

Name: _____ Class: _____

Excerpt from "Nature"

By Ralph Waldo Emerson
1836

Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882) was an American essayist, philosopher, and poet. He was a leader in Transcendentalism, a social and philosophical movement that held a deep respect for nature. In this excerpt from Emerson's essay "Nature," he discusses his appreciation for nature. As you read, take notes on how Emerson describes humans' experience of nature.

[1] The stars awaken a certain reverence,¹ because though always present, they are inaccessible; but all natural objects make a kindred² impression, when the mind is open to their influence. Nature never wears a mean appearance. Neither does the wisest man extort her secret, and lose his curiosity by finding out all her perfection. Nature never became a toy to a wise spirit. The flowers, the animals, the mountains, reflected the wisdom of his best hour, as much as they had delighted the simplicity of his childhood.



"Alone in the unspoilt wilderness" by David Marcu is licensed under CC0

When we speak of nature in this manner, we have a distinct but most poetical sense in the mind. We mean the integrity of impression made by manifold³ natural objects. It is this which distinguishes the stick of timber of the wood — cutter, from the tree of the poet. The charming landscape which I saw this morning, is indubitably⁴ made up of some twenty or thirty farms. Miller owns this field, Locke that, and Manning the woodland beyond. But none of them owns the landscape. There is a property in the horizon which no man has but he whose eye can integrate all the parts, that is, the poet. This is the best part of these men's farms, yet to this their warranty-deeds give no title.

1. **Reverence** (*noun*): a deep respect for something
2. similar in kind; related
3. many and various
4. **Indubitable** (*adjective*): impossible to doubt; unquestionable

To speak truly, few adult persons can see nature. Most persons do not see the sun. At least they have a very superficial seeing. The sun illuminates only the eye of the man, but shines into the eye and the heart of the child. The lover of nature is he whose inward and outward senses are still truly adjusted to each other; who has retained the spirit of infancy even into the era of manhood. His intercourse with heaven and earth, becomes part of his daily food. In the presence of nature, a wild delight runs through the man, in spite of real sorrows. Nature says, — he is my creature, and maugre⁵ all his impertinent griefs, he shall be glad with me. Not the sun or the summer alone, but every hour and season yields its tribute of delight; for every hour and change corresponds to and authorizes a different state of the mind, from breathless noon to grimmest midnight. Nature is a setting that fits equally well a comic or a mourning piece. In good health, the air is a cordial of incredible virtue. Crossing a bare common, in snow puddles, at twilight, under a clouded sky, without having in my thoughts any occurrence of special good fortune, I have enjoyed a perfect exhilaration. I am glad to the brink of fear. In the woods too, a man casts off his years, as the snake his slough,⁶ and at what period soever⁷ of life, is always a child. In the woods, is perpetual youth. Within these plantations of God, a decorum⁸ and sanctity⁹ reign, a perennial festival is dressed, and the guest sees not how he should tire of them in a thousand years. In the woods, we return to reason and faith. There I feel that nothing can befall me in life, — no disgrace, no calamity,¹⁰ (leaving me my eyes,) which nature cannot repair. Standing on the bare ground, — my head bathed by the blithe¹¹ air, and uplifted into infinite space, — all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eye-ball; I am nothing; I see all. . .

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5. an archaic term meaning "in spite of"
 6. a snake's skin
 7. to any possible or known extent
 8. behavior in keeping with good taste and propriety; etiquette
 9. state of being holy or sacred
 10. **Calamity** (*noun*): an event causing great damage or distress; a disaster
 11. happy or joyous

Text-Dependent Questions

Directions: For the following questions, choose the best answer or respond in complete sentences.

1. PART A: What is the meaning of “perennial” as it is used in paragraph 3?
 - A. continuing
 - B. enchanting
 - C. intimidating
 - D. common

2. PART B: What phrase from paragraph 3 is an example of something that is being described as “perennial”?
 - A. "impertinent grief"
 - B. "tribute of delight"
 - C. "perpetual youth"
 - D. "infinite space"

3. PART A: What is Emerson’s overall purpose in his essay?
 - A. to argue that people’s feelings about nature are more important than nature itself
 - B. to defend the idea that only children can see nature as it really is
 - C. to explain why a special kind of insight is required to fully experience nature
 - D. to consider whether it is foolish for humans to believe they can comprehend nature

4. PART B: What quotation from the essay directly supports the overall purpose in Part A?
 - A. “Nature never wears a mean appearance.” (Paragraph 1)
 - B. “There is a property in the horizon which no man has but he whose eye can integrate all the parts, that is, the poet.” (Paragraph 2)
 - C. “Nature is a setting that fits equally well a comic or a mourning piece.” (Paragraph 3)
 - D. “In the woods, we return to reason and faith.” (Paragraph 3)

