

Nature



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF RALPH WALDO EMERSON

Ralph Waldo Emerson was an American essayist, lecturer, and philosopher. Born at the turn of the 19th century in Boston, he was the son of a reverend who ensured that Emerson and his siblings had a strong spiritual and intellectual foundation in their upbringing. Emerson was an advanced student, learning to read at age three and attending Harvard College at 14. Following in his father's footsteps, Emerson went on to Harvard Divinity School and was a pastor at Boston's Second Church until he became disenchanted with organized religion. Emerson, remarkably well-read and well-traveled, switched careers to become a lecturer of philosophy. He was a lead figure of American Transcendentalism, rebelling against the rationalism of the Unitarian religion and the empiricism of science to instead focus on the divinity of the individual. Emerson published his first essay, "Nature," in 1836, followed by the collection *Essays: First Series* in 1841. Emerson solidified himself as a revered author, orator, and philosophical thinker of the American Romantic era, publishing dozens of essays, poems, and other works before his death in 1882.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

As part of the Transcendentalist movement, much of Emerson's work was a reaction to the 18th-century Age of Enlightenment, also referred to as the "Century of Philosophy." The Enlightenment marked a shift in the West's core beliefs, as new ideas and doctrines such as the separation of church and state emphasized reason over divine right as the ultimate source of authority. By contrast, Emerson believed in the Transcendentalist valuation of the individual's spiritual intuition as the ultimate source of truth and wisdom. This notion is presented throughout "Nature," as Emerson advocates for the individual to make sense of the world and the divine not through religious doctrine, but through their own personal experiences and interpretations. Emerson's philosophical and theological views also run parallel to Unitarianism, the religious movement that predominated Boston throughout his life. Emerson resonated with certain aspects of Unitarian belief (such as the importance of one's own individualized search for truth and meaning) but favored a more intense spiritual experience than the reserved, rational mindset that the Unitarian Church encouraged.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

In "Nature," Emerson outlines the relationship between nature and the soul; his essays "History" and "Self-Reliance" both

express a similar reverence for the unity of nature and the individual. This central theme of unity also appears in Emerson's essay "The Over-Soul," where he tackles the complex relationships of the individual's soul with the ego, God, and other human beings. Emerson is widely considered to be the most important writer of the 19th century, with his ideas inspiring his fellow Transcendentalists as well as contemporary writers such as Herman Melville, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and Edgar Allan Poe who resisted his ideas. Emerson was mutually influenced by other writers in the Transcendentalist movement, with books such as Henry David Thoreau's book [Walden](#) and Walt Whitman's poetry collection *Leaves of Grass* drawing from many of the same ideas about the individual, spirituality, and nature. Emerson's deep metaphysical musings even went on to influence the works of philosophers like Friedrich Nietzsche.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** Nature
- **When Written:** Mid-1830s (in November 1833, he gave a lecture called "The Uses of Natural History" in Boston, which contained many of the ideas that he'd later flesh out in his essay "Nature").
- **Where Written:** Concord, Massachusetts
- **When Published:** September 1836 (Emerson also has a later essay called "Nature," published in 1844, which is a separate work from his better-known 1836 "Nature" essay).
- **Literary Period:** Transcendentalism
- **Genre:** Essay
- **Point of View:** First Person

EXTRA CREDIT

Dear Diary. Emerson was a prolific diarist, with his personal journals spanning from his junior year at Harvard College up through his elderly years. His journals served as a major source of inspiration for fellow Transcendentalist writer Henry David Thoreau and were eventually published in 16 volumes.

The Buddha of the West. Emerson was revered as an orator as well as an author, giving as many as 80 philosophical lectures in a year throughout the United States. (He gave his first lecture, "The Uses of Natural History," in 1833, outlining some of the points that he would later refine and build on in "Nature.") Many of his contemporaries regarded him as a brilliant and wise thinker whose lectures inspired people to see the world's underlying beauty and mysticism.



PLOT SUMMARY

Emerson opens his 1836 edition of his essay “Nature” with an epigraph from the philosopher Plotinus, suggesting that nature is a reflection of humankind. The rest of his essay focuses on the relationship between people and nature.

In the Introduction, Emerson suggests that rather than relying on religion and tradition to understand the world, people should spend time in nature and intuit answers for themselves. But people shouldn’t just observe nature—they should also actively consider “to what end is nature” (that is, what nature means or does). To Emerson, all forms of science try to answer this question and find a “theory of nature.” And though it might sound unscientific, Emerson thinks that seeking “abstract truth” through firsthand experience in nature is the best way to craft such a theory.

Emerson then defines some of the terms that he’ll use throughout the rest of the essay: Nature/nature, the Soul, and art. First, he suggests that the universe is comprised of two parts: Nature and the Soul. He uses Nature (capital “N”) in the philosophical sense to refer to everything that is “NOT ME”—that is, everything that isn’t the Soul. Emerson then breaks down Nature into smaller parts: nature (lowercase “n”), art, other people, and our own physical bodies. The common use of the word nature (lowercase “n”) refers to the natural world—non-manmade things like trees and the wind. But when people combine their human will with elements of the natural world, they create art.

In Chapter 1, Emerson advocates for spending time alone in nature. By looking up at the stars, a person transcends this world and comes in contact with the sublime. Most people take the stars for granted, since they shine nightly. But if a person opens him- or herself up to nature’s influence and adopts an attitude of childlike curiosity, nature will captivate and awe them. Part of seeing nature clearly is realizing that it is one integrated whole. To illustrate this point, Emerson recalls looking out at the land and seeing between 20 and 30 farms. And while each farm is separate from the next, and a different man owns each one, all of the farms form one unified landscape. Most people struggle to view nature holistically like this, but poets, children, and people who love nature all can.

Emerson explains that when he’s in the woods, he turns into a “**transparent eyeball**” that allows him to see everything. In this state, Emerson connects with God and even becomes part of God. Likewise, when people connect with nature, they’re also connecting with themselves, because “Nature always wears the colors of the spirit.” If a person feels somber, for instance, nature will look and feel somber, too.

In Chapter 2, Emerson focuses on nature as a commodity, or the ways in which nature is useful and valuable to humankind. While nature’s status as a commodity is less important than all

of its other qualities (which each successive chapter will cover), Emerson nevertheless underscores that all of nature’s various forms (e.g., fire, stones, vegetables, animals) work together to support human life.

In Chapter 3, Emerson turns to beauty—the idea that something can produce delight in the viewer in and of itself, and not for the usefulness it can provide. Living and working in society can sap people of their vitality, so being immersed in nature’s beauty invigorates the soul. Emerson points out that every season has its own unique kind of beauty—even the depths of winter are beautiful in their own way. Part of what makes nature so beautiful, though, is that it’s imbued with the divine. Beauty also stimulates the intellect and generates creativity. The creation of beauty is called art, and all art is either the product of nature or the expression of it.

Emerson explores how nature shapes language in Chapter 4. All words represent natural objects, which in turn represent spiritual truths. (For example, “a cunning man is a fox, [...] a learned man is a torch.”) Emerson argues that people who have been corrupted by their various desires use corrupted language. But a person with good character, who’s grown up close to nature, has a skillful grasp of language and is more creative.

In Chapter 5, Emerson suggests that nature is a discipline: every aspect of it teaches us moral, spiritual, and intellectual truths. But Emerson points out that nature is also meant to serve humankind. In this chapter, he also underscores nature’s unity: even though nature takes many forms, they’re all interconnected.

Chapter 6 is about idealism. Here, Emerson contemplates how it’s impossible to prove that anything is real. But to Emerson, it doesn’t really matter whether there is an external reality or whether everything we perceive to be real is just an illusion. He suggests that most people consider themselves as permanent, while nature is in flux, but this isn’t necessarily the case. Through words and particularly through symbols, the poet is the one who is able help the reader see the world from new angles and perspectives. In contrast, both religion and ethics disregard, demonize, or undervalue nature.

In Chapter 7, Emerson suggests that nature is a manifestation of God’s Spirit, or the Supreme Being, and that nature is the means through which God connects with people. Emerson then questions what kind of matter nature is made out of, where this matter came from, and why. In this section, Emerson suggests that people are simultaneously separate from nature and part of it.

The essay’s final chapter centers around how to best study nature. Different branches of science (e.g., geology) use observations, measurements, and calculations to study nature, and they also isolate different elements of nature (like rocks and minerals) to study instead of considering those parts within

the larger whole of nature. Emerson advocates for a more holistic, intuitive approach to studying nature. But he suggests that there is value in the kind of observation that scientists use (he calls this observation “Understanding”), because people need to understand, or observe, the world before they can use their intuition to interpret those observations (he calls intuition “Reason”).

