Life on the Mississippi Study Guide

Life on the Mississippi by Mark Twain

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Plot Summary

In Mark Twain's Life on the Mississippi, the author describes many different aspects of the river and its life in the nineteenth century. Overall, Twain writes about the Mississippi as a living, breathing being - it is by far the most important character in the story, and functions as a character throughout the narrative.

Half history and half memoir, Life on the Mississippi begins with an historical examination of the river. Twain writes of its early discovery by settlers and how, for many years, the river was ignored as anything but a simple natural fact: it was hardly used, and very few pilgrims came to live along it. However, it became an important feature as America expanded westward, and was of vital importance in trade and travel by the time Twain was born.

After covering the history of the river, Twain focuses on his personal history with the river. Growing up in Missouri, the river played an important role in his childhood, as he dreamed of becoming a steamboat pilot. Eventually, he achieved this role: a large part of the book deals with his training in this area, under the tutelage of an experienced pilot named Bixby. Twain's stories vary throughout the narrative: at certain points, he is humorous, particularly when he's speaking about his own failings in the early days; at others, he is technical, describing the various features of the river and the difficulties they presented for pilots in the early days; at other points, he describes tragic occurrences, such as the death of his brother.

Twain then marks the passage of twenty-one years when he was not on the river with a single page, then transitioning back to the river itself. However, this time he writes of a recent journey he took down the river, incognito, more than two decades after he worked as a pilot himself on the Mississippi. Here, he searches for different towns he knew, speaks to pilots old and new, and looks at the changes that have taken place on the river since he last saw it.

Throughout the book, Twain relies not only on his own recollections and observations, but also on a variety of sources: from his own early drafts of "The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn" to the memoirs of previous travelers, such as an English writer named Mrs. Trollope. By doing so, he creates a textured narrative about an important, changing geographical feature that has played a complex role in American history.

Chapters 1-15

Chapters 1-15 Summary and Analysis

Twain begins the book in Chapter I, "The River and its History," by describing the river, which he thinks is the longest and crookedest in the world: 1,300 miles altogether which would be 675 if drawn in a straight line. He then moves from the physical to the historical, writing about DeSoto, who in 1542 was the first settler to see the river. He puts this in context with artistic and social events of this era. He notes that it would be 130 years before another white man saw the river.

In Chapter II, "The River and its Explorers," Twain discusses the many different explorers who saw the river, from Marquette to DeSoto to La Salle. Joliet and Marquette came from Wisconsin to the Mississippi junction. There, they were told by the Indians that the river was dangerous. Going down to the mouth of Arkansas, they believed that the river emptied into the Gulf of Mexico and turned back. La Salle later proved this, ending down by Napoleon, AK, where Joliet and Marquette had also ended their journey.

In Chapter III, "Frescoes from the Past," Twain brings in observations and illustrations of life on the river, using excerpts from his novel Huckleberry Finn to illustrate how men spoke on the river. The section he chooses to include is one in which Huck eavesdrops on a group of men to try to find out if they've passed Cairo, which is where he wants to take Jim to set him free. Here, he listens to ghost stories and songs. Eventually discovered by the men, they treat him roughly but good-naturedly, and send him on his way.

Chapter IV, "The Boy's Ambition," describes the importance of steamboats in Twain's early life. He paints a picture of his town in the early days, writing about a boy he knew who eventually went to work on a steamboat, and how jealous he was. Eventually, he writes, he ran away himself to work on one of these vessels.

In Chapter V, "I Want to Be a Cub-Pilot," Twain writes about his early attempts to work on a steamboat. Initially, he thinks he will continue an exploration of the Amazon he has read about, and so tries to travel from Cincinnati to New Orleans. While on this boat, he shows off by trying to help the "mate"; however, he humiliates himself. In the end, Twain became friends with the boat's night watchman. Nevertheless, the watchman's stories were mostly invented, as Twain later discovered, but he did encourage Twain's taste for life on the river.

