

For Writing and Research

1. *Analyze* the strategies Twain uses to compose and contrast his two views of the river.
2. *Practice* by describing your reactions to a special place in your childhood and then comparing the way you respond to it now.
3. *Argue* that learning too much about the technical details of a process—such as painting or singing—destroys one’s ability to appreciate its beauty.
4. *Synthesize* your knowledge of Mark Twain’s life and writing. Then use this evidence to argue that creative achievement depends on the willingness to take risks.

BARRY LOPEZ

Barry Lopez was born in 1945 in Port Chester, New York, and was educated at the University of Notre Dame and the University of Oregon. For the last ten years he has lived near the Willamette Forest in Oregon and worked as a full-time writer and free-lance photographer. His articles and photographs on various aspects of the natural environment have appeared in *National Wildlife*, *American Forests*, *Audubon*, and other magazines. His works include *Desert Notes: Reflections in the Eye of the Raven* (1976), *River Notes: The Dance of the Herons* (1979), *Of Wolves and Men* (1978), *About This Life: Journeys on the Threshold of Memory* (1998), and *Light Action in the Caribbean* (2000). Lopez is regarded as a superb naturalist who possesses the imagination and voice of a poet. In “The Raven,” from *Desert Notes*, he contrasts two birds that the casual observer may see as quite similar.

The Raven

I AM GOING to have to start at the other end by telling you 1
 this: there are no crows in the desert. What appear to be
 crows are ravens. You must examine the crow, however,
 before you can understand the raven. To forget the crow
 completely, as some have tried to do, would be like trying
 to understand the one who stayed without talking to the
 one who left. It is important to make note of who has left
 the desert.

To begin with, the crow does nothing alone. He cannot 2
 abide silence and he is prone to stealing things, twigs and
 bits of straw, from the nests of his neighbors. It is a game

with him. He enjoys tricks. If he cannot make up his mind the crow will take two or three wives, but this is not a game. The crow is very accommodating and he admires compulsiveness.

Crows will live in street trees in the residential areas of great cities. They will walk at night on the roofs of parked cars and peck at the grit; they will scrape the pinpoints of their talons across the steel and, with their necks out-thrust, watch for frightened children listening in their beds.

Put all this to the raven: he will open his mouth as if to say something. Then he will look the other way and say nothing. Later, when you have forgotten, he will tell you he admires the crow.

The raven is larger than the crow and has a beard of black feathers at his throat. He is careful to kill only what he needs. Crows, on the other hand, will search out the great horned owl, kick and punch him awake, and then, for roosting too close to their nests, they will kill him. They will come out of the sky on a fat, hot afternoon and slam into the head of a dozing rabbit and go away laughing. They will tear out a whole row of planted corn and eat only a few kernels. They will defecate on scarecrows and go home and sleep with 200,000 of their friends in an atmosphere of congratulation. Again, it is only a game; this should not be taken to mean that they are evil.

There is however this: when too many crows come together on a roost there is a lot of shoving and noise and a white film begins to descend over the crows' eyes and they go blind. They fall from their perches and lie on the ground and starve to death. When confronted with this information, crows will look past you and warn you vacantly that it is easy to be misled.

The crow flies like a pigeon. The raven flies like a hawk. He is seen only at a great distance and then not very clearly. This is true of the crow too, but if you are very clever you can trap the crow. The only way to be sure what you have seen is a raven is to follow him until he dies of old age, and then examine the body.

Once there were many crows in the desert. I am told it was like this: you could sit back in the rocks and watch a pack of crows working over the carcass of a coyote. Some would eat, the others would try to squeeze out the vultures. The raven would never be seen. He would be at a distance, alone, perhaps eating a scorpion.

There was, at this time, a small alkaline water hole at the desert's edge. Its waters were bitter. No one but crows would drink there, although they drank sparingly, just one or two sips at a time. One day a raven warned someone about the dangers of drinking the bitter water and was overheard by a crow. When word of this passed among the crows they felt insulted. They jeered and raised insulting gestures to the ravens. They bullied each other into drinking the alkaline water until they had drunk the hole dry and gone blind.

