

OBSERVATIONS BY MARK TWAIN

1869

Mark Twain

Mark Twain was a popular writer of the late 1800s and early 1900s who is perhaps best known for his novel *Huckleberry Finn*. Twain is also widely known for writing outrageous, sarcastic essays concerning social justice, American civilization in the age of imperialism, and the sinful nature of humankind. In the following excerpt from his essay "Open Letter to Commodore Vanderbilt," Twain criticizes the power and greed of the "robber baron" capitalists of the late 1800s.

READING FOCUS:

Why does Twain pity the wealthy Commodore Vanderbilt?

How my heart goes out in sympathy to you! How do I pity you, Commodore Vanderbilt! Most men have at least a few friends, whose devotion is a comfort and a solace [relief] to them, but you seem to be the idol of only a crawling swarm of small souls, who love to glorify your most flagrant [outrageous] unworthiness in print; or praise your vast possessions worshippingly; or sing of your unimportant private habits and sayings and doings. I do pity you. I would pity any man with such friends as these. Now, have you ever thought calmly over your newspaper reputation? One day one of your subjects comes out with a column or two detailing your rise from penury [poverty] to affluence [wealth], and praising you as if you were the last and noblest work of God, but unconsciously telling how exquisitely [incredibly] mean a man has to be in order to achieve what you have achieved.

Poor Vanderbilt! How I do pity you; and this is honest. You are an old man, and ought to have some rest, and yet you have to struggle and struggle, and deny yourself, and rob yourself of restful sleep and peace of mind, because you need money so badly. I always feel for a man who is so poverty ridden as you. Don't misunderstand me, Vanderbilt. I know you own seventy millions; but then you know and I know that it isn't what a man has that constitutes [makes up] wealth. No--it is to be *satisfied* with what one has; that is wealth. As long as one sorely needs a certain additional amount, that man isn't rich. Seventy times seventy millions can't make him rich as long as his poor heart is breaking for more. You have got seventy millions, and you *need* five hundred millions, and are really suffering for it. Your poverty is something appalling. I tell you truly that I do not

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believe I could live twenty-four hours with the awful weight of four hundred and thirty millions of abject want [strong desire] crushing down on me. I should die under it. My soul is so wrought upon [upset] by your hapless pauperism [helpless poverty], that if you came by me now I would freely put ten cents in your tin cup, if you carry one, and say, "God pity you, poor unfortunate!"

"Open Letter to Com. Vanderbilt" by Mark Twain from *Mark Twain: Collected Tales, Sketches, Speeches, & Essays 1852-1890*.