Chapter VI, "A Cub-Pilot's Experience," describes Twain's training with Bixby, an established pilot. In exchange for training him, he promises Bixby $500 out of his first wages. For this amount, Bixby will show him half of the river, from Saint Louis to New Orleans. However, as he describes everything to Twain, Twain writes none of it down and later is completely lost when they are out there at night. He is amazed at everything

he has to learn; particularly how complicated the river is and how he has to learn it both ways, going upriver and going downriver. Pilots in those days worked in four hour shifts, then sleeping for four hours before returning to the steering wheel.

Twain devotes Chapter VII, "A Daring Deed," to the description of Bixby steering the boat through a particularly difficult pass before dark. He has to steer the boat almost over part of an island, which nobody thinks he can do; however, he successfully does it.

In Chapter VIII, "Perplexing Lessons," Twain describes how difficult it became to navigate the river after dark, as the river is already a shifting being with few stable points. In this chapter, he tells the story of a pilot who came to take over the shift from Bixby, Mr. W. Because he is nervous about going out at night, Twain stays with the intention of describing the route to Mr. W. However, he never works up the nerve; later, Bixby says that it's a good thing he didn't, for W would have killed him.

Chapter IX, "Continued Perplexities," is the story of Twain steering the boat "solo" and his difficulties. Twain writes of how pilots had to read the water to know what was in it and how deep it was; he tells the story of being fooled by what he thinks was a "bluff reef," or reef hidden under water, which turned out to be wind. He ends the chapter by writing that it is a shame that the river would lose its romance for men who became pilots, just as the human body loses its mystery for doctors.

Chapter X, "Completing My Education," begins with Twain realizing that not only does he have to learn all the physical markers of the river, but he also has to learn how high it is at any given point in time, making the amount of things he has to know about the river twice as much. He writes about how difficult it was at night, when boats with no lanterns (which were required by law) would bump into the larger steamboats, and later sue them for damages.

In Chapter XI, "The River Rises," Twain writes of navigating difficult pieces of the river. He describes the different people, farmers and poorer people, whom they saw along the way. Twain ends the chapter by describing an amazing piece of piloting that nobody thought was possible - and, in the end, the pilot turned out to have fallen asleep!

Chapter XII, "Sounding," is the description of another difficult pilot's task, which is figuring out how shallow the river is by "sounding." This involves men going out to a buoy to mark how shallow the water is; Twain describes one of his rivals for a girl's affection, Tom, almost drowning going out one night to what turns out not to be a buoy. He almost died and became a hero to the girl.

"A Pilot's Needs," Chapter XIII, begins with Twain describing the qualities a good pilot needs. Chief among these is memory, and he gives the example of Mr. Bixby, who could remember just about anything. He adds to these qualities judgment and courage. In his later days of training, Twain remarks that he had gotten pretty full of himself, and all of his colleagues took him down a notch by making him question his own judgment about the depth of the river at a certain point. By doing so, they shook his faith in himself and made him realize that he wasn't perfect.

In Chapter XIV, "Rank and Dignity of Piloting," Twain notes that in his opinion, pilots are the freest men in America; he compares their profession to a variety of others, and piloting always comes out ahead. He tells the story of a pilot named Stephen, who was only offered $125 when $250 was the normal wages; by doing what he considered to be a "$125 job," Stephen was able to boost his wages to $250."

Chapter XV, "The Pilot's Monopoly," contains the description of the pilots' association. At first, the pilots' association was ignored by most of the community; however, as they grew, and refused to work with anybody not included, their control grew. Each man had a key representing his membership, and would only give reports on the status of the river to anybody wearing this key. They slowly raised dues very high, to $50 plus ten percent of the earnings since the founding of the association. Ironically, Twain notes, the captains and owners helped complete the monopoly of the pilots' association when they formed their own associations.

Chapters 16-30

Chapters 16-30 Summary and Analysis

In Chapter XVI, "Racing Days," Twain describes the excitement of boarding a steamboat when there was a race. He tells anecdotes about these times and notes that no passengers would go on the boats, since they needed to be as light as possible. However, he questions the claim that boats have gotten faster, proving that they have not with various calculations and charts.