The crows flew into canyon walls and dove straight into the ground at forty miles an hour and broke their necks. The worst of it was their cartwheeling across the desert floor, stiff wings outstretched, beaks agape, white eyes ballooning, surprising rattlesnakes hidden under sage bushes out of the noonday sun. The snakes awoke, struck and held. The wheeling birds strew them across the desert like sprung traps.

When all the crows were finally dead, the desert bacteria and fungi bored into them, burrowed through bone and muscle, through aqueous humor and feathers until they had reduced the stiff limbs of soft black to blue dust.

After that, there were no more crows in the desert. The few who watched from a distance took it as a sign and moved away.

Finally there is this: one morning four ravens sat at the edge of the desert waiting for the sun to rise. They had been there all night and the dew was like beads of quicksilver on their wings. Their eyes were closed and they were as still as the cracks in the desert floor.

The wind came off the snow-capped peaks to the north and ruffled their breast feathers. Their talons arched in the white earth and they smoothed their wings with sleek dark bills. At first light their bodies swelled and their eyes flashed purple. When the dew dried on their wings they lifted off

from the desert floor and flew away in four directions. Crows would never have had the patience for this.

If you want to know more about the raven: bury yourself in the desert so that you have a commanding view of the high basalt cliffs where he lives. Let only your eyes protrude. Do not blink—the movement will alert the raven to your continued presence. Wait until a generation of ravens has passed away. Of the new generation there will be at least one bird who will find you. He will see your eyes staring up out of the desert floor. The raven is cautious, but he is thorough. He will sense your peaceful intentions. Let him have the first word. Be careful: he will tell you he knows nothing.

If you do not have the time for this, scour the weathered desert shacks for some sign of the raven's body. Look under old mattresses and beneath loose floorboards. Look behind the walls. Sooner or later you will find a severed foot. It will be his and it will be well preserved.

Take it out in the sunlight and examine it closely. Notice that there are three fingers that face forward, and a fourth, the longest and like a thumb, that faces to the rear. The instrument will be black but no longer shiny, the back of it sheathed in armor plate and the underside padded like a wolf's foot.

At the end of each digit you will find a black, curved talon. You will see that the talons are not as sharp as you might have suspected. They are made to grasp and hold fast, not to puncture. They are more like the jaws of a trap than a fistful of ice picks. The subtle difference serves the raven well in the desert. He can weather a storm on a barren juniper limb; he can pick up and examine the crow's eye without breaking it.

For Study and Discussion

QUESTIONS ABOUT PURPOSE

1. What is Lopez's primary purpose—to explain the difference between the raven and the crow or to demonstrate why the raven is superior to the crow? Explain your answer.
2. According to Lopez, why did the crow leave the desert?

QUESTIONS ABOUT AUDIENCE

1. Throughout the essay Lopez uses direct address, as in "you must examine the crow," "if you want to know more about the raven." What advantages does this give him in establishing a relationship with his readers?
2. In choosing to discuss the crow first, what assumptions does Lopez make about his readers' experience?

QUESTIONS ABOUT STRATEGIES

1. Where does Lopez use the divided pattern? Where does he use the alternating pattern? What aspect of his subject causes him to combine the two strategies?
2. How does he use the story of the water hole to characterize the difference between the two birds?

For Writing and Research

1. *Analyze* how Lopez uses comparisons to other birds—pigeon, hawk, vulture—to distinguish between the raven and the crow.
2. *Practice* by comparing the behavior and personalities of two domestic pets—for example, dogs and cats.
3. *Argue* that animals who live in a domestic setting develop different or similar personalities to animals who live in the wild.
4. *Synthesize* the research on animals who inhabit the same wild territory. Then use this evidence to compare and contrast their hunting strategies and feeding habits.