Closing his essay, Emerson suggests that we once lived in a utopian society where humankind and nature lived in harmonious unity. But over time, we stopped paying attention to the spiritual truths that nature teaches, and we grew distant from nature. To remedy this, people must spend time in nature and use their intuition to understand it—this will unify humankind with nature again.



CHARACTERS

Ralph Waldo Emerson – Emerson is the author and narrator of “Nature.” A prominent figure of American Transcendentalism, Emerson was a reverend, philosopher, and lecturer, and he also wrote poems and essays. Held in high esteem as a wise philosophical and spiritual thinker, he was nicknamed “The Sage of Concord” and “The Buddha of the West” by his contemporaries. Emerson is considered by many to be one of the most important writers of the 19th century, and he heavily influenced other well-known Transcendentalist writers such as Henry David Thoreau and Walt Whitman. In “Nature,” Emerson’s voice is firmly grounded in the principles of Transcendentalism, as he encourages readers to take a subjective, experiential approach to understanding God and nature. Rather than exclusively looking to religion, science, or various authority figures to understand the natural and supernatural, people should rely on their intuition, personal observations, and firsthand experiences in nature. Like other Transcendentalist thinkers, Emerson’s perspective throughout the essay is rooted in his reverence for nature, the individual, the divine, and beauty. As a man of deep Christian faith and a graduate of Harvard Divinity School, Emerson approaches nature through a spiritual lens, arguing that the divine is imbued in nature, and that a person can only understand God by being in nature. Emerson’s central tenet of “Nature” is recognizing that all things, humans included, are deeply interconnected and part of a greater whole.

TERMS

Sublime – A core idea in both Romanticism and Transcendentalism, the sublime refers to an experience of intense, overwhelming emotion that transcends the mundane (i.e., the earthly world). In “Nature,” **Emerson** suggests that nature produces such a state—enjoying solitude in nature

separates a person from their normal, day-to-day life, and nature’s unearthly, divine beauty is profoundly moving.

Transcendentalism – Transcendentalism was an early 19th-century philosophical movement based in the U.S. Its thinkers—**Emerson** among them—rejected the highly scientific and rational worldview that was common at the time, instead valuing subjectivity, intuition, and spirituality. They believed in the value of every individual and that society (particularly institutions like organized religion and politics) corrupted people. Transcendentalists also deeply appreciated nature and saw it as a way to understand the world and observe the interconnectedness of all things.



THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.



UNITY AND INTERCONNECTEDNESS

Emerson was a thought leader of the Transcendentalist movement, and his 1836 essay “Nature” was a founding document that outlines many of the movement’s tenets. The concept of unity—that all people and things are interconnected—is central to Transcendentalism, and Emerson focuses on the idea that people in his time (the early 19th century) have lost sight of this. In “Nature,” he proposes that nature, humanity, and the spiritual world are all animated and united by the same “Universal Being,” or life force. His central argument in the essay is that everything and everyone is interconnected—but that people have become dangerously alienated from themselves, from other people, from nature, and from the divine.

When most people look at nature, they see its individual parts, but Emerson underscores that nature is really a single, unified whole. For instance, he describes looking out at the countryside, which is dotted with 20 or 30 farms that seem separate from one another, given that they each have their own boundaries and owners. This is how most people see nature—they see its individual parts. But Emerson underscores that these seemingly disparate farms all make up one landscape. And likewise, the different aspects of the natural world (like a flower petal, the wind, a tree, an animal) all fall under the same single umbrella of nature. Emerson writes that all aspects of nature have something in common—beauty—and that “A single object is only so far beautiful as it suggests this universal grace.” Few people are able to see this interconnectedness that runs throughout the natural world. It’s

people who genuinely love nature and live in close proximity to it (Emerson includes children and poets in this category) who are able to recognize this unity.

But it's not just nature that's interconnected—Emerson stresses that humankind and nature are connected, too. To illustrate this point, Emerson describes how a person who's mourning the loss of a loved one will perceive nature as looking dark and somber, because "Nature always wears the colors of the spirit." He stresses that nature doesn't have its own personality; we project our own emotional experiences on it. In this way, nature is a reflection of humankind, and even an extension of it. The epigraph from the original 1836 version of "Nature" underscores this point. Quoting the philosopher Plotinus, Emerson notes that nature is "an image or imitation of wisdom," meaning that it's an imitation of humankind. Emerson pushes his argument about nature and humanity's interconnectedness one step further with the concept of the "Universal Being." A core Transcendentalist belief, the Universal Being is the creative, animating, supernatural life force imbued in all things. And because this spirit underpins everything—it's infused in nature and in people—it consequently links nature, humanity, and the spiritual/supernatural world together. At times, Emerson calls this force the "Universal Soul," or the "Oversoul." He suggests that just as individual aspects of the natural world (e.g., a single leaf) form the broader whole of nature, so too do individual people's souls form the universal soul.

Emerson makes—but never resolves—a key contradiction to his argument about unity. At several points throughout the essay, he (perhaps unintentionally) suggests that nature and humankind are actual distinct from one another. In the essay's Introduction, Emerson differentiates nature from Nature. With a lowercase -n, nature refers to the natural world—the common definition of the word. But when he uses Nature with a capital -N, Emerson is taking a philosophical angle: Nature encompasses the natural world (nature), art, a person's own physical body, and other people. In other words, Nature encompasses everything except for the soul. In a way, Emerson is linking nature and humankind as he notes how the physical human body is part of Nature. But he filters out the human soul—which is perhaps central to what it means to be human—from this broad definition of Nature. Overall, though, Emerson's primary point in "Nature" is clear: all things are connected, but people have lost sight of this truth.



THE TRANSFORMATIVE POWER OF NATURE

In "Nature," Emerson stresses that while humankind used to enjoy a close, pure, harmonious connection to nature, this is no longer the case. Individuals and society as a whole have become corrupted, largely because people have become disconnected from their own intuition,

spirituality, and sense of morality. But Emerson suggests that nature can heal humanity on both small and large scales. This starts on an individual level: if people spend more time in nature, it will revitalize and enlighten them, and this positive transformation will ripple out to the rest of society.

Writing in the mid-1830s in the U.S., Emerson suggests that corruption abounds on both the societal and individual level. Throughout the essay, Emerson underscores that nature teaches people moral and spiritual truths, if only people use their intuition (what Emerson calls "Reason") to recognize and absorb these lessons. But people have grown physically and emotionally distant from nature—moving out of the countryside and to the increasingly industrialized cities, for instance—and so they've consequently lost touch with this key source of moral and spiritual guidance. Emerson writes that the average person's "mind is imbruted and he is a selfish savage." Drawing on the ideas of Transcendentalist writer Amos Bronson Alcott (whom Emerson refers to in the essay as the "Orphic poet"), Emerson explains that humans have corrupting desires—like the desire for wealth, power, pleasure, or praise—and that giving in to those desires further disconnect people from nature. Living in a society that's physically set apart from nature and ungrounded in the kind of moral and spiritual truth that nature provides destroys a person's wholeness. And this separates them even further from other people, nature, morality, spirituality, and their own selves.

Given that humankind's growing distance from nature is responsible for this widespread corruption, Emerson suggests that it's only through interacting with nature directly that people can better themselves, becoming more energized, happier, and wiser. Unlike society, nature has a rejuvenating effect on people. Emerson suggests that people who spend time in nature "retain[] the spirit of infancy even into the era of manhood." In other words, even as a person grows old, their spirit stays young; they still possess a childlike energy, curiosity, and reverence when they live in close proximity to nature. Emerson uses the metaphor of a snake sloughing off its dead skin—revealing fresh, tender skin beneath—to illustrate how a person casts off their old age and is renewed in nature. "In the woods," Emerson writes, "is perpetual youth." Nature is also a source of joy, wonder, and emotional bliss. Throughout the essay, Emerson draws on his own experiences in nature. Each time, he uses joyful, emotionally charged language to describe his emotions. While he's in the countryside, he "enjoy[s] a perfect exhilaration," and admits, "Almost I fear to think how glad I am." Nature's sheer beauty brings about emotional bliss and fulfillment, as it "satisfies the soul purely by its loveliness." Another important aspect of nature is the deep sense of awe that it stirs up in a person. Emerson likens the dawn to the ancient Assyrian empire (known for its vastness, power, and splendor), the moonlight to "unimaginable realms of faerie," and nighttime to "mystic philosophy and dreams." Emerson links

nature to magnificent, indescribable, awe-inspiring places and things to emphasize that nature shares those same qualities and incites a similar sense of wonder within him.