Chapter XVII, "Cut-offs and Stephen," contains notes on various changes in the river, particularly difficulties caused by shortening it through cut-offs. Here, the river would change as men dug ditches and made it straighter, shortening the way. Because of this, there were stories, for example, of ghost boats that got stuck in the closed-off elbows forever. He ends the chapter with the story of Stephen, a man who borrowed money from everyone including a novice called Yates; after apologizing every time they met, he promised to pay back all of his debts - alphabetically.

In Chapter XVIII, "I Take a Few Extra Lessons," Twain describes his time training with a man named Brown, who was extremely hard on him. He found fault no matter what Twain did, which was very different than Bixby (who had loaned Twain out to this boat). Even the other pilot, who was much nicer to his trainee, or "cub," was rough on Twain because he saw how hard Brown was on him.

"Brown and I Exchange Compliments," Chapter XIX, is the story of how Brown does not hear Twain's brother Harry when he tells him that they have to make a stop at a particular point. When Brown gets in trouble for not going to this point, he goes after Harry with a ten-pound lump of coal but Twain attacks him first. Though he gets scolded by the Captain, the Captain admits that he's secretly glad Twain did it. In the end, Brown refuses to sail with Twain anymore, and the Captain chooses Twain over Brown.

Chapter XX, "A Catastrophe," is the story of the Pennsylvania, Brown's ship, blowing up. After all of the previous chapter, Twain was in fact sent to another ship. However, his former ship was reported to have exploded. Twain read the paper and saw that his brother was fine but later on saw that he was reported hurt beyond saving Twain went to Memphis, where he sat with his brother for six days before he passed away.

In the brief page of Chapter XXI, Twain describes how the war changed his course in life and how he went from being a pilot to being a reporter and traveling the world.

Twenty-one years later, in Chapter XXII, "I Return to My Muttons," Twain decides to return to the river incognito; however, he is often recognized. He describes the changing traits and speech in people he encounters as he goes south, and particularly remarks on the changes to Saint Louis. He remarks that he has seen the entire rise and fall of the steamboat industry, which has now been replaced for the most part by trains.

In Chapter XXIII, "Traveling Incognito," Twain writes about the towns between Saint Louis and New Orleans, tracing some of them back to French settlements. He wants to see one in particular but finds that a town has been built up in front of it, cutting off its access to the river.

Chapter XXIV, "My Incognito is Exploded," describes Twain's encounter with a pilot who tells him fantastic stories about alligators on the river before Twain realizes that they know each other and the pilot was just trying to figure out why Twain was playing such a silly game by traveling incognito.

In Chapter XXV, "From Cairo to Hickman," Twain describes the many changes he sees down river, in different islands. Some are gone, some have developed. He is happy to see that Cairo is still there.

Chapter XXVI, "Under Fire," tells the story of a pilot who took men to a Civil War battle and watched it from the pilot-cabin; the story of a feud between two families living in a town called "Compromise" nearby, and finally describes the area down by New Madrid, which Twain claims to have been important to the Union during the war.

"Some Imported Articles," Chapter XXVII, is comprised of tourist accounts of the Mississippi River; Twain remarks that after the war of 1812, many tourists came to the area, all finding it savage, lonely, and desolate.

Chapter XXVIII, "Uncle Mumford Unloads," describes the reason Twain finds that the romance of the river has been ruined since he was last there. In the first place, there are now lights at night to guide the way; there are government surveying boats to measure places where the river is too shallow; and finally, the pilot has to stay awake for the whole trip. Still, Twain calculates that these measures save around $162,000 on a single load of cargo and are to a certain extent worth it.

In Chapter XXIX, "A Few Specimen Bricks," Twain again borrows from first-hand accounts to tell stories of Murel's gang, a local group who stole slaves; the Yellow Death in Memphis; and finally, giving Mrs. Trollope's account of the early days in Memphis

In Chapter XXX, "Sketches by the Way," Twain tells several anecdotes from his trip, including the story of one Wisconsinite who tries to educate Twain about the river and who soon learns his lesson. Twain describes the sunrise on the river, as well as one horrific story about a man who tried to save his wife during a steamboat accident but ended up killing her. At this point, they are near Helena and Arkansas City, which he describes.

