

Literary Criticism On Emerson's Essay "Nature"

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Introduction

Ralph Waldo Emerson's *Nature*, published anonymously in 1836, is one of the foundational texts of American Transcendentalism. The essay argues that human beings can renew their intellectual, moral, and spiritual lives by encountering nature directly rather than receiving truth only through inherited institutions and traditions. The original analysis correctly notices Emerson's emphasis on perception, childhood, symbolism, and the relationship among humanity, nature, and the divine. However, it sometimes treats nature as if Emerson believed the external world exists only because human beings imagine it. His position is more subtle. Nature is the "not me," the world outside the individual will, yet its meaning becomes available through a perceiving mind that recognizes correspondence between material facts and spiritual truths. Emerson therefore combines realism about the natural world with an idealist account of how nature becomes intelligible. (Emerson, n.d.)

Historical and Intellectual Context

Nature appeared during a period of religious, political, and economic change in the United States. Emerson had resigned from the ministry after questioning established forms of worship, and he sought a spiritual language that did not depend entirely on church authority. European Romanticism, German idealism, Neoplatonism, Asian religious texts, and the New England environment all shaped his thought. At the same time, expanding markets and industrialization were changing the relationship between people, labor, and land. Emerson responds by arguing that modern life has become excessively secondhand. People inherit the insights of earlier generations but fail to experience the world with equal freshness. His opening demand—"Why should not we also enjoy an original relation to the universe?"—sets the essay's central task.

Nature as the "Not Me"

Emerson defines nature broadly as everything separate from the individual self: landscapes, other people, the human body, art, and social institutions can all belong to the "not me." This definition prevents nature from being reduced to forests or mountains alone. The term marks a relationship between consciousness and what consciousness encounters. Emerson does not deny that the world exists independently. Instead, he asks how mind and world become connected through perception, language, and spirit. This approach allows him to move from physical objects to philosophical

questions without claiming that stones, trees, and stars are merely inventions of thought.

The Childlike Eye

Emerson repeatedly contrasts habitual adult perception with the openness of the child. Adults often see only property, utility, routine, or social classification; children experience surprise and presence. The childlike eye is not simple ignorance. It is a disciplined capacity to encounter the familiar without allowing convention to exhaust its meaning. Emerson's ideal observer preserves wonder while also developing intellectual maturity. His criticism is directed at inattentiveness: people become so absorbed in commerce, status, and repetitive labor that they stop perceiving the world as alive with significance. Renewal begins when the observer temporarily suspends those habits.

The Transparent Eyeball

The most famous image in *Nature* occurs when Emerson describes himself as a "transparent eyeball" in the woods. He declares, "I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me." The metaphor dramatizes a moment in which private ego recedes and the observer feels absorbed into a larger unity. Transparency suggests that perception is no longer obstructed by vanity or self-interest. Yet the image also contains a paradox: an eyeball is pure vision without a body, history, or social position. This makes the passage powerful but vulnerable to criticism. No observer is literally without identity, and the fantasy of complete self-erasure can conceal the cultural assumptions through which nature is perceived.

Commodity and Human Use

Emerson's first major category is "Commodity," meaning the practical benefits nature provides. Land produces food, rivers move goods, animals assist labor, and natural materials support shelter and technology. He does not reject usefulness. Instead, he places utility at the lowest stage of a larger hierarchy. A society that sees nature only as a resource becomes spiritually impoverished because it ignores beauty, symbolism, discipline, and spirit. This distinction remains relevant to environmental debates. Economic use is unavoidable, but treating forests, water, and animals only as commodities can destroy the ecological conditions on which economic life depends.

Beauty and Perception

Beauty is the second major use of nature. Emerson presents natural beauty as immediate pleasure, artistic inspiration, and moral elevation. Light, color, movement, seasons, and landscape can interrupt anxiety and restore perspective. Beauty is not located solely in an object or solely in the observer. It emerges through relation. The same field may appear ordinary to a distracted traveler and sublime to

a receptive one. This relational account explains why Emerson emphasizes mood and attention without claiming that nature has no existence apart from human perception. Beauty depends on both a world capable of affecting us and a mind capable of responding.

Language and Natural Symbolism

In the section on “Language,” Emerson argues that words for spiritual and intellectual ideas often originate in material experience. Terms such as “right,” “wrong,” “spirit,” or “understanding” retain traces of bodily or spatial meaning. He goes further by asserting that natural facts symbolize spiritual facts: “Every natural fact is a symbol of some spiritual fact.” A storm may represent conflict, dawn renewal, and a path moral choice. This symbolic theory helps explain why poetry can make abstract experience vivid. However, symbols are not mechanically fixed. Darkness does not always mean evil, and light does not always mean innocence. Literary meaning depends on context, culture, and the structure of the work.