Being in nature is also a positive form of escapism from sadness and puts a person's day-to-day struggles into perspective. He explains how if a person were to be alone in nature and look up at the stars, the starlight "will separate between him and vulgar things" (in Emerson's time, "vulgar" meant common, day-to-day things). Likewise, he suggests that when a person ventures out into nature, "a wild delight runs through [them], in spite of real sorrows." With this, Emerson suggests that while a person may have very real problems in their life, nature has a bolstering, invigorating effect and can help a person put their problems into perspective. Taking this a step further, Emerson suggests that nature can even heal or solve a person's problems.

Speaking from his own experience, he writes, "In the woods [...] I feel that nothing can befall me in life—no disgrace, no calamity [...] which nature cannot repair." Nature also provides crucial moral guidance. To illustrate this point, Emerson gives the example of a fisherman who learns "firmness" (i.e., strength of character) while out at sea: though the ocean waves crash forcefully over the rocks again and again, the rocks remain unmoved.

In the essay's final chapter, Emerson stresses that the only way to return the world to its former utopia (in which humankind and nature lived in harmony) is through "redemption of the soul." In other words, people need to become whole again on an individual level before the wider world can be redeemed, and this kind of personal transformation only happens in nature.



RELIGION, SCIENCE, AND INDIVIDUALISM

Individualism lies at the heart of Transcendentalism, so it's also central to "Nature,"

which is a founding document of the movement. For Emerson—and other Transcendentalist thinkers—spirituality is crucial to understanding the universe, and spirituality and nature are intimately connected. So, he advocates for a spiritual worldview that's based on highly subjective, personal experiences in nature. In the essay, Emerson stresses that people shouldn't look to authority figures, organized religion, history, or science for explanations about the world and about God. Rather, people must turn to their own intuition and firsthand experiences in nature and draw their own conclusions.

Emerson isolates several common—but largely unhelpful—ways of understanding the world and the divine. He suggests that society primarily relies on "tradition, and a religion by revelation to us" to understand the universe and God. By this, he seems to be saying that people look to traditional practices and beliefs, dogma, sacred writings, and/or

religious authority figures for answers about God and how the world works. Most people cling to previous generations' experiences with and insights about the divine, they use those revelations to guide their understanding rather than having their own first-hand experiences and forming their own insights. (Emerson doesn't go into detail about previous generations' experiences, but an example might be the narratives in the Bible that recount someone's experiences with the divine, like the stories about Moses in the Book of Exodus.) But to Emerson, history and tradition are stale, outdated, and unhelpful—they're "dry bones of the past" in a "faded wardrobe." In contrast, he writes that "There are new lands, new men, new thoughts. Let us demand our own works and laws and worship." With this, he's saying that the "dry bones of the past" (history and tradition) can't help us understand "new lands, new men, [and] new thoughts"—instead, people must connect with God and with nature in a new way by exploring such things for themselves and forming their own approach to spirituality.

Similar to society's emphasis on religion and tradition, many people rely on science's objective observation and calculated measurements to understand the world. But Emerson argues that this is a one-sided approach for discovery—it over-focuses on mere observation and doesn't leave room for insights gained through intuition. Instead, Emerson advocates for an individualized approach to spirituality that's grounded in personal experience in nature. Rather than revering authority figures and the knowledge they share, Emerson praises solitude and the insights that often accompany it. Throughout the essay, he writes of the insights that came to him when he was alone in the countryside (e.g., realizing that nature has the capacity to fix all of his problems) and stresses that the reader must carve out time to be alone in nature, too. With distractions and other people's influence stripped away, a person can form a one-on-one connection with nature—and consequently with God, whose spirit is imbued in nature. Emerson suggests that there's a special kind of spiritual clarity that comes from being alone in the wilderness, as he writes that "in the woods, we return to reason and faith" (when Emerson uses the word reason in his essay, he's referring to "intuition"). By referring to intuition and faith, which are abstract and emotional, Emerson frames nature as a hub for discovering spiritual truths—much like a church or other religious center might be.

From Emerson's perspective, it's not equations, scientific facts, or religious doctrine that will help a person understand the world—real understanding comes from "untaught sallies of the spirit," or sudden spiritual insights. Importantly, these insights are "untaught" and highly personal; they must come from the individual and not from an outside source like a sacred scripture or scientific journal. According to Emerson, a truly wise person knows that sometimes, dreams can teach a person

more than scientific experiments can, and a thoughtful guess can be more valuable than a proven fact.



REASON, UNDERSTANDING, AND TRUTH

Much of “Nature” is about how people are disconnected from themselves and from nature, and how they must consequently spend time in nature to fix their current corrupted state. But Emerson takes his argument a step further by outlining how, exactly, he thinks people should study, interact with, and learn from nature in order to become whole again. He suggests that, when it comes to learning about (or from) nature, people rely too heavily on their “understanding”—that is, discovering intellectual facts or objective truths through observation. And while he admits that understanding has merit, Emerson says that it’s crucial for people to lean on their intuition (which he calls “reason”) to grasp nature’s moral and spiritual teachings.

One way people can learn from nature is by using their understanding—using observation to learn intellectual truths or facts. Emerson stresses that all parts of nature “is a school for the understanding—its solidarity or resistance, its inertia, [...] its divisibility. The understanding adds, divides, combines, [and] measures [...]” Citing concepts from physics and algebra, Emerson suggests that understanding is what comes from meticulous, scientific, objective methods of observing and studying the world. He provides the example of “the astronomer, [and] the geometer”—a type of scientist and a type of mathematician, respectively—and explains that they “rely on their irrefragable analysis,” meaning the objective, indisputable conclusions they’re able to draw about the world because of their observations. (Though Emerson does contradict this idea at points throughout the essay, claiming that scientists use abstract reasoning more than physical observation.) This kind of careful observation and analysis is valuable, Emerson says, but it’s ultimately incomplete on its own.

Understanding, though essential, must be paired with intuition (“reason”) for people to grasp the full scope of nature’s teachings. In the chapter about language, Emerson explains that “Every natural fact is a symbol of some spiritual fact.” In other words, it’s not enough to know objective facts about nature, because those facts are also infused with spiritual truths that extend beyond mere understanding. For example, while mere observation can show someone that moss only grows on completely unmoving objects, there’s a spiritual or moral truth underpinning the idea that “A rolling stone gathers no moss”: a person who’s always moving from place to place can’t set down roots in a community or be successful. To Emerson, “All the facts in natural history taken by themselves, have no value,” so observation must be coupled with reason for a person to access all of nature’s valuable truths. Emerson describes tossing a stone into a stream and watching the water

ripple, and how the experience suddenly reminds him of “the flux of all things.” While a fisherman, by contrast, might watch the ocean crash over the rocky coastline again and again and learn “firmness” (i.e., strength of character) from the rocks. But in both cases, observing how stones and water interact leads to gleaning deeper spiritual or ethical truths about the human experience.

Emerson suggests that there is an “ethical character [that] so penetrates the bone and marrow of nature”—another way of saying that nature is infused with moral lessons. Even religious figures like David and Jesus, Emerson notes, have turned to nature for this kind of moral guidance. Natural truths (i.e., facts about nature) and moral truths are like faces looking at one another through glass—or, in modern phrasing, they’re two sides of the same coin. Emerson writes that “The axioms of physics translates the laws of ethics,” by which he means that objective facts about the natural world (like laws of physics) actually express moral laws or truths, too. For example, the phrases “reaction is equal to action,” or “the whole is greater than its part” are both scientific truths, but they can also be applied to life more broadly (e.g., “the whole is greater than its part” might be used to describe how a team is more effective than each individual working on their own). Overall, Emerson stresses that understanding and intuition must be woven together for a person to access the full depth of nature’s teachings.



SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



THE TRANSPARENT EYEBALL

Emerson explains that, when he’s in nature, he “become[s] a transparent eyeball”—a symbol that holds several layers of significance. The “transparent eyeball” represents the value of intuition and having personal experiences in nature; the interconnectedness of all things; and the ability to see and understand that interconnectedness.

The eyeball is “transparent,” which reflects the idea that a person comes to a clearer understanding of God and the world by spending time in nature. Emerson argues that people must not allow religion, tradition, science, or authority figures to dictate how they understand the natural and supernatural. He refers to an eyeball that allows him to “see all,” which underscores that a person’s own intuition and firsthand observation of the natural world is what gives them this valuable clarity and understanding. In line with this, Emerson also suggests that being in nature gives a person greater perspective on their own problems—which are likely small compared to nature’s vastness. Emerson writes, “In the

presence of nature, a wild delight runs through the man, in spite of real sorrows,” and he speaks from firsthand experience when he says that “In the woods [...] I feel that nothing can befall me in life [...] which nature cannot repair.”

