

from **Nature**
Ralph Waldo Emerson

Nature is a setting that fits equally well a comic or a mourning piece. In good health, the air is a cordial of incredible virtue. Crossing a bare common,¹ in snow puddles, at twilight, under a clouded sky, without having in my thoughts any occurrence of special good fortune, I have enjoyed a perfect exhilaration. I am glad to the brink of fear. In the woods, too, a man casts off his years, as the snake his slough, and at what period soever of life is always a child. In the woods is perpetual youth. Within these plantations of God, a decorum and sanctity reign, a perennial festival is dressed, and the guest sees not how he should tire of them in a thousand years. In the woods, we return to reason and faith. There I feel that nothing can befall me in life—no disgrace, no calamity

(leaving me my eyes), which nature cannot repair. Standing on the bare ground—my head bathed by the blithe air and uplifted into infinite space—all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eyeball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or parcel of God. The name of the nearest friend sounds then foreign and accidental: to be brothers, to be acquaintances, master or servant, is then a trifle and a disturbance. I am the lover of uncontained and immortal beauty. In the wilderness, I find something more dear and connate than in the streets or villages. In the tranquil landscape, and especially in the distant line of the horizon, man beholds somewhat as beautiful as his own nature.

The greatest delight which the fields and

1. common: Piece of open public land.



SUNSET
Frederick E. Church
Munson-Williams-Proctor Institute
Museum of Art, Utica, New York

woods minister is the suggestion of an occult relation between man and the vegetable. I am not alone and unacknowledged. They nod to me, and I to them. The waving of the boughs in the storm is new to me and old. It takes me by surprise, and yet is not unknown. Its effect is like that of a higher thought or a better emotion coming over me, when I deemed I was thinking justly or doing right.

Yet it is certain that the power to produce this delight does not reside in nature, but in man, or in a harmony of both. It is necessary to use these pleasures with great

temperance. For nature is not always tricked² in holiday attire, but the same scene which yesterday breathed perfume and glittered as for the frolic of the nymphs is over-spread with melancholy today. Nature always wears the colors of the spirit. To a man laboring under calamity, the heat of his own fire hath sadness in it. Then there is a kind of contempt of the landscape felt by him who has just lost by death a dear friend. The sky is less grand as it shuts down over less worth in the population.

2. **tricked:** Dressed.

THINKING ABOUT THE SELECTION

Recalling

1. According to Emerson, where can we "return to reason and faith"?
2. What happens to Emerson when he stands on the bare ground with his head "uplifted into infinite space"?
3. Where does man behold "somewhat as beautiful as his own nature"?
4. What is "the greatest delight which the fields and woods minister"?
5. What "colors" does nature wear?

Interpreting

6. What does Emerson mean when he comments that in the woods "a man casts off his years"?
7. What does Emerson mean when he describes himself as a "transparent eyeball"?

Applying

8. In what ways is Emerson's attitude toward nature different from a scientist's attitude?

ANALYZING LITERATURE

Understanding Transcendentalism

Transcendentalism was an intellectual movement that held that knowledge of fundamental reality was derived through intuition rather than through sensory experience. This movement focused on the human spirit and the spiritual relationship between humanity and nature. The Transcendentalists ultimately reached the conclusion that all forms of being are spiritually united through a shared universal soul, or Over-Soul.

Emerson's essay *Nature*, published in 1836, was the Transcendentalists' unofficial statement of belief.

1. What does *Nature* reveal about the Transcendentalists' attitude toward nature?
2. What does *Nature* reveal about the Transcendentalists' perceptions of human nature?
3. How does the essay convey the Transcendentalists' belief in the Over-Soul?
4. Do you find any evidence of Transcendentalist beliefs in today's poetry and song lyrics? Explain.