

A Brief Summary of “Nature”, by Ralph Waldo Emerson

Reprinted from [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nature_\(essay\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nature_(essay))

"**Nature**" is an essay written by Ralph Waldo Emerson, and published by James Munroe and Company in 1836. In this essay Emerson put forth the foundation of transcendentalism, a belief system that espouses a non-traditional appreciation of nature. Transcendentalism suggests that the divine, or God, suffuses nature, and suggests that reality can be understood by studying nature. Emerson's visit to the *Muséum National d'Histoire Naturelle* in Paris inspired a set of lectures he later delivered in Boston which were then published.

Within the essay, Emerson divides nature into four usages: Commodity, Beauty, Language and Discipline. These distinctions define the ways by which humans use nature for their basic needs, their desire for delight, their communication with one another and their understanding of the world. Emerson followed the success of *Nature* with a speech, "The American Scholar", which together with his previous lectures laid the foundation for transcendentalism and his literary career.

Synopsis

In "Nature", Emerson lays out and attempts to solve an abstract problem: that humans do not fully accept nature's beauty. He writes that people are distracted by the demands of the world, whereas nature gives but humans fail to reciprocate. The essay consists of eight sections: Nature, Commodity, Beauty, Language, Discipline, Idealism, Spirit and Prospects. Each section takes a different perspective on the relationship between humans and nature.

In the essay Emerson explains that to experience the "wholeness" with nature for which we are naturally suited, we must be separate from the flaws and distractions imposed on us by society. Emerson believed that solitude is the single mechanism through which we can be fully engaged in the world of nature, writing "To go into solitude, a man needs to retire as much from his chamber as from society. I am not solitary whilst I read and write, though nobody is with me. But if a man would be alone, let him look at the stars."

When a person experiences true solitude, in nature, it "take[s] him away". Society, he says, destroys wholeness, whereas "Nature, in its ministry to man, is not only the material, but is also the process and the result. All the parts incessantly work into each other's hands for the profit of man. The wind sows the seed; the sun evaporates the sea; the wind blows the vapor to the field; the ice, on the other side of the planet, condenses rain on this; the rain feeds the plant; the plant feeds the animal; and thus the endless circulations of the divine charity nourish man".

Emerson defines a spiritual relationship. In nature a person finds its spirit and accepts it as the Universal Being. He writes: "Nature is not fixed but fluid; to a pure spirit, nature is everything."

Theme: Spirituality

Emerson uses spirituality as a major theme in his essay, "Nature". Emerson believed in reimagining the divine as something large and visible, which he referred to as nature; such an idea is known as transcendentalism, in which one perceives anew God and their body, and becomes one with their surroundings. Emerson confidently exemplifies transcendentalism, stating, "From the earth, as a shore, I look out into that silent sea. I seem to partake its rapid transformations: the active enchantment reaches my dust, and I dilate and conspire with the morning wind", postulating that humans and wind are one. Emerson referred to nature as the "Universal Being"; he believed that there was a spiritual sense of the natural world around him. Depicting this sense of "Universal Being", Emerson states, "The aspect of nature is devout. Like the figure of Jesus, she stands with bended head, and hands folded upon the breast. The happiest man is he who learns from nature the lesson of worship".

According to Emerson, there were three spiritual problems addressed about nature for humans to solve, "What is matter? Whence is it? And Whereto?". What is matter? Matter is a phenomenon, not a substance; rather, nature is something that is experienced by humans, and grows with humans' emotions. Whence is it and Whereto? Such questions can be answered with a single answer, nature's spirit is expressed through humans, "Therefore, that spirit, that is, the Supreme Being, does not build up nature around us, but puts it forth through us", states Emerson. Emerson clearly depicts that everything must be spiritual and moral, in which there should be goodness between nature and humans.

Influence

"Nature" was controversial to some. One review published in January 1837 criticized the philosophies in "Nature" and disparagingly referred to beliefs as "Transcendentalist", coining the term by which the group would become known.^[5]

Henry David Thoreau had read "Nature" as a senior at Harvard College and took it to heart. It eventually became an essential influence for Thoreau's later writings, including his seminal *Walden*. In fact, Thoreau wrote *Walden* after living in a cabin on land that Emerson owned. Their longstanding acquaintance offered Thoreau great encouragement in pursuing his desire to be a published author.

And excerpted from "What Hath God Wrought: The Transformation of America, 1815-1848, by Daniel Walker Howe, Chapter 16, American Renaissance ...

Most of the Concord writers belonged to an informal "club" (their term) called the Transcendentalists. Their critics had fastened the name on them as a sign of contempt (the labels "Quaker", "Shaker", "Methodist", and "Mormon" had originally been derogatory too) but the writers came to accept it, for it signified their desire to transcend appearances and perceive the underlying reality. Like so much else in pre-Civil War American culture, literary Transcendentalism derived from a religious impulse. Transcendentalism was one of the many forms of religious awakening characteristic of the period, and its members aspired to revive what they accounted true piety -- a kind of personal spirituality they believed the organized churches and their creeds inhibited rather than nurtured. The Transcendentalists shared in the millennial mood of their times -- not in a biblical or Christian way, but in the sense that they saw themselves initiating a new order of the ages, democratic and free, in harmony with the divine. Like the evangelist Charles Finney, they preached a form of perfectionism, though theirs meant not Christian deliverance from sin but realization of the divine potential in all human beings.

Except for James Marsh up in Vermont, all the Transcendentalists were either Unitarians or ex-Unitarians. Emerson's career illustrates this derivation in his own gradual transition from Christian humanism to a non-sectarian spiritual humanism. ... (pp 618-19)

Emerson became a popular philosopher with his short book *Nature* (1836), which espoused what was essentially a new religion: idealistic, monistic, mystical, and intuitive, based on spiritual communion with nature. He summed it up (prosaically) this way: "1. Words are signs of natural facts. 2. Particular natural facts are symbols of particular spiritual facts. 3. Nature is the symbol of spirit." Emerson's God (which he elsewhere named the Oversoul) was imminent in the universe. Through harmony with nature, a person achieved not merely "likeness to God" ... but participation in divinity itself. Emerson's message thus accorded self-improvement a spiritual dimension and sanction. Emerson won a hearing for these ideas because the American public felt concern about spiritual things and eagerly engaged in schemes of self-improvement. What he and his fellow Transcendentalists most valued about their new form of spirituality was its individualism: It put every person directly in touch with the divine, without any need for tradition, a written scripture, or an institutional church. (pg 620)