Chapters 31-45

Chapters 31-45 Summary and Analysis

Chapter XXXI, "A Thumb-print and What Came of It," is the story of what Twain has to do in Napoleon and why he wants to stay overnight and not de-boat at noon. He once had a friend in Munich whose job it was to watch over the dead bodies right after death to make sure they didn't come back to life. This man had seen his wife and child murdered in front of him and sworn revenge. He later found the two soldiers who had done it, posing as a fortune teller to become their friends. The man, Ritter, then told them he knew what they had done; one of them said that he had just sat by the victims and tried to comfort them, which Ritter knew to be true. That night, Ritter killed the other and fled the camp. However, years later, in Munich, he saw the body of the killer among the corpses and realized that he had killed the wrong one. He watched the right one, who still happened to be alive, suffer and eventually die in front of him. After Ritter himself died, he told Twain there was ten thousand dollars that he wanted sent to the first man's child, elsewhere in Germany, and had given him instructions as to where it was - in Napoleon.

In Chapter XXXII, Twain and his companions, after he has recounted the previous story, decide to find the money and talk about sending less and less of it to the son, until he is getting hardly anything at all. Finally, Twain tells the men on the boat he wants to disembark at Napoleon, which they think is hilarious - finally, they tell him why. Napoleon burned to the ground, leaving nothing but a chimney. The livery stable where the money was kept has been gone for years.

Chapter XXXIII, "Refreshments and Ethics," tells of the Calhoun Line, which has decided to sell cotton in a way that benefits laborers and cotton owners alike. Twain then gets into a discussion of steamboat bars, which used to be enormously profitable but now aren't worth much.

In Chapter XXXIV, "Tough Years," Twain writes of Vicksburg, and the holdouts there during the Civil War, who holed up in Caves. He gives some first hand accounts of how terrible it was waiting during the fighting. Finally, around 17,000 people died there because of the war.

"The Professor's Yarn," Chapter XXXVI, is the anecdote a professor told Twain of a gambler he'd met on a boat who wanted to do business with him but ended up making it big when the men he was gambling against accidentally dealt a fixed hand wrong - he was supposed to get four queens and lose but instead got four aces and won.

The next chapter, Chapter XXXVII, is one page long and simply reports that The Gold Dust, the boat of the previous chapter, exploded.

In Chapter XXXVIII, "The House Beautiful," Twain compares steamboats to the average fancy house in many southern areas, finding it vastly superior to even the loveliest houses from twenty years ago.

Chapter XXXIX, "Manufactures and Miscreants," describes Natchez, a manufacturing city. Here, they make ice, as well as olive oil from cotton seeds.

In Chapter XL, "Castles and Culture," Twain writes about Baton Rouge and particularly the architecture of educational instructions nearby. Here, he finds complex architecture in female colleges and very Southern styles. He gives more accounts by Mrs. Trollope to back up his ideas here.

"The Metropolis of the South," Chapter XLI, contains Twain's return to New Orleans, which he finds much the same as when he left it except more hygienic and with fewer fires in its recent history.

In Chapter XLII, "Hygiene and Sentiment," Twain writes about the graveyards in New Orleans, which he finds beautiful but dangerous in the chemicals the dead bodies emit. In this way, he writes, the relics of Saint Anne may have saved some people but it was just due diligence for everyone they had killed. He writes that he wishes to be cremated.

Chapter XLIII, "The Art of Inhumation," describes Twain's encounter with an old friend who has become an undertaker. The man talks about how happy he is, since the money is excellent and nobody ever skimps on funerals - in fact, the opposite. However, he does not like epidemics, because they are not as profitable as regular funerals.

In Chapter XLIV, "City Sights," Twain writes about the South and particularly Southern speech. He missed it, and makes note of particular aspects of the speech and the grammar he finds notable (if not always charming), including the substitution of Ys for Rs and using "went" instead of "gone."

"Southern Sports," Chapter XLV, describes three Southern occupations. The first is war talk, which Twain finds more appropriate in the South than in the North, because more people were involved. The second is his first cock fight, which he finds disgusting and does not stay to see the end. Finally, he goes to the mule races, which he adores.