Significantly, Emerson refers to just one eyeball—he doesn’t become a set of eyes, as might be more expected, but one single “transparent eyeball.” The eyeball’s striking singularity represents Emerson’s broader idea that all things are interconnected and form one unified whole. After becoming this “transparent eyeball,” Emerson writes, “I am nothing. I see all.” The words “nothing” and “all” again align with the idea that all things, no matter how small and insignificant, are part of an integrated whole.

Just before his reference to the eyeball, Emerson explains how there might be 20 or 30 farms dotted across a swath of land, but those farms nevertheless make up one unified landscape. Right after this explanation, Emerson writes, “There is a property in the horizon which no man has but he whose eye can integrate all the parts, that is, the poet.” The reference to a person’s “eye,” in conjunction with the idea that all things are part of a larger whole, suggests that the “transparent eyeball” can also represent the poet. Unlike most people, poets see nature clearly—that is, they understand the unity and interconnectedness of all things, which Emerson suggests all people should strive for.

“our own works and laws and worship.” Old teachings can’t help us navigate or understand “new lands, new men, new thoughts”; only by experiencing these things firsthand can a person gain their own understanding of the world around them.

During Emerson’s time (the mid-1830s), this was a radically individualistic stance, which explains why Emerson repeats the word “new” so many times in this passage. In this quote—and throughout “Nature”—Emerson strips religion, science, and authority figures of their power. Instead, he encourages his readers spend time in nature alone; form a personal connection with God (whose spirit, according to Emerson, is imbued in nature); and come to their own conclusions about the natural and supernatural worlds by using their intuition.

●● Philosophy considered, the universe is composed of Nature and the Soul. Strictly speaking therefore, all that is separate from us, all which Philosophy distinguishes as the NOT ME, that is, both nature and art, all other men and my own body, must be ranked under this name, NATURE. In enumerating the values of nature and casting up their sum, I shall use the word in both senses—in its common and in its philosophical import. [...] *Nature*, in the common sense, refers to essences unchanged by man; space, the air, the river, the leaf. *Art* is applied to the mixture of his will with the same things, as in a house, a canal, a statue, a picture. But his operations taken together are so insignificant, a little chipping, baking, patching, and washing, that in an impression so grand as that of the world on the human mind, they do not vary the result.

Related Characters: Ralph Waldo Emerson (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 2

Explanation and Analysis

At the end of the Introduction, Emerson defines a few terms that are central to the arguments he’ll make in the following chapters. Most notably, he separates Nature (uppercase -N) from nature (lowercase -n): the latter (nature) refers to the natural world, which is the common definition of the word that readers will be familiar with. But Emerson takes a philosophical angle with the word Nature, suggesting that it encompasses everything besides the Soul. In other words, it encompasses the natural world (nature), other people, art, and even one’s own physical body—again, everything besides the Soul. (This broad definition explains why, later on in the essay, he considers things like debt and property to



QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Dover Thrift Editions edition of *Nature and Other Essays* published in 2009.

Introduction Quotes

●● The sun shines to-day also. There is more wool and flax in the fields. There are new lands, new men, new thoughts. Let us demand our own works and laws and worship.

Related Characters: Ralph Waldo Emerson (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 1

Explanation and Analysis

After explaining how people commonly look to the past to understand God and the world, Emerson stresses that we need a new method in the present. To Emerson, the revelations and teachings that one can learn from religion and tradition are stale and outdated, so we need to form

be natural objects.)

Even though it may seem in this passage like Emerson is focused on how things are separate from one another (e.g., the soul is separate from Nature), the crux of his argument in “Nature” is actually the interconnectedness of all things. Here, he’s breaking down concepts like Nature and Art to show not how things differ, but how they come together to form a unified whole: like how Nature plus the Soul make up the universe.

Chapter 1: Nature Quotes

☛ But if a man would be alone, let him look at the stars. The rays that come from those heavenly worlds, will separate between him and vulgar things. One might think the atmosphere was made transparent with this design, to give man, in the heavenly bodies, the perpetual presence of the sublime. Seen in the streets of cities, how great they are! If the stars should appear one night in a thousand years, how would men believe and adore; and preserve for many generations the remembrance of the city of God which had been shown! But every night come out these preachers of beauty, and light the universe with their admonishing smile.

The stars awaken a certain reverence, because though always present, they are inaccessible; but all natural objects make a kindred impression, when the mind is open to their influence.

Related Characters: Ralph Waldo Emerson (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 2

Explanation and Analysis

Here, Emerson explains how being in nature—and specifically being in nature alone—is deeply transformative. He gives the example of someone going out into nature to look at the stars and being transported out of their normal, day-to-day life. This kind of intentional, reflective, solo interaction with nature is so profound that a person can experience the sublime—which is essentially a rush of strong emotion brought on by some part of the natural world. (The sublime is a common concept in Romanticism, which is an intellectual and artistic movement that overlaps with the Transcendentalist movement that Emerson was a part of.)


In this passage, Emerson stresses that most people take nature’s beauty for granted. If the stars were to only shine for one night every thousand years, the sky would look like

“the city of God,” and people would remember and recount the experience for generations. But because the stars shine most every night, it’s easy to forget how striking and magical-looking they are. Because of this tendency to take nature’s beauty for granted, Emerson emphasizes that people must carve out intentional time to be in nature and open themselves up to whatever the natural world might show and teach them.

☛ 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 eye-ball; I am nothing. I see all. The currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or particle of God.

Related Characters: Ralph Waldo Emerson (speaker)

Related Themes:    

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 3

Explanation and Analysis

Emerson has just extolled the value of spending time alone in nature, and in this passage, he shares his own first-hand experience. One of the key ideas Emerson raises here is that nature can put a person’s worldly troubles into perspective. This passage implies that, because nature is so vast and feels so set apart from society, it makes a person’s problems seem small by comparison (this is why Emerson describes feeling like “nothing”). And even if “disgrace” or “calamity” does befall him, Emerson says, he’s confident that nature can fix it.

Also striking in this passage is the “transparent eyeball” image, for which Emerson and “Nature” are well-known. This image encapsulates many of the essays core themes: most notably, the eyeball suggests that a person gains perspective, clarity, wisdom, and insight when they spend time in nature. And the fact that Emerson becomes *one* eyeball (not a set of eyes) and details both feeling God flowing through him and himself in God points to the idea that all things (nature, people, the divine, etc.) are connected.

It is necessary to use these pleasures with great temperance. For, nature is not always tricked in holiday attire, but the same scene which yesterday breathed perfume and glittered as for the frolic of the nymphs, is overspread 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.

Related Characters: Ralph Waldo Emerson (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 3



Explanation and Analysis

The primary theme in “Nature” is unity—how all things (including humankind, nature, and the divine) are interconnected and meant to live in alignment with one another. In this passage, Emerson speaks to the interconnectedness between nature and humankind. He suggests that “Nature always wears the color of the spirit,” meaning that nature doesn’t have a personality of its own and instead takes on the onlooker’s emotions or experiences (i.e., their “spirit”). That’s why the landscape looks and feels “less grand” and even “contempt[uous]” to someone who is grieving a friend’s death: the deep sadness they feel over the loss colors the landscape, as if they were looking through the world with dark, tinted glasses. And because people project their own feelings onto the natural landscape, “nature is not always tricked in holiday attire”—meaning it’s not always going to look beautiful and festive, because most people don’t feel that way at all times, either.

Chapter 2: Commodity Quotes

The misery of man appears like childish petulance, when we explore the steady and prodigal provision that has been made for his support and delight on this green ball which floats him through the heavens. What angels invented these splendid ornaments, these rich conveniences, this ocean of air above, this ocean of water beneath, this firmament of earth between? this zodiac of lights, this tent of dropping clouds, this striped coat of climates, this fourfold year? Beasts, fire, water, stones, and corn serve him. The field is at once his floor, his work-yard, his play-ground, his garden, and his bed.

Related Characters: Ralph Waldo Emerson (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 4

Explanation and Analysis

In this chapter, Emerson begins his examination of the first element of nature’s relationship with humankind: commodity, or the practical ways that nature aids humankind. As he highlights in this passage—and throughout the entire chapter—all parts of nature work together to sustain human life. From Emerson’s perspective, nature is meant to humbly serve humankind (hence why “Beasts, fire, water, stones, and corn serve [people]”), but in return, people should respect and even revere nature for its service.

