

Two Ways of Seeing a River

Mark Twain

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. The text recounts a young Twain learning to pilot a steamboat on the Mississippi River. It delves into the growth and change in perspective with regard to the river he underwent as a steamboat pilot. Read this passage as **an example of an attention situation** (interpreting a river to drive a boat) **and for the two types of attention** Twain conveys before and after learning to drive boats (what is the novice's attention? What is the expert pilot's attention?). David has marked the text for you and provided key takeaways afterward to help teach the relevancies to our course.

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 keep 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 sombre **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, in this fashion: "This **sun** means that we are going to have wind to-morrow; 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 the 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?" (Twain 1883).

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Lessons for Students

1. **The attention situation:** "reading" the river to pilot steamboat optimally
2. **The situation's "language":** Twain creates a language for his situation, the "language of the river": how to attend to the **sun, floating log, slanting mark, tumbling 'boils', lines and circles, silver streak** in the **shadow, dead tree, etc.**
3. **Conventions about attention** generally
 - a. Novelty's fresh eyes vs. trained expertise
 - b. Looking **at** X vs. looking **through** X
4. Language is one of the best windows into attending to attention, seeing as others see and *getting* others to see as you see. This is a secret skill of writing, thinking, education, and many practical skills in life.

Further considerations

How would you have conveyed your change in attention from learning to boat?

What trainings have you undergone to change your attention? How would you best express what your attention was like before and after your training? Can you make others see it, as Twain has let us see his two attentions

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. How has your view of this event or place changed over time? Write it out.

Expertises from students

School cheer - imperfection
Casting a fishing line -
Dancing - work behind
Running - pacing based on the body
Sewing - how I'd make it thru sewing
Track - running strategies
Taking care of kids - prevent accidents
Rubix cubes - seeing the stages of solution
Piano - perfect pitch - hearing and playing back
Taught kids piano - kid's experience
Shoulder PT - guess the injury in others
Customer service - what people need
Fishing - water dynamics
Fundraisers - monetizing what ppl like
Volleyball - predictive angles
Soccer - boring until knowing the game
Computers - mess stuff up