Chapters 45-60

Chapters 45-60 Summary and Analysis

In Chapter XLVI, "Enchantments and Enchanters," Twain writes about Mardi Gras, which he is sad to have missed in the South. In addition, he writes about the spell Sir Walter Scott has cast on the South and how they admire his work, romanticizing the Middle Ages.

Chapter XLVII, "Uncle Remus and Mr. Cable," discusses Twain's acquaintance with a writer named Uncle Remus, who is very shy and turned out to be white and red-haired, to everyone's surprise. Twain also writes about a strange name he and a collaborator used for a book, which nevertheless later had to be changed after the owner brought a libel suit against the writers.

In Chapter XLVIII, "Sugar and Postage," Twain sees Bixby on the street and is delighted to find him exactly the same. During the rest of the chapter, he describes a man who supposedly sent on correspondence from the spirit world, which Twain very much doubted.

Chapter XLIX, "Episodes in Pilot Life," describes what happened to many of the pilots Twain had known as a young man. Many of them had become farmers; Bixby had been blown up but was all right; many had become heroes, including a man named Ritchie, who was disabled. Twain ends the chapter with a story of a man who married a girl because they thought they would inherit some money, only to find out they were wrong.

In Chapter L, "The 'Original Jacobs'," Twain tells the story of how he took his pen name. He'd once known a man named Captain Sellers, an ancient steamboat pilot who wrote silly articles under the name Mark Twain. Twain had mocked him in the first article he'd written, using the same name; Sellers detested him after that for a long time. Twain kept the name and Sellers never wrote again.

Chapter LI, "Reminiscences," tells of Twain going to Saint Louis under the cover of many thunderstorms, traveling the Mississippi with Bixby again. He later runs into an acquaintance of his on the street, acting in Julius Caesar. Twain goes to see the play but does not see his friend, who later tells him he was playing a Roman soldier, with no lines.

"A Burning Band," Chapter LII, is the story of a man who received a letter from a former prison roommate, who describes his new life in God with the help of a man named Mr. Brown and thanks his acquaintance, Williams, for helping him. Twain includes the letter and writes how moved he was - and how shocked to later discover it was a fake. Now in Saint Louis, Twain is disappointed that he cannot go see Mr. Brown himself.

In Chapter LIII, "My Boyhood's Home," Twain returns to Hannibal, Missouri. Here, he runs into an older man on the street and asks him about old acquaintances - including himself, though he hears that he was always considered a fool.

In Chapter LIV, "Past and Present," Twain considers two of his childhood acquaintances who died as children as he goes by Sunday School.

Chapter LV, "A Vendetta and Other Things," tells the story of a carpenter Twain had known as a child, who told him about all the men he had supposedly murdered all around the world, all named Lynch. Terrified, Twain warned the only Lynch in town, who told off the carpenter for telling such lies.

"A Question of Law," Chapter LVI, tells of a bum to whom Twain had given matches as a child, to light his pipe. However, the man set himself on fire in his sleep, and Twain was sure he had murdered him. He was terrified that he had confessed to his brother in his sleep; however, his brother, though he had heard something, was convinced that Twain said that a boy named Ben had done it instead

In Chapter LVII, "An Archangel," Twain remarks on the changes in many of the cities they encounter on the way since the last time he saw them.

Chapter LVIII, "On the Upper River," describes the Upper Mississippi, particularly in Minnesota, while Twain remarks on the incredible growth of towns and cities along the way.

In Chapter LIX, "Legends and Scenery," Twain writes about the many Indian stories he heard along the way, and gives an example.

Finally, in Chapter LX, "Speculations and Conclusions," Twain ends his trip in Saint Paul and Minneapolis, which impress him with their organization. He then returns to New York, via Chicago.

