Eddy Harris (b. 1956) is a writer, adventurer, and seeker who spent his early years in New York City before moving to St. Louis. His first book, Mississippi Solo, chronicles the canoe trip he took down the entire length of the Mississippi River in the 1980s—a risky trip that this city dweller was unprepared for. He has also written about adventurous journeys in other southern regions and in Africa.

from Mississippi Solo

Memoir by Eddy Harris

SETTING A PURPOSE Pay attention as you read to how the author recounts a special moment from his life while he canoed by himself down the Mississippi River. What makes his experience so meaningful for him?

Too many marvelous days in a row and you begin to get used to it, to think that’s the way it’s supposed to be. Too many good days, too many bad days—you need some break in the monotony of one to appreciate the other. If you only get sunshine, someone said, you end up in a desert.

I guess I’d had enough hard days to last me for a while, enough scary times to be able to appreciate the peaceful, easy, glorious days. On the way to Natchez, I had another one, and I took full advantage of it to do absolutely nothing. No singing, no thinking, no talking to myself. Just feeling. Watching the river, noticing the changes in color, seeing the way it rises and falls depending on the wind and on what lies

\[1\] Natchez (näch`ız): a city in southwest Mississippi on the Mississippi River.

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on the river bed. Each change had something to say, and I listened to the river. The river was talking to me, changing colors from puce\(^2\) to brown to thick, murky green. Saying nothing. The idle chatter you get when you walk with your favorite niece or nephew going no place in particular with nothing special on your minds and the little kid just jabbers away because it’s comfortable and he feels like it. The river was like that to me. A comfortable buddy sharing a lazy day.

Nothing else mattered then. Going someplace or not. Arriving in New Orleans or shooting past and landing in Brazil. I didn’t care about anything. The river kept me company and kept me satisfied. Nothing else mattered.

Then the river whispered, “Get ready. Get ready.”

The day turned gray and strange. Clouds rolled overhead in wild swirls like batter in a bowl. I could see the rainstorm forming off in the distance but swirling rapidly toward me like a dark gray avalanche. I felt the river dip down and up—a shallow dale\(^3\) in the water. I passed from the cool moisture surrounding me and into a pocket of thin air hot and dry. It was as though a gap had opened in the clouds and the sun streamed through to boil the water and heat up this isolated patch of river a scant\(^4\) thirty yards long. My first thought was to shed a shirt and stay cool, but when I passed through the far curtain of the insulated air, I knew I had better do just the opposite. I drifted and donned my yellow rain suit and hood. The sky above grew serious and advanced in my direction with the speed of a hurricane. Looking for a place to land, I scanned the shore. There was no shore. Only trees. Because of the heavy rains and high water, the shore had disappeared, and the new shoreline of solid earth had been pushed back through the trees and beyond the woods. How far beyond, I couldn’t tell. I looked across to the other side of the river half a mile away. No way could I have made it over there. Halfway across and the wind would have kicked up and trapped me in the middle.

The leading edge of the storm came, and the first sprinkles passed over like army scouts. The wooded area lasted only another hundred yards or so, and I thought I could easily get there before the rains arrived. I could then turn left and find

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\(^2\) puce (pyōs): purplish brown.

\(^3\) dale: valley.

\(^4\) scant: just short of.
ground to pull out and wait out the storm. But the voice of the river came out and spoke to me teasingly but with a chill of seriousness down my spine. I could have ignored it, but as if reading my thoughts and not wanting me to fight it, the river grabbed the end of the canoe and turned me toward the trees. I thought I was looking for land. I wasn't. I was looking for shelter.

"The day turned gray and strange."

The urge to get into the trees came on me quite suddenly and really without thought or effort on my part. Almost an instinct.

No sooner had I ducked into the trees than the sky split open with a loud crash and a splinterly crackle of lightning. I was not going to make it through the trees. The wind came in at hurricane strength. The tips of the trees bent way over and aimed toward the ground, like fishing rods hooked on a big one. Water flooded like the tide rushing upstream. The trees swooshed loudly as the leaves and branches brushed hard together. Branches fell. Rains came and poured down bucketfuls.