Most people fail to show nature the gratitude and respect it deserves, though, and to Emerson, this ingratitude is nothing more than “childish petulance.” He suggests that nature’s sheer splendor, coupled with the practical ways it supports and enriches human life (“these rich conveniences”), should make a person feel happy and supported. So, when people are miserable even despite living on a miraculous “green ball which floats him through the heavens,” Emerson sees such unhappiness as foolish and naïve, much like a child’s tantrum.

Chapter 3: Beauty Quotes

To the body and mind which have been cramped by noxious work or company, nature is medicinal and restores their tone. The tradesman, the attorney comes out of the din and craft of the street, and sees the sky and the woods, and is a man again. In their eternal calm, he finds himself. The health of the eye seems to demand a horizon. We are never tired, so long as we can see far enough.

Related Characters: Ralph Waldo Emerson (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 6

Explanation and Analysis

Here, Emerson illustrates a sharp contrast between city life and country life. He suggests that life in the industrialized city (he’s writing in the mid-1830s, in the midst of the American Industrial Revolution) saps a person of their vitality and stifles them. A person who lives in an industrialized society is “cram[ped]”—the close quarters and loud noises of the city (it’s described as a “din”) are


physically uncomfortable, but they also crowd out a person's spirit. Emerson suggests that city life can even be outright corrupting, since he refers to industry as "noxious," or poisonous and harmful.

Unlike life in the city, nature is "medicinal," "restor[ative]," and "eternal[ly] calm"—it's a place of peace, rest, self-discovery, and healing. Emerson's sharp contrast in language here underscores one of the essay's primary points: that nature has a positive, transformative effect on people on physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual levels. This passage also points back to the idea that nature sustains human life; Emerson suggests that nature is like a medicine that heals a person and gives them energy to "never tire[.]" So, even though Emerson's society saw industrialization as what was sustaining and enriching human life, Emerson suggests the opposite. City life is, in part, what's disconnected humankind from nature and disconnected people from themselves. The only way for a person to restore unity within themselves—and eventually restore unity on a societal or global level—is to spend time in nature alone. Because when a person "sees the sky and the woods, [they are] a [hu]man again."

Chapter 5: Discipline Quotes

☛☛ Space, time, society, labor, climate, food, locomotion, the animals, the mechanical forces, give us sincerest lessons, day by day, whose meaning is unlimited. They educate both the Understanding and the Reason. Every property of matter is a school for the understanding—its solidity or resistance, its inertia, its extension, its figure, its divisibility. The understanding adds, divides, combines, measures, and finds everlasting nutriment and room for its activity in this worthy scene. Meantime, Reason transfers all these lessons into its own world of thought, by perceiving the analogy that marries Matter and Mind.

Related Characters: Ralph Waldo Emerson (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 15

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Emerson emphasizes that nature is like a discipline, or field of study, so it has a lot of lessons to teach humankind. Every aspect of nature has some sort of lesson or wisdom to impart: "Space, time, society, labor, climate, food, locomotion, the animals, the mechanical forces, give us sincerest lessons, day by day, whose meaning is unlimited." Here, Emerson is referring to Nature (all things that aren't

the soul) rather than nature (the natural world), which is why things like "labor" and "locomotion" are included in his list of natural objects.


He also notes that there are two ways of learning from and about the world: using one's Understanding and Reason. Understanding basically means using observation to learn intellectual truths or facts—like how science might discern an object's "inertia" or "divisibility." Reason, by contrast, means using one's intuition to grasp spiritual or moral truths. These are things a person can't learn through observing, adding, subtracting, combining, and measuring. In this passage, Emerson stresses that Understanding isn't problematic—it's actually essential for learning about the world. But it's incomplete on its own and must be "marrie[d]" with Reason for a person to fully understand the world around them.

Chapter 7: Spirit Quotes

☛☛ Therefore, that spirit, that is, the Supreme Being, does not build up nature around us, but puts it forth through us, as the life of the tree puts forth new branches and leaves through the pores of the old. As a plant upon the earth, so a man rests upon the bosom of God: he is nourished by unfailing fountains, and draws, at his need, inexhaustible power.

Related Characters: Ralph Waldo Emerson (speaker)

Related Themes:    

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 27

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Emerson highlights how God's divine spirit is infused in nature. The spirit of God, whom Emerson also refers to as "the Supreme Being" lives in nature, but it also lives *through* nature. Emerson makes this point early on in the essay when he suggests that being in nature transforms him into a "transparent eyeball," and that, in this state, he feels God's spirit pulsing through him, but he also suddenly feels like he's part of God, too.

Similarly, in this passage, he explains how "the tree puts forth new branches and leaves through the pores of the old." With this analogy, Emerson is gesturing to the essay's core theme of unity: all things (e.g., nature, God, people) are interconnected, and they're meant to live in harmonious alignment, or unity, with one another. And it's by spending time in nature that a person connects with God and

restores this unity: “As a plant upon the earth, so a man rests upon the bosom of God.”

Chapter 8: Prospects Quotes

●● The reason why the world lacks unity, and lies broken and in heaps, is, because man is disunited with himself. He cannot be a naturalist, until he satisfies all the demands of the spirit.

Related Characters: Ralph Waldo Emerson (speaker)

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 31

Explanation and Analysis

In the essay’s final chapter, Emerson addresses the rampant

disunity he sees in society. Throughout “Nature,” he’s stressed that all things are interconnected and meant to be in alignment—for instance, people and nature are intimately connected, and people are supposed to live in harmonious unity with the natural world. And because all things are connected, when people are disconnected from themselves, it affects this broader unity of all things. This, Emerson stresses, is why the world “lies broken and in heaps.”

Here, Emerson encourages the reader to focus on coming back into unity within themselves by “satisf[ying] all the demands of the spirit” in order to eventually restore the world’s unity. Throughout the essay, he’s suggested that the key way for people to do this is to spend time alone in nature. In doing so, they will gain the energy and wisdom that they lack, reestablish their connection with God, and bring society a step closer to healing itself.



SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

INTRODUCTION

Emerson quotes philosopher Plotinus in the epigraph that proceeds the introduction. In it, Plotinus suggests that nature is an “image or imitation” of humankind.

Plotinus was an ancient philosopher who founded Neoplatonism. His philosophy hinged on three key elements: the One, the Intelligence, and the Soul. This breakdown of reality into parts echoes the way Emerson breaks down nature into smaller parts at the end of the Introduction. The epigraph also introduces the idea that humankind and nature are intimately connected, and that people project their own experiences or emotions onto nature (which is why nature is an “image or imitation”).



Our society is focused on the past—it’s common, for instance, for people to build monuments or write biographies of famous figures from the past. And in the past, it was once common for people to “be[hold] God and nature face to face.” Emerson suggests that we should draw inspiration from this particular past and likewise cultivate a personal connection with the universe.

Here, Emerson suggests that society—at least in his current time and place (mid-1830s United States)—is overly focused on the past. But ironically, in the past, people often had a personal connection to the universe and to God, and Emerson suggests that this approach is what we should try to venerate and replicate in the present.



Emerson suggests that poetry and philosophy should be grounded in intuition, not tradition, and that religion should hinge on one’s own personal revelations rather than someone else’s. We must set aside “the dry bones of the past” and instead think new thoughts, explore new lands, meet new people, construct new laws, and engage in a new kind of worship. Emerson encourages the reader to adopt a curious, questioning mindset and to contemplate “to what end is nature.”

Emerson suggests that the lessons we can glean from the past are like “dry bones,” which means that they’re essentially dead and have been wrung dry of any kind of nourishment. These “dry bones” need to be buried, and people need to focus on experiencing the world that’s in front of them and drawing their own conclusions about God and nature this way.



All forms of science try to pin down a “theory of nature,” but Emerson suggests that humankind is actually far away from “the road to truth.” He sees proof of this in the way that religions squabble with one another, and in the way that critical thinkers are deemed trivial and foolish. But to Emerson, “the most abstract truth is the most practical.”

Here, Emerson lays out the key issue humanity faces: we’re not living in alignment with truth, nor are we even on the “road to truth.” In this passage, he suggests that what society values (e.g., arguing about who’s right; practical, concrete truth; etc.) isn’t what will realign humanity with truth.



Emerson suggests that the universe has two parts: Nature and the Soul. In other words, Nature is everything that isn't a person's own Soul—it consists of the natural world (nature in the common sense of the word, spelled with a lower-case -n), other people, and even one's own physical body. Art also falls under the umbrella of Nature; it's the combination of nature and human will. For instance, a statue is composed of natural materials (e.g., stone) and an artist's choice to create something out of those materials (human will).

