center; weird, by comparison, has its mongrel origins in the Old English *wyrd*, meaning fate or destiny; and the larger, darker forces conjured up by the term — Macbeth's weird sisters and the like—are given an extra twist with the slangy, bastard suffix -o. Beneath the linguistic roots, however, we feel the difference on our pulses. The eccentric we generally regard as something of a donny, dotty, harmless type, like the British peer who threw over his Cambridge fellowship in order to live in a bath. The weirdo is an altogether more shadowy figure—Charles Manson acting out his messianic visions. The eccentric is a distinctive presence; the weirdo something of an absence, who casts no reflection in society's mirror. The eccentric raises a smile; the weirdo leaves a chill.

All too often, though, the two terms are not so easily distinguished. Many a criminal trial, after all, revolves around precisely that gray area where the two begin to blur. Was Bernhard Goetz just a volatile Everyman, ourselves pushed to the limit, and then beyond? Or was he in fact an aberration? Often, besides, eccentrics may simply be weirdos in possession of a VIP pass, people rich enough or powerful enough to live above convention, amoral as Greek gods. Elvis Presley could afford to pump bullets into silhouettes of humans and never count the cost. Lesser mortals, however, must find another kind of victim.

To some extent too, we tend to think of eccentricity as the prerogative, even the hallmark, of genius. And genius is its own vindication. Who cared that Glenn Gould sang along with the piano while playing Bach, so long as he played so beautifully? Even the Herculean debauches of Babe Ruth did not undermine so much as confirm his status as a legend.

QUESTIONS ON SUBJECT

1. What, for Iyer, is the essential difference between an eccentric and a weirdo?
2. Out of the whole cast of “deviants — crackpots, oddballs, fanatics, quacks and cranks” (paragraph 3), why does Iyer say he chose to explain the differences between eccentrics and weirdos? Do you agree with his assessment of the important differences between these two personality types? Why, or why not?
3. Iyer believes that the terms *eccentric* and *weirdo* can be difficult to distinguish at times, that there is a “gray area where the two begin to blur” (paragraph 5). What are some of the problems that come up when we try to categorize “people rich enough or powerful enough to live above convention” or “geniuses”?
4. How does Iyer resolve the “distortions” of wealth, power, and genius? Explain.

QUESTIONS ON STRATEGY

1. What is Iyer’s thesis, and where does he present it? (Glossary: *Thesis*)
2. Iyer begins his essay with two paragraphs about Charles Waterton and James Warren Jones. How do these two paragraphs serve to both introduce the essay and show the essential differences between eccentrics and weirdos? (Glossary: *Beginnings/Endings: Examples*)
3. Iyer uses a point-by-point organization for his essay. What would have been gained or lost had he chosen to use a block-by-block organization? Explain.
4. In addition to the examples in the opening two paragraphs, Iyer uses other examples to illustrate the critical differences between eccentrics and weirdos. Identify five or six of these examples, and explain how they work in the context of the essay. (Glossary: *Examples*) Which examples worked best for you? Explain why.
5. How does Iyer use the strategy of definition in support of his comparison and contrast? (Glossary: *Definition*) Explain.

QUESTIONS ON DICTION AND VOCABULARY

1. In discussing the etymology or history of the words *eccentric* and *weird* in paragraph 4, Iyer contrasts the former’s “distinguished Latin pedigree” with the latter’s “mongrel origins.” What point is Iyer making here? What does he mean when he says “the larger, darker forces conjured up by the term [weird] . . . are given an extra twist with the slangy, bastard suffix -o”? Make a list of at least six to ten words Iyer uses to describe an eccentric and another list of words for a weirdo. In what ways do the connotations of these words reinforce Iyer’s central distinction between these two personality types? (Glossary: *Connotation/Denotation*)
3. Refer to your last discussion of the distinction between these two per-

Indeed, the unorthodox inflections of the exceptional can lead to

and psychopaths are out of the ordinary, then geniuses are psychopaths and vice versa, or so at least runs the reasoning of many dramatists who set their plays in loony bins. If the successful are often strange, then being strange is a way of becoming successful, or so believe all those would-be artists who work on eccentric poses. And if celebrity is its own defense, then many a demagogue or criminal assures himself that he will ultimately be redeemed by the celebrity he covets.

All these distortions, however, ignore the most fundamental distinction of all: the eccentric is strange because he cares too little about society, the weirdo because he cares too much. The eccentric generally wants nothing more than his own attic-like space in which he can live by his own peculiar lights. The weirdo, however, resents his outcast status and constantly seeks to get back into society, or at least get back at it. His is the rage not of the bachelor but the divorce.

Thus the eccentric hardly cares if he is seen to be strange; that in a sense is what makes him strange. The weirdo, however, wants desperately to be taken as normal and struggles to keep his strangeness to himself. “He was always such a nice man,” the neighbors ritually tell reporters after a sniper’s rampage. “He always seemed so normal.”

And because the two mark such different tangents to the norm, their incidence can, in its way, be an index of a society’s health. The height of British eccentricity, for example, coincided with the height of British power, if only, perhaps, because Britain in its imperial heyday presented so strong a center from which to depart. Nowadays, with the empire gone and the center vanishing, Britain is more often associated with the maladjusted weirdo—the orange-haired misfit or the soccer hooligan.

At the other extreme, the relentless and ritualized normalcy of a society like Japan’s—there are only four psychiatrists in all of Tokyo—can, to Western eyes, itself seem almost abnormal. Too few eccentrics can be as dangerous as too many weirdos. For in the end, eccentricity is a mark of confidence, accommodated best by a confident society, whereas weirdness inspires fear because it is a symptom of fear and uncertainty and rage. A society needs the eccentric as much as it needs a decorated frame for the portrait it fashions of itself; it needs the weirdo as much as it needs a hole punched through the middle of the canvas.

THINKING CRITICALLY ABOUT THE TEXT

At the end of his essay, Iyer claims that the incidence of eccentrics and weirdos “can, in its way, be an index of a society’s health.” What do you think he means by this statement? Has he convinced you that “too few eccentrics