The trees were tall and no more than three feet around. I maneuvered the canoe as best I could in the wind and rushing water, turned it to face upstream, and kept my back to the rain, which slanted in at a sharp angle. I reached out for the sturdiest tree I could get my arms around and I held on.

Water everywhere. The river sloshed over the side and into the canoe: I tried to keep the stern pointed right into the flow so the canoe could ride the waves, but it didn't work. The canoe was twisted about, and water poured over the side. The

splinter (splin'tar) v. To splinter means to break up into sharp, thin pieces.

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5 Water everywhere: The author is referring to the line "water, water, everywhere" from The Rime of the Ancient Mariner, a widely known poem about a sailor recounting supernatural events at sea.
rain was heavier than any I had ever been in or seen before. It really was more like a tropical storm. The heavy winds, the amount of water, the warmth of the air, and the cold rain. Only my neck was exposed to the rain. When the rain hit my neck, it ran under the rain suit and very cold down my back.

The wind shifted as the storm came directly overhead. Water streamed straight down. I was drenched, and the canoe was filling up quickly. Anything in the canoe that could float was floating. If the rain continued for long or if the wind kept up strong and the rain kept spilling into the canoe, I would sink. But I was not worried, hardly more than concerned. In fact I enjoyed the feeling of the water all around me and on me, enveloping me like a cocoon, and despite the drama I felt no real threat. I was more amazed than anything, trying to analyze the voice I had heard or whatever instinct or intuition it was that urged me to park in these trees. It had been something so very definite that I could feel it and yet so ethereal that I could not put my finger on it. So I stopped trying and just sat there impatiently waiting and hugging my tree. I was one with this river, and nothing could happen to me.

The storm slid forward, and the rain slanted in on my face. Then it moved on farther up the river to drench someone else. It was gone as suddenly as it had arisen. Only the trailing edge was left, a light rain that lasted almost until I reached Natchez.

**COLLABORATIVE DISCUSSION** What do you think made this experience on the river affect the author so strongly? Talk about your ideas with other group members.
Analyze Text: Memoir

A memoir is a form of autobiographical writing in which a writer shares his or her personal experiences and observations of significant events or people. Memoirs are often written in the first person. Authors of memoirs often
- “talk” to readers, using informal language and sharing personal feelings
- recall actual events and emphasize their reactions to them
- show how their experiences changed their attitudes and lives

What feature of a memoir appears in the first sentence of the excerpt from Mississippi Solo?

Analyze the Meanings of Words and Phrases

The author's style is the manner of writing—how something is said rather than what is said. Readers can analyze an author's style by making observations about these elements:
- word choice
- sentence types
- sentence length
- sentence fragments
- repetition of one or more words
- descriptive details

An author's style can be formal, using complex language and sentence structures, or informal, using simpler language, sentences, and fragments.

Figurative language is an imaginative use of words to express ideas that are not literally true but that are meaningful and can have an emotional impact. This chart shows three common kinds of figurative comparisons.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Comparison</th>
<th>Example</th>
<th>Effect</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>simile: a comparison of two unlike things using the word like or as</td>
<td>Clouds rolled overhead in wild swirls like batter in a bowl. (lines 26–27)</td>
<td>vivid image of changing sky</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>metaphor: a comparison of two unlike things that have qualities in common, without using like or as</td>
<td>...the far curtain of the insulated air... (lines 35–36)</td>
<td>warmth that is trapped inside a barrier</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>personification: the giving of human qualities to an animal, object, or idea</td>
<td>The river was talking to me... (line 14)</td>
<td>a feeling of connectedness</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Find another example of a simile in this memoir. What does it help you understand?
Analyzing the Text

Cite Text Evidence Support your responses with evidence from the text.

1. Interpret Reread lines 85–100. What seems unexpected about the author's reactions during this experience?

2. Compare Reread lines 13–20 to find what the author compares to walking with a favorite niece or nephew. What does that comparison suggest?