Characters

Mark Twain

Mark Twain, the narrator of Life on the Mississippi is the main character and, indeed, the character who ties the narrative together. Growing up as a young boy in Hannibal, Missouri, located on the Mississippi River, Twain watched steamboats go by with envy and desire to become one of the men who worked on them. As he got older, he eventually got the idea to go explore the Amazon on a boat. However, it was too early for that; so he took a job training to become a pilot on a steamship, under an experienced man named Bixby. Twain writes the narrative from an older perspective, poking fun at his younger self, whom he describes as inexperienced, naive, and slightly puffed-up about what he already knew about the river. Later, Twain returns to the river twenty-one years after his first training, trying to be incognito. However, he again makes fun of himself, for he is not successful at hiding his true identity as he sees many men he used to know. When he is successful at hiding his identity, for example in Hannibal, he finds out that people considered him a fool in his youth. Overall, Twain is a detail-oriented and technical steamboat operator, but he has a sense of humor and a sensitivity that make his character - and his story - appealing to the general public, who may know little or nothing about the profession.

Bixby

The pilot with whom Twain trains, Bixby is a tough and hardened operator; however, he is intelligent and very sharp, and knows exactly what Twain must learn in order to succeed. He makes fun of Twain and takes him down a few notches every now and then. This is not out of malice, though, but rather a knowledge that a pilot needs to have a certain temperament as well as specific knowledge of the river. Twain runs into Bixby years later and is delighted to see the man, who has an excellent memory for all things and tells long, winding stories about people he used to know.

Harry

Harry is Twain's brother, who appears in several different chapters. Most importantly, Twain tells the story of how he died in a steamboat accident. Harry also appears in the chapter of Twain's childhood where Twain is afraid that he killed the bum by giving him the match.

Mr. W

The guest pilot who Twain almost offends when he thinks of correcting him is called Mr w.

Tom

Tom is another cub trainee who Twain competes with for a girl's affections.

Brown

Brown is a harsh pilot who Twain trains with after working with Mr. Bixby

Stephen

A pilot, Stephen borrows significant amounts of money from those around him.

Karl Ritter

The man who sees his wife and child murdered in front of him and swears to get revenge is Karl Ritter.

Kruger

The German soldier who murdered Ritter's wife and child is named Kruger.

Adler

Another of the German soldiers who was present when Ritter's wife and child were murdered is Adler.

Objects/Places

Mississippi

The largest river in the United States and the site of Twain's stories is the Mississippi.

Paul Jones

One of the first steamboats on which Twain worked was named the Paul Jones.

Hat Island

Hat Island is an important island in the Mississippi; Bixby must get the boat past it at one point and nearly goes over it.

Pilot

The pilot chooses the boat's direction.

Steersman

A worker of lesser rank than the pilot on board a steamboat is the steersman.

Cub

A trainee on the steamboat is a cub.

Captain

The head of the steamboat's crew is the captain.

Steamboat

A steamboat is a large boat, usually carrying passengers, powered by steam. They were common on the Mississippi during the nineteenth century.

Ditch

An area where men filled in the river with land to cut off large detours that made the journey down or up the Mississippi longer was referred to a ditch.

Murel's Gang

Murel's Gang is a group of men who stole slaves, telling them they would actually be set free.

Themes

The Growth of America

One of the most prevalent themes in Life on the Mississippi is the growth of America as a country, as well as the development of national and regional characteristics. Through the rise and fall of the steamship industry, Twain traces the development of a certain area of the United States. Thus, he begins his story by telling of the discovery of the Mississippi and of its early uses before giving the narrative its more personal tone. Here, we begin by seeing the Mississippi as an undiscovered resource, to be followed by a discussion of its uses for the growth of industry, as well as its mythical character in Twain's eyes. Not only does Twain discuss the steamboat as a part of his maturing, but he also shows how it allowed America to grow and develop, through trade and even during the Civil War. The two main parts of Twain's memoirs demonstrate this, as well: the lapse of twenty years in which Twain left the river and explored the rest of the world were a crucial twenty years in the development of many American cities, and here, Twain shows the reader how certain cities grew while others shrunk or even disappeared in the time since he'd last traveled. However, for the most part, the country has grown, including in the north () and developed different characteristics in its inhabitants. For example, Twain gives a lengthy description of how Minnesota has changed since he was a boy and remarks particularly on the speech.

