From the 1940s to the 1980s, Sydney J. Harris wrote a daily column, titled "Strictly Personal," that was syndicated in hundreds of newspapers throughout the United States. Described as "America's finest living aphorist" and "the most cosmic journalist we possess," Harris wrote thought-provoking personal essays on various aspects of contemporary life.

In this brief essay, first published in 1961, Harris offers an extended definition of a familiar character type.

A Jerk

by Sydney J. Harris

I don't know whether history repeats itself, but biography certainly does. The other day, Michael came in and asked me what a "jerk" was--the same question Carolyn put to me a dozen years ago.
At that time, I fluffed her off with some inane answer, such as, "A jerk isn't a very nice person," but both of us knew it was an unsatisfactory reply. When she went to bed, I began trying to work up a suitable definition.

It is a marvelously apt word, of course. Until it was coined, there was really no single word in English to describe the kind of person who is a jerk--"boob" and "simp" were too old hat, and besides they really didn’t fit, for they could be lovable, and a jerk never is.

Thinking it over, I decided that a jerk is basically a person without insight. He is not necessarily a fool or a dope, because some extremely clever persons can be jerks. In fact, it has little to do with intelligence as we commonly think of it; it is, rather, a kind of subtle but persuasive aroma emanating from the inner part of the personality.
I know a college president who can be described only as a jerk. He is not an unintelligent man, nor unlearned, nor even unschooled in the social amenities. Yet he is a jerk cum laude, because of a fatal flaw in his nature--he is totally incapable of looking into the mirror of his soul and shuddering at what he sees there.

A jerk, then, is a man (or woman) who is utterly unable to see himself as he appears to others. He has no grace, he is tactless without meaning to be, he is a bore even to his best friends, he is an egotist without charm. All of us are egotists to some extent, but most of us--unlike the jerk--are perfectly and horribly aware of it when we make asses of ourselves. The jerk never knows.
"I was born a writer," Gore Vidal once said. "When that happens you have no choice in the matter." A popular novelist, Vidal was also one of the finest American essayists of the past century.

Vidal's extended definition of "pretty" in the following passage originally served as the introduction to a review of the diaries of Sir Cecil Beaton, a British photographer and stage designer. The blend of historical information and personal narrative is a strategy Vidal often adopted in his essays.
In the fifteenth century the adjective "pretty" joined the English language (derived from the Old Teutonic noun pratti or pratta, meaning trick or wile). At first everyone thought the world of pretty. To be a pretty fellow was to be clever, apt, skillful; a pretty soldier was gallant and brave; a pretty thing was ingenious and artful. It was not until the sixteenth century that something started to go wrong with the idea of prettiness. Although women and children could still take pleasure in being called pretty, a pretty man had degenerated into a fop with a tendency to slyness. Pretty objects continued to be admired until 1875
when the phrase "pretty pretty" was coined. That did it. For the truly clever, apt, and skillful, the adjective pretty could only be used in the pejorative sense, as I discovered thirty years ago while being shown around King's College by E.M. Forster. As we approached the celebrated chapel (magnificent, superb, a bit much), I said, "Pretty." Forster thought I meant the chapel when, actually, I was referring to a youthful couple in the damp middle distance. A ruthless moralist, Forster publicized my use of the dread word. Told in Fitzrovia and published in the streets of Dacca, the daughters of the Philistines rejoiced; the daughters of the uncircumcised triumphed. For a time, my mighty shield was vilely cast away.

In the last thirty years the adjective pretty has been pretty much abandoned, while the notion of beauty has become so
complex that only the dullest of the daughters of the uncircumcised dares use it. Santayana was the last aesthetician to describe beauty without self-consciousness; and that was in 1896. As a result, we now live in a relativist's world where one man's beauty is another man's beast. This means that physical ugliness tends to be highly prized on the ground that it would be not only cruel, but provocative for, let us say, a popular performer to look better than the plainest member of the audience. This is democracy at its most endearing; and only a beauty or a Beaton would have it otherwise.

A highly regarded art critic, novelist, poet, essayist, and screenwriter, John Berger began his career as a painter in London. Among his best known works are Ways of Seeing (1972), a series of essays about the
power of visual images, and G. (also 1972), an experimental novel which was awarded both the Booker Prize and the James Tait Black Memorial Prize for fiction.

In this passage from And Our Faces, My Heart, Brief as Photos (1984), Berger draws on the writings of Mircea Eliade, a Romanian-born historian of religion, to offer an extended definition of home.

The Meaning of Home*

by John Berger

The term home (Old Norse Heimer, High German heim, Greek komi, meaning "village") has, since a long time, been taken over by two kinds of moralists, both dear to those who wield power. The notion of home became the keystone for a code of domestic morality, safeguarding the
property (which included the women) of the family. Simultaneously the notion of homeland supplied a first article of faith for patriotism, persuading men to die in wars which often served no other interest except that of a minority of their ruling class. Both usages have hidden the original meaning.

Originally home meant the center of the world—not in a geographical, but in an ontological sense. Mircea Eliade has demonstrated how home was the place from which the world could be founded. A home was established, as he says, "at the heart of the real." In traditional societies, everything that made sense of the world was real; the surrounding chaos existed and was threatening, but it was threatening because it was unreal. Without a home at the center of the real, one was not only shelterless, but also lost in nonbeing, in
unreality. Without a home everything was fragmentation.

Home was the center of the world because it was the place where a vertical line crossed with a horizontal one. The vertical line was a path leading upwards to the sky and downwards to the underworld. The horizontal line represented the traffic of the world, all the possible roads leading across the earth to other places. Thus, at home, one was nearest to the gods in the sky and to the dead of the underworld. This nearness promised access to both. And at the same time, one was at the starting point and, hopefully, the returning point of all terrestrial journeys.

(See also Joan Didion’s “On Self-Respect”)