In breaking up the universe into smaller parts, Emerson echoes Plotinus's similarly structured philosophy. Although Emerson is separating out Nature from the Soul, his overarching point is actually about unity, not division. In other words, he's not trying to stress how Nature and the Soul are different, but how Nature and the Soul combine to form one universe (and likewise, how all of the different parts of Nature combine to form Nature).



CHAPTER 1: NATURE

If a person spends time in solitude in nature—like if they look at the stars—it will allow them to temporarily transcend their day-to-day lives and connect with the sublime. Since the stars shine nearly every night, people take their beauty for granted. But a wise person never takes nature's beauty for granted and never loses their childlike curiosity about the world.

Here, Emerson begins to flesh out the idea that people need firsthand experiences in nature—that's why he brings up the example of someone looking at the stars alone. This kind of experience is so impactful that it temporarily uproots a person from their mundane, day-to-day lives and connects them with the divine, or the sublime. (The sublime is a key concept in Romanticism, which preceded Transcendentalism. It essentially refers to the overwhelming emotions that can bubble up when a person is alone in nature.)



Emerson notes that nature is a unified whole made up of lots of natural objects. He gives the example of looking out at the land and seeing 20 or 30 farms in this distance. But even though they're separate farms with separate owners, they nevertheless make up the same single landscape.

Through the example of the disparate farms forming a single landscape, Emerson returns to the concept of unity and interconnectedness. Taken together, every element of nature (e.g., a leaf or a flower) combine to form the natural world. This hearkens back to his structured definitions of nature (the natural world) and Nature (the natural world plus everything that's not the Soul) at the end of the Introduction.



Few adults see nature clearly, but children do, as do adults who have a deep and enduring love for nature (since they've retained their childlike spirit even as adults). For such people, being in nature is "part of [their] daily food." These people find delight in every season and variation of nature—from a beautiful afternoon to the "grimmiest midnight."

Throughout the essay, Emerson highlights that nature has a transformative effect on people. He begins to build that argument here by showing how adults who love nature are wiser (they see nature clearly); happier (they enjoy nature no matter the season or time of day); and more youthful (they retain a childlike energy and curiosity) than adults who don't spend time in nature or love nature. The idea that nature is "part of [their] daily food" suggests that nature is crucial to physical well-being, but it also has religious undertones. With this, Emerson is drawing an association between nature and Communion (or Eucharist) in the Christian tradition. Just as Christians ritualistically eat bread and drink wine to connect with Christ and his sacrificial death, so too do nature lovers consume nature for spiritual nourishment.



When a person is in nature, all of their day-to-day concerns melt away, and they are overcome with a sense of youthfulness, optimism, and clarity. Emerson writes that when he's in the woods, he turns into a **"transparent eyeball"** that allows him to become "nothing" while also seeing everything clearly. In this state, he feels God (or the "Universal Being") pulse through him, but he also feels that he is "part or particle" of God. To Emerson, the wilderness is far more beautiful and nourishing than the city.

Once again, Emerson returns to the idea that solitude in nature lifts a person out of their earthly lives and transforms them spiritually or emotionally in the process. One of the most famous images in the essay, the "transparent eyeball" speaks to the idea that being in nature gives a person clarity and wisdom about how all things are connected. This is why Emerson feels God's presence in himself but also feels himself in God—the two are intimately connected, and nature facilitates this spiritual experience of unity.



When he's in the countryside, Emerson shares an intimate relationship with nature. He and nature nod in acknowledgment at one another—an experience that is both "new [...] and old," and surprising but not totally unfamiliar. He underscores that nature absorbs a person's emotions—that is, how "Nature always wears the colors of the spirit." So, if a person has just lost a loved one, nature will look more somber to them.

"Nature" is full of contradictions (intentional and otherwise), and Emerson raises some here. He suggests that the harmonious relationship he shares with nature is simultaneously "new [...] and old," surprising and unsurprising. He also emphasizes that nature doesn't have a personality of its own: it absorbs people's emotions and experiences, which is why nature might look more bleak or harsh when a person is overcome with similarly painful feelings of grief.



CHAPTER 2: COMMODITY

Emerson explains that, in the coming chapters, he will tackle each element of nature's relationship with humankind: "Commodity; Beauty; Language; and Discipline." By "Commodity," he's referring to nature's practical, immediate, "low" uses rather than the grander, more spiritual ways that nature affects the Soul. Of all of the elements of nature outlined above, Emerson writes that commodity is the only one that all people grasp.

This chapter marks the beginning of Emerson's investigation into each main element of nature's relationship with humankind, ordered from lowest to highest importance. His hierarchy is somewhat similar to the concept of psychologist Abraham Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. Just as the foundational level of Maslow's pyramid (psychological needs like food, water, sleep, warmth) are crucial to mere survival but don't satisfy psychological needs (e.g., friendship or respect), so too is commodity the most basic way that people connect and use nature but doesn't extend beyond survival.



Earth was created to "support and delight" humankind. And because of this, Emerson thinks that when people are miserable, it reads like ungrateful "childish petulance." Indeed, all parts of nature work together to take care of humankind. For instance, the wind spreads seeds into fields, the rain nourishes the seeds and helps them grow into plants, the plants then feed animals, and so on.

Though Emerson has stressed that people who love nature are childlike, here, he suggests that people who don't grasp the full extent to which nature sustains human life are childish. In other words, Emerson praises having a childlike spirit of openness, curiosity, and delight. But he criticizes moodiness, irritability, and selfishness—the negative qualities children can have. He suggests that people who don't recognize how thoroughly nature sustains life appear ungrateful and naïve, like a child having a tantrum.



These days, a person doesn't have to wait for a gust of wind to fill their ship's sails and carry the ship forward on the sea. That person can power their ship by steam, and "realize[] the fable of Aeolus's bag." Between "the era of Noah to that of Napoleon," Emerson writes, people have discovered countless ways to use nature to their benefit.

Aeolus's bag is a reference to Homer's Odyssey. In the epic, Greek god Aeolus—keeper of the winds—gives Odysseus a bag of wind that he can use to guide his ship back home to Ithaca, which he's been away from for years. Throughout the Odyssey, Odysseus is at the mercy of the gods and the Fates, but what Emerson is saying here is that by capitalizing on nature's resources, people can essentially control their own fate—or at least control their own ships. The reference to steam power is also a nod to the American Industrial Revolution, which was going on while Emerson was writing. He suggests that between biblical times (he references Noah from the Book of Genesis) and his contemporary time (the 19th century), people have made great strides in approaching nature as a commodity and shaping it for their own uses.



CHAPTER 3: BEAUTY

Emerson moves on to beauty, which is "nobler" than commodity. The Greek word for "world" is **κόσμος**, meaning "beauty." To Emerson, beauty refers to the enjoyment that comes from objects' "outline, color, motion, and grouping."

Emerson points out the connection between the words "world" and "beauty" in Greek to emphasize how beauty is woven throughout the entire natural world.



Recognizing beauty has a lot to do with light (anything looks beautiful in the right kind of light) and the physical structure of the eye. To Emerson, "the eye is the best composer" and "light is the first of painters." All natural forms are beautiful to the eye, because there is a "general grace diffused over nature."

The word "grace" can mean elegance, but it also has Christian undertones. In this context, it refers to God's favor, which is unearned. Throughout much of "Nature," Emerson stresses that nature is imbued with the divine—so here, he's perhaps saying that God's divine grace is what's "diffused over nature."



Emerson outlines three different aspects of Beauty. The first is that looking at natural forms is inherently enjoyable. Living and working in society drains a person of their energy, whereas being in nature is nourishing and revitalizing for the Soul. Appreciating nature's beauty means admiring nature's various spectacles without searching for some kind of practical use.

The American Industrial Revolution was in full swing while Emerson was writing. During this time, technological advancements, railroads, and factories flourished, leading to more industrialized cities. But Emerson suggests that this kind of environment is actually draining and stifling, and that nature is the only cure. (Rebecca Harding Davis's "Life in the Iron Mills," set in the 1830s, paints a similar picture of life in the industrialized U.S.)



Emerson describes watching the sunrise peek over the hill by his house and looking out at the sea. These experiences are so moving that he declares, “Give me health and a day, and I will make the pomp of emperors ridiculous.” He writes that the sunrise is his Assyria, the sunset is his fairyland, and nighttime is his “Germany of mystic philosophy and dreams.”

Having just gestured to the Industrial Revolution, which brought economic prosperity, Emerson declares here that all he needs is good health and a day in nature. These two things alone are enough to eclipse “the pomp of emperors” and make this kind of earthly “pomp” (spectacle) seem absurd. He likens different parts of the day to ancient Assyria, which was known for its vastness, power, and displays of wealth to underscore nature’s own vastness and power, power, and resplendence. And in likening the sunset to a fairyland and nighttime to “mystic philosophy and dreams,” he suggests that nature is likewise magical and mysterious.



