

Ralph Waldo Emerson

From "Nature"

Nature is a setting that fits equally well in a comic or a mourning piece. In good health, the air is a cordial of incredible virtue. Crossing a bare common* in snow puddles at twilight, under a clouded sky, without having in my thoughts any occurrence of special good fortune, I have enjoyed a perfect exhilaration. I am glad to the brink of fear. In the woods, too, a man cast off his years, as the snake his slough, and at what period soever of life is always a child. In the woods is perpetual youth. Within these plantations of God, a decorum and sanctity reign, a perennial festival is dressed, and the guest sees not how he should tire of them in a thousand years. In the woods, we return to reason and faith. There I feel that nothing befall me in life--no disgrace, no calamity (leaving me my eyes), which nature cannot repair. Standing on the bare ground,--my head bathed by the blithe** air and uplifted into infinite space--all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eyeball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or parcel of God. The name of the nearest friend sounds then foreign and accidental; to be brothers, to be acquaintances, master or servant, is then a trifle and a disturbance. I am the lover of uncontained and immortal beauty. In the wilderness, I find something more dear and connate*** than in the streets or villages. In the tranquil landscape, and especially in the distant line of the horizon, man beholds somewhat as beautiful as his own nature.

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

Yet it is certain that the power to produce this delight does not reside in nature but in man, or in harmony of both. 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 to 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.

* piece of open land

*** Existing naturally, innate

** Carefree

**** dressed

1. What does Emerson mean when he says that in the woods, A man casts off his years?

2. What does Emerson mean when he describes himself as a “transparent eyeball?”

3. Find evidence in this essay to support the Transcendentalist belief in the unity of the Human Spirit and Nature?

4. How persuasive is Emerson? Do you buy his argument? Why/why not?

5. How is Emerson’s approach different from that of a scientist?