Growing Up

Though not a coming-of-age narrative in the same way that Huck Finn can be considered a coming of age narrative, Life on the Mississippi nevertheless describes important milestones in Twain's youth and adolescence, showing how he came to mature and leave his hometown, his state, and eventually his country. Twain starts out as a boy dreaming about the Mississippi and its steamboats, and then goes to train on a boat; he does not return to tell about his childhood until much later in the story, when he reminiscences twenty years later. However, as Twain describes the lessons he learns on the boat, we can see how they affect him as an individual. He has a bad memory but must learn the markers of the river, even as they change. He thinks a lot of himself and what he already knows, but must learn humility. At the same time as he presents amusing anecdotes about these traits, Twain also tells the reader of more tragic events that also shaped him: the death of his brother, for example. The role of his steamboat training, and the Mississippi River in general, is highlighted even further in the later section, when Twain, though older, thinks more about his childhood and how much the world around him has changed since then. Though he thinks mostly about the differences in the cities and towns, as well as the river, he has changed as well, which is evident to the reader.

Travel

Travel as a theme, and particularly the benefits of travel, play an important role in Life on the Mississippi. Twain does not treat steamboat travel as a luxurious experience or as a tourist might: for him it is a job, a career, as well as a trade. Later on in the book, when he discusses the glamorous spaces of the steamboat's interior, they stand in sharp contrast to the hard work and grueling hours he has earlier described. Nevertheless, travel is one of the most important factors that leads to Twain's growing up and to his maturity. The widest travel occurs in the course of less than a page, when Twain describes going to Europe, Hawaii, and around the world between his two journeys up and down the Mississippi; nevertheless, his travel began here, on the river. It is on the river as well that Twain sees, over the course of several hundred miles, the growth of America. It is through this exploration that he grows as a person while remarking on the growth of a nation.

Style

Point of View

Life on the Mississippi is told from the point of view of Mark Twain (his pen name; Twain's real name was Samuel Clemens), the writer and former steamboat captain who later returns to trace his earlier footsteps up and down the river. Twain's point of view is unique in that he has seen the entire rise and fall of the steamboat industry: from his days as a boy, when steamboats were the most important and almost the only way to trade goods throughout a large part of the United States, to the latter part of the nineteenth century and early twentieth century, when the industry had in large part been replaced by trains and the geography of the Mississippi had changed enormously. Twain's point of view, though limited mostly to his personal experiences, is also vast in that he describes the larger historical context in which many of the events, anecdotes, and descriptions with which he provides the reader occurred. At the same time, he provides numerous other first-hand accounts of the river, from tourists to travel writers to letters and anecdotes he has overheard, which support many of his claims and help to make the reader's understanding of the river even stronger.

Setting

Life on the Mississippi is set along the Mississippi River. Twain's descriptions focus mainly on the area between Saint Louis and New Orleans, which is the stretch of the river (covering about half of it) which he studied under the direction of Mr. Bixby. During the first part of the book, Twain focuses on the river itself: its peculiarities, its directions, its islands, and so on. As he returns twenty-one years later, Twain focuses more on the islands and the towns lining the banks of the river. He also blends this with descriptions of the area as it was earlier, providing contrast for the reader. Towards the end of the book, he writes about the Upper Mississippi, taking the reader north into Minnesota, to describe the river there.

Life on the Mississippi is set in the nineteenth century, as it covers a major part of Twain's life. It begins before the Civil War and ends after the war, when steamboat travel has become much less important to the industry of the United States and the country has expanded a great deal from what it was when Twain was young.

Language and Meaning

Twain does not hesitate to use complex words in his writing, and often does so in an amusing and unexpected way. He does not worry about alienating the reader through these strange choices in vocabulary, but very often plays upon words in funny ways. Twain also presents many of his characters by showing the way that they really spoke: whether they used slang, had an accent, or other peculiarities, he writes in dialect often. This is particularly true during the excerpt from The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn as

well as his early descriptions of the language aboard the steamboats. Later, he discusses the language of the South and how it developed over the years. While Twain has a particular fondness for the Southern accent, he has no patience for what he sees as faults in grammar and other issues of syntax and diction that he attributes to the South and, indeed, readers will not necessarily pick up on a "Southern" flavor to the narrative, except insofar ad the subject matter is concerned.