People who live in the city assume that the countryside is only beautiful half the year, but Emerson underscores that every season has its own unique, ethereal beauty. Describing the yellow butterflies and richly colored plants that populate the river in the summertime, Emerson declares that “Art cannot rival this pomp of purple and gold,” and that “the river is a perpetual gala.”

Earlier in the chapter, Emerson suggested that good health and a day in nature are enough to outdo the “pomp of emperors” (and make that material version of “pomp” look ridiculous). He repeats a similar sentiment in this passage by calling the brightly colored plants “this pomp of purple and gold” and suggesting that even art, like material wealth, can’t complete with nature’s splendor.



The second element of nature’s beauty has to do with spirituality. Emerson explains that “Beauty is the mark God sets upon virtue.” Nature’s beauty thus adds to the beauty of people’s heroic, virtuous deeds. And people who act virtuously are more likely to open themselves up to nature’s influence.

By drawing a connection between nature, beauty, God, and virtue, Emerson is again underscoring the interconnectedness of all things. By saying that beauty is essentially God’s stamp of approval (e.g., God approves of things that are virtuous, so he makes them beautiful), Emerson is also suggesting that nature is inherently good.



The third and final aspect of nature’s beauty is that it’s connected to the intellect. Emerson suggests that the intellect loves order, and order is a manifestation of the divine.

Here, Emerson suggests that the way things are ordered, or arranged, in nature is in part what makes them appear beautiful. Similar to the previous section, Emerson draws a connection in this passage between nature, beauty, the intellect, and God to emphasize that all things are united.



While *Taste* refers to the love of beauty, *Art* refers to the creation of beauty. Even though art can take many forms, all art is a reflection of the world—a microcosm of nature. Likewise, truth, goodness, and beauty “are but different faces of the same All.”

Just how nature is one unified whole despite being made up of lots of different elements, virtues like truth and beauty are different pieces or “faces” of the same unified whole. Emerson also takes a different angle in his argument about unity by suggesting that art isn’t just part of Nature but is also a microcosm of it (i.e., nature encapsulated in miniature form).



CHAPTER 4: LANGUAGE

The third way that Nature serves humankind is through language. Emerson breaks down nature's impact on language into three parts. First, he notes that abstract words actually grew out of words for physical objects. For instance, "wrong means *twisted*," and "Spirit primarily means *wind*."

These physical objects are consequently reflective of spiritual truths. According to Emerson, every "state of the mind" is reflected in nature and described as such. For example, "An enraged man is a lion," while "A lamb is innocence; a snake is subtle spite; flowers express to use the delicate affections."

When a person throws a rock into a stream and watches the ripples on the water, they notice "the flux of all things" and begin to grasp that there is a "universal soul" underpinning their own existence—something that connects them to Nature and to all other people. Emerson calls this *Reason*. He suggests that the analogies and symbols he's outlined in this section are universal across time and place and even across different languages.

Nature is an interpreter between people. But Emerson cautions that a person's grasp of language largely depends on their character. If a person is corrupted—meaning that they've given into their various desires (e.g., for wealth, power, praise, or pleasure)—then the language they use to communicate is corrupted, too. A corrupted person can't create new ideas or imagery; they misuse words, and their language is less impactful.

In contrast, wise people have a more grounded approach to language because they "fasten words again to visible things," and their language is aligned with truth and with God. Such people are able to create new imagery spontaneously. Emerson suggests that living in the country is therefore better for the mind than living in the city—a poet who's grown up in the woods has a powerful grasp on language.

Modern linguists have discredited Emerson's argument about how abstract words grew out of words for physical objects. But nevertheless, Emerson's point is again that all things are connected, and that the natural world is foundational to human life.



Here, Emerson begins to edge toward the argument that nature is imbued with spiritual truths that extend beyond what a person might learn through mere observation.



The "universal soul" (also called the over-soul) refers to the life force that runs through all people and things, animating them and connecting them to one another—a clear articulation of Emerson's suggestion that everything and everyone is connected. On another note, when Emerson uses the word Reason throughout the essay, he's not using it in the common sense (e.g., logic or rationality)—he means something more like intuition.



Similar to the previous chapter, Emerson is drawing a connection between several seemingly separate things: nature, language, and morality. But to Emerson, these three things are intimately connected. Essentially, a person's character depends on their connection to nature, and a person's use of language depends on their character.



In the introduction, Emerson stressed that there are many new places to explore, new thoughts to think, and new people to meet—and that clinging to antiquated teachings is unhelpful. He makes a similar argument here by stressing the need for new imagery, which can only be created if a person is aligned with God and lives close to nature.



Next, Emerson examines how our use of language gives nature a spiritual element. He suggests that “the whole of nature is a metaphor of the human mind.” Similarly, human laws (e.g., scientific laws about matter) and laws of nature mirror one another, as “The axioms of physics translate the laws of ethics.” In line with this, he notes that common proverbs and famous sayings often contain a natural fact—for instance, “A rolling stone gathers no moss,” or “The last ounce broke the camel’s back.”

If a person lives in harmony with nature, they will come to understand nature “by degrees.” Eventually, the natural world will be like an “open book.”

According to Emerson, science and ethics are like two sides of the same coin. With this, he’s gesturing to the idea that people can learn intellectual truths or objective facts from observing nature, but there’s also a more spiritual layer of nature that they can learn from, too.



Emerson suggests that learning about and learning from nature is a piecemeal process, but a person will gradually come to see nature clearly and learn from nature effortlessly.



CHAPTER 5: DISCIPLINE

Nature is a discipline—meaning that nature is a field of study, and it’s also a teacher. Every aspect of nature has something to teach and can educate a person’s Understanding and Reason.

First, Emerson examines how nature teaches people intellectual truths. In our day-to-day lives, we learn lessons about how natural objects are different from or similar to one another, as well as lessons about order and generality. Emerson uses debt and property as examples of natural objects that are instructive, and he suggests that those who suffer the most from debt are the ones who need to learn from it the most.

Every interaction we have with the world also teaches us about how we can shape nature according to our human will. This is because nature is meant to serve mankind, just like “the ass on which the Saviour rode.”

Throughout the essay, Emerson uses Understanding to mean the process of learning intellectual truths or facts through mere observation. And by Reason, he’s actually referring to something closer to the process of using one’s intuition to grasp spiritual or moral truths from nature.



Since Emerson defined Nature so broadly in the introduction (Nature with a capital -N refers to everything that’s not the Soul), he then categories debt and property as natural objects.



Emerson is referring to the story in the Gospels of Jesus riding into Jerusalem on a donkey while crowds cheered. With this biblical reference, Emerson is aligning humankind with Jesus, and nature with the donkey. Much of “Nature” is about how nature and humankind are interconnected and need to return to their former state of unity. But here, Emerson separates humankind and nature by suggesting that nature is subservient, and that people are meant to have dominion over it.



Nature, as the “ally of Religion,” also teaches moral lessons—even prophets and religious figures like David and Jesus have turned to nature for moral instruction. Moral truth is imbued in nature (Emerson suggests that a farm is like a silent gospel), but the amount of moral influence nature has is different for each person.

Emerson then underscores the “Unity of Nature,” and he references the lesson underpinning the Greek myth of the prophet Proteus. Every element of nature (e.g., a leaf or a raindrop), Emerson explains, is part of a broader whole and is like a microcosm (a small-scale representation) of that whole. Even elements of nature that seem dissimilar are still related and imbued with the universal Spirit, or God. To illustrate this point, Emerson uses the example of a circle that has “innumerable sides.”

Extending the concept of unity to words and actions, Emerson suggests that “Words are finite organs of the infinite mind” and can corrupt truth. But action—and particularly a good, moral action—is the “perfection and publication of thought” and connects with the whole of nature. Emerson suggests that words and actions are what set people apart from (and allow them to domineer over) other elements of nature.

CHAPTER 6: IDEALISM

Next, Emerson examines external reality, questioning whether the world we perceive with our senses is actually real, or if it’s just an illusion. But Emerson suggests that it doesn’t really matter if nature truly exists or is just an illusion that exists in people’s minds. Either way, nature is still “useful” and “venerable.”

Most people take comfort in permanence, including the permanence of humankind and that of natural laws. After all, humankind generally believes that it’s “not built like a ship to be tossed, but like a house to stand.” In other words, people see themselves as separate from nature. But still, Emerson points out, this doesn’t answer the question of nature’s “absolute existence.” The only way for a person to really see things clearly (and shed their faith in permanence) is if they use Reason.