3. Cite Evidence Reread lines 1–10. What does the author reveal about himself?

4. Analyze Reread line 25. What kind of figurative language is the author using, and what does it suggest about his connection to his environment?

5. Analyze Find an example of one or more sentence fragments. Why might the author have chosen to use fragments instead of complete sentences, and what does it suggest about the style of his writing?

6. Analyze Reread lines 62–70. What word choices and figurative language help you picture the scene?

PERFORMANCE TASK

Writing Activity: Analysis Look back through the memoir to list examples of how the author uses similes and personifies the river. Focusing on examples from your list, write a two- to four-paragraph literary analysis that explains how the author uses figurative language in this memoir.

- Support your main points by using quotes from the text as examples.
- Explain the meanings of the examples and how they contribute to important ideas of the memoir.
- Discuss what impressions you have about the author's writing style, based on his use of figurative language.
Critical Vocabulary

avalanche    insulate    splinter    ethereal

Practice and Apply  Choose the situation that is the better match with the meaning of the vocabulary word. Give your reasons.

1. avalanche
   a. Snow fell for two days, covering the rooftops and streets.
   b. Snow on a mountainside suddenly loosened and slid.

2. insulate
   a. On a hot day, a car with closed windows heats up quickly.
   b. An old, drafty house is expensive to heat in winter.

3. splinter
   a. People stroll on the boardwalk that crosses the wetland.
   b. River water breaks up into many streams and smaller creeks.

4. ethereal
   a. The desert travelers came to an area with palm trees and shade.
   b. The desert travelers mistakenly thought they saw a lake ahead.

Vocabulary Strategy: Figures of Speech

An author may make an allusion, a reference to a famous person, place, event, or work of literature. Although an allusion is not explained, the reader may recognize its source and meaning, or may do research to learn about it. Look for the allusions in these examples:

Poppa’s shoe store closed after only a year, and he lost money.
Poppa worked hard, but he just didn’t have the Midas touch.

All of my cousins were strong and good-looking; I was unhappy aware of my ugly duckling status from an early age.

In the first example, the phrase the Midas touch is an allusion to the Greek myth about King Midas, who was briefly able to turn everything he touched into gold. The second example includes an allusion to the fairy tale “The Ugly Duckling,” by Hans Christian Andersen. In that tale, an odd-looking duckling endures abuse until it grows up to find its true family of beautiful swans.

Practice and Apply  Reread the paragraph that begins on line 76 of the memoir. The first sentence of that paragraph is an allusion to a well-known quotation from the long poem The Rime of the Ancient Mariner, by Samuel Taylor Coleridge. Find the poem and identify the famous lines in Part II. What meaning from the poem might Harris have tried to connect to his own experience?
Language Conventions: Precise Language

When you write, choose words carefully to ensure that readers picture what you see and understand what you mean. Use precise words to express exact meanings and to be concise, using only necessary words. Compare these two sentences:

I moved the canoe in the water, which was rushing very fast.

I maneuvered the canoe in the rushing water.

You can tell that the second sentence is the stronger one. The word maneuvered is more precise than moved. In the clause which was rushing very fast, the words very fast are unnecessary because they repeat the meaning of rushing. The single word rushing conveys the same meaning.

This sentence appears in the excerpt from Mississippi Solo. Note how the author has used vivid language and precise words—gap, streamed, boil, isolated patch, a scant thirty yards long—to help the reader participate in the scene.

It was as though a gap had opened in the clouds and the sun streamed through to boil the water and heat up this isolated patch of river a scant thirty yards long.

Practice and Apply Each of these sentences is not as strong as it could be. Rewrite the sentence to make it more precise and concise.

1. The clouds in the sky overhead moved very slowly and looked interesting.

2. All at once, a streak of lightning suddenly traveled down from a big cloud.

3. I heard the thunder, which was loud and shook the ground under my feet a lot.

4. I looked around for a place that would be safe and went into a building that was nearby.