Structure

Life on the Mississippi is divided into sixty chapters, each one of which covers several anecdotes. These chapters all have titles that allude to the stories they tell; however, some are more direct than others, which are more metaphorical. At the beginning of each chapter is a brief description of the different components of the chapter, which is a typical nineteenth and early-twentieth century device. For example, underneath the title for Chapter VII ("A Daring Deed"), Twain has "River Inspectors. - Cottonwoods and Plum Point - Hat-Island Crossing. - Touch and Go. - It is a Go - A Lightning Pilot." All of these phrases describe events in the chapter, some more directly.

Each chapter of Life on the Mississippi is remarkably even in length; most chapters are exactly five pages, with few chapters more than seven pages and almost none more than ten pages. There are several chapters of one page each, usually to report upon singular events or to summarize larger stretches of time. Within each chapter, though they are short, Twain sometimes wanders a bit and discusses several different, rather disconnected, events or happenings.

Quotes

"It always happens that when a man seizes upon a neglected and important idea, people inflamed with the same notion crop up all around. It happened so in this instance."
Chapter I, Page 8

"I now come to a phase of the Mississippi River life of the flush times of steamboating, which seems to me to warrant full examination — the marvelous science of piloting, as displayed there. I believe there has been nothing like it elsewhere in the world."
Chapter II, Page 27

"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 towards compassing the safe piloting of a steamboat."
Chapter IX, Page 63

"The girl couldn't seem to have enough of that pitiful 'hero' the rest of the trip, but little I cared; I loathed her, anyway."
Chapter XII, Page 81

"I often wanted to kill Brown, but this would not answer. A cub had to take everything his boss gave, in the way of vigorous comment and criticism; and we all believed that there was a United States law making it a penitentiary offense to strike or threaten a pilot who was on duty."
Chapter XVIII, Page 123

"This was bad - not best, anyway; for mine was not (preferably) a noonday kind of errand."
Chapter XXXI, Page 188

"The changes in the Mississippi River are great and strange, yet were to be expected; but I was not expecting to live to see Natchez and those other river towns become manufacturing strongholds and railway-centers."
Chapter XXXIX, Page 234

"There's one thing in this world which a person won't take pine if he can go walnut; and won't take in walnut if he can go mahogany. . . "
Chapter XLIII, Page 252

"He never printed another paragraph while he lived, and he never again signed 'Mark Twain' to anything."
Chapter L, Page 291

"The investigations of long ago had proved that the benevolent Brown, like 'Jack Hunt,' was not a real person, but a sheer invention of that gifted rascal, Williams - burglar,

Harvard graduate, son of a clergyman."
Chapter LII, Page 306

"Oh, he succeeded well enough - another case of damned fool. If they'd sent him to St. Louis, he'd have succeeded sooner."
Chapter LIII, Page 312

"I was told what became of him, but as it was a disappointment to me, I will not enter into details. He succeeded in life."
Chapter LIV, Page 319

Topics for Discussion

Twain makes two journeys down the Mississippi in this book. Compare and contrast these two trips: what has changed? What remains the same?

How does Twain himself change over the course of the book? What aspects of his personality remain constant?

Describe the point of view and the tone of the book. How does Twain use other accounts of the river in the narrative, and how does this affect his own tone?

The river itself takes on the role of a character in Life on the Mississippi. Describe this character, as well as Twain's relationship to it.

Why does Twain begin the book with a lengthy description of the river's history? How does this add to, or detract from, what follows?

Twain learns many important lessons from Mr. Bixby. Describe Bixby's character, as well as the relationship between the two men.

Twain includes several chapters of only one page each. Why is that? How does the length of these chapters serve the book's structure?

Describe the account of Twain's brother Harry's death. How is it discussed, and why do you think Twain presents it in this way?

Twain lists many things he learned about the river in his early "cub" days. What do you consider to be the three most important things a cub pilot had to learn?