In this passage, Emerson speaks directly to the idea that nature can teach spiritual or moral lessons, just like religion might, if only a person spends time in nature alone. This approach is individualistic because people must go alone into nature and learn these lessons for themselves, but the lessons will also influence each person differently.



According to Greek mythology, Proteus knew everything about the past, present, and future but guarded this knowledge fiercely. The only way to get him to divulge what he knew was to sneak up on him while he was sleeping and hold onto him tightly while he tried to shape-shift and escape. Because of his shape-shifting abilities, he’s essentially a symbol of the matter or substance that all things are made of—that is, the “Unity of Nature.” Nature, like a circle and like the shape-shifting Proteus, has “innumerable sides” but is all part of the same overarching whole.



Once again, Emerson connects morality, language, and nature. His reasoning is complex, but he’s essentially suggesting that actions are purer and more virtuous than words. Both are important, though, in that they both set humankind apart from other elements of nature (e.g., plants and animals).



Emerson makes deep, philosophical arguments throughout “Nature,” but there’s one particular philosophical question that he doesn’t care to know the answer to: whether or not there is an external reality. To Emerson, all that matters is that we do perceive nature with our senses. Even if this perception is just an illusion, we nevertheless can use and learn from nature.



While most people see themselves as “a house to stand” (that is, fairly permanent) Emerson will later side with a poet who suggests that nature is actually the house, while we are the residents who come and go.



Emerson suggests that looking at nature from a different physical perspective—like seeing the shoreline from a ship or hot air balloon—makes the world look “pictorial” and fills us with both delight and wonder.

Poets are skilled at manipulating perspective in this way. Through words and literary devices, the poet “unfixes the land and the sea” and shapes the natural world into symbols. Emerson cites Shakespeare’s *Tempest* as an example of poetry that uses natural imagery and symbolism skillfully.

Emerson points out that the poet’s goal is to illuminate beauty, while the philosopher’s goal is to illuminate truth. Quoting Plato, Emerson underscores that philosophy’s biggest shortcoming is that it, too, subscribes to the idea of permanence. He suggests that the “true poet” and the “true philosopher” are two iterations of the same being, and that truth and beauty are also two sides of the same coin.

Emerson then discusses “intellectual science.” According to Emerson, science encourages people to doubt external reality, and it is focused on abstract ideas rather than physical things. He suggests that religion and ethics also focus on abstract ideas as opposed to observation. (Emerson differentiates religion and ethics by saying that, unlike ethics, “Religion includes the personality of God.”) Religion encourages its practitioners to focus on the “unseen,” “eternal” things.

The two key ways of learning about and learning from nature, according to Emerson, are Understanding (using observation to learn intellectual truths) and Reason (using intuition to learn spiritual or moral truths). In other words, Emerson is concerned with perspective: the same natural landscape can teach intellectual, moral, or spiritual truths based on a person’s perspective and approach. Here, he makes perspective more literal by showing how seeing nature from new heights or new angles is uniquely satisfying and captivating.



Earlier in the essay, Emerson emphasized that people who are virtuous and spend a lot of time in nature are thus skillful and creative in their use of language (especially as it relates to imagery and symbolism).



Emerson’s primary goal in the essay is to stress how all things are connected—even if they seem dissimilar on the surface. He does so here by suggesting that both poets and philosophers are in the business of illuminating something, whether that be truth or beauty—and that truth and beauty themselves are similar concepts, too.



At several points in the essay, Emerson criticizes science for relying too heavily on objective facts and measurements. But here he suggests the opposite, claiming that science relies more heavily on abstract ideas than observation. This is one of several contradictions in the essay that scholars have pointed out. But Emerson’s overarching point in this passage is that people must focus on experiencing the physical, natural world, and that in doing so, a person can learn those more abstract lessons. A person can’t focus on “unseen” or “eternal” things (e.g., heaven) without looking to the natural world first for spiritual guidance.



Poetry, science, religion, and ethics all influence our understanding of external reality. Emerson suggests that a person who uses Reason adopts the perspective of philosophical idealism by default. Idealism, Emerson writes, “sees the world in God” and acknowledges the divine unity of all things. The person who employs idealism has a more nuanced perspective of Christianity. Such a person doesn’t get distracted by historical inaccuracies, scandals in the Church, or even miracles; instead, this person “accepts from God the phenomenon [...] as the pure and awful form of religion in the world.”

Emerson continues his critique of religion by suggesting that it makes people focus on the wrong things—like getting hung up on small historical details or scandals. Instead, people must use their intuition (“Reason”) to see the world and God more clearly.



CHAPTER 7: SPIRIT

Emerson returns to the “theory of nature.” He likens nature to Jesus and suggests that the happiest person is the one who’s learned “the lesson of worship” from nature. But Emerson cautions that it’s difficult to use language to accurately describe the divine spirit imbued in nature. Nature is the primary instrument through which God, or the universal spirit, communicates with individuals.

Earlier, Emerson likened humankind to Jesus and nature to the mule Jesus rode into Jerusalem, but here he links Jesus with nature. This could be an unintentional contradiction, but it could also be Emerson’s way of showing how humankind, nature, and the divine are intimately connected.



Emerson raises three questions: “What is matter? Whence is it? and Whereto?” To him, idealism is a “hypothesis” of nature. He doesn’t find idealism useful if it fully rejects the existence of external reality (or matter), because such a perspective “leaves God out of me.”

Nature and humanity can’t be entirely separate (as idealism would hold) because, as Emerson noted earlier, people project their emotions onto nature. And because of this, there is a trace of humankind within nature; they aren’t wholly separate.



Spirit underpins nature and runs throughout it. And spirit (which Emerson also calls “the Supreme Being”) also runs through humankind, similar to how a tree grows new leaves through its old branches. Both humankind and the world come from this spirit, which is an “inferior incarnation of God.” But this spirit, unlike humankind, isn’t “subjected to the human will.” Because nature is imbued with this spirit, when people are far away from nature, they’re consequently alienated from God.

In this passage, Emerson clearly outlines the consequences of everything being so tightly connected. He restates that divine is infused in nature, and that humankind is meant to live in unity with nature. But when people are physically and emotionally distant from nature (their present state, according to Emerson), humanity is consequently disconnected from God. It follows, then, that people must reconnect with nature in order to find spiritual wholeness again.



CHAPTER 8: PROSPECTS

Emerson examines different ways to study nature. The key shortcoming of empirical science is that it breaks nature down into small, disparate parts rather than considering nature as a whole. Emerson praises the naturalist who, by contrast, recognizes that they know very little about the world and that the way to learn is through “untaught sallies of the spirit” and self-discovery. Such a person sees that sometimes guesses are more valuable than proven facts, and dreams contain more truth than countless experiments.

Emerson raises two issues with science: first, that it examines individual parts of the natural world without also taking a holistic approach, and second, that it overvalues the things that can be taught (Understanding). Emerson praises alternate ways of knowing (intuition, guesses, dreams) as key means for self-discovery and learning about the world.



Each person is part of the greater whole of the world, but they're also a reflection, or microcosm, of the whole. Emerson quotes a poem from George Herbert, in which the speaker stresses the unity of all things. The speaker likens the natural world to a comforting, protective, comfortable house and people to the house's residents.

Quoting Plato, Emerson underscores that "poetry comes nearer to vital truth than history," and that science has lost sight of truth, too. He references the ideas of a "certain poet," suggesting that humankind has gone astray now that people are so disconnected from nature. People used to enjoy a close, nourishing relationship with the natural world. Now though, people only rely on their "understanding" rather than using a combination of reason and understanding.

Emerson suggests that what destroyed this past utopia is people growing disconnected from themselves. A person cannot be a naturalist, Emerson writes, "until he satisfies all the demands of the spirit." To become united again, each person must learn to look at the world through a new perspective.

This passage points back to the image of the "transparent eyeball"—in that section, Emerson felt God flowing through him, but he also sensed that he was part of God. Here, he takes a similar approach by suggesting that while a person is part of the whole world, they also are the whole world in that they're a microcosm of it.



Near the beginning of the essay, Emerson declared that humankind has diverged from the "road to truth," an idea he fleshes out more here. The underlying issue he sees is that people are overly focused on understanding (learning intellectual truths or facts about the world through observation), so they miss out on the richer spiritual and moral lessons that nature has to teach.



The crux of Emerson's argument is that all things are connected. Thus, he advocates for people to seek spiritual wholeness on an individual level in order to heal and unite society (and indeed, the world) more broadly.





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