Discipline and the Education of the Mind

Nature disciplines human beings through both understanding and moral consequence. Scientific study trains attention, classification, measurement, and reasoning. Labor teaches limits, patience, and causality. Actions produce consequences in a world that does not simply obey desire. Emerson therefore refuses the idea that spirituality requires abandoning knowledge. Science can deepen wonder by revealing order and relation. His concern is that facts become sterile when disconnected from a larger philosophy. Education should unite observation and imagination rather than force students to choose between them.

Idealism and the Stability of the World

Emerson’s discussion of idealism asks whether the material world has absolute existence or whether it is dependent on mind. He does not attempt a final philosophical proof. Instead, he argues that idealism changes the significance of nature without eliminating its practical stability. Whether matter exists independently or is mediated by consciousness, human beings still experience consistent laws and consequences. Idealism liberates the mind from assuming that material appearances are the whole of reality. It also allows nature to become a form of revelation. The danger is that an overly spiritual reading may minimize physical suffering, ecological limits, or the reality of other beings. (Richardson, 1995)

Spirit and the Divine

For Emerson, nature is not God, but it is a medium through which divine spirit becomes perceptible. The world's order, beauty, and symbolic power suggest a universal intelligence. Human beings participate in that intelligence because mind can recognize patterns in nature. This is why the essay links self-reliance with spiritual unity: the deepest self is not isolated ego but participation in a larger being. Emerson departs from orthodox Christianity by reducing dependence on scripture, doctrine, and institutional mediation. Revelation is continuous, and each generation can encounter it anew.

Prospects and the Call for Renewal

The final section, "Prospects," turns from analysis to prophecy. Emerson calls for a new philosophy, poetry, science, and religion capable of perceiving unity. He believes inherited knowledge has become fragmented into specializations and conventions. The solution is not to reject the past but to reanimate it through original experience. His concluding vision is optimistic: "The kingdom of man over nature" will expand when human beings understand both the laws of nature and their spiritual relation to it. Modern readers should approach this language critically because "dominion" can imply control and extraction. Emerson's deeper argument, however, emphasizes participation rather than conquest.

Transcendentalism and Self-Reliance

Nature anticipates Emerson's later essay "Self-Reliance." Both texts distrust conformity and insist that individuals must test inherited beliefs through direct experience. The self-reliant person does not merely pursue private preference. Emerson imagines a self capable of hearing universal moral insight beneath social noise. Nature assists this process because it temporarily removes the individual from systems of approval and comparison. Solitude becomes a way to examine whether one's convictions arise from genuine perception or from fear of public opinion. (Emerson, n.d.)

Romanticism and American Identity

The essay belongs to Romanticism through its emphasis on imagination, organic unity, emotion, and resistance to mechanistic thought. Yet it also seeks a distinctly American intellectual independence. Emerson challenges American writers and thinkers to stop repeating Europe and create from their own environment and historical moment. This national ambition is productive but incomplete. The landscape he treats as spiritually available was already inhabited, named, cultivated, and governed by Indigenous peoples. A contemporary reading must therefore distinguish intellectual independence from the settler assumption that the continent was an empty stage for American self-discovery.

Social Limits of Emerson's Vision

Emerson often writes as though any individual can enter solitude and become transparent to universal truth. In practice, access to land, leisure, safety, education, and mobility has never been equally distributed. Enslaved people, women constrained by law, industrial workers, Indigenous communities, and poor families encountered nature through labor and dispossession as well as beauty. These limits do not make the essay worthless. They reveal the social conditions hidden inside its universal "man." The modern reader can preserve Emerson's call for direct experience while asking whose experience is represented and whose relationship with land has been ignored.

Environmental Relevance

Emerson was not an environmental scientist, and *Nature* should not be treated as a modern ecological policy document. Nevertheless, his refusal to reduce the natural world to commodity offers a strong ethical resource. Climate change, biodiversity loss, pollution, and resource depletion expose the failure of purely instrumental thinking. Emerson's symbolic and spiritual language can cultivate care, but care must be joined with scientific evidence, collective institutions, and environmental justice. Personal wonder alone cannot regulate emissions or protect vulnerable communities. The essay is most useful when inspiration leads to responsibility.

Style and Rhetorical Power

Emerson's prose moves through aphorism, metaphor, assertion, classification, and visionary declaration. He rarely builds a single linear proof. Instead, he invites readers to experience intellectual movement. This style produces memorable passages but can also frustrate readers seeking careful definitions. Contradictions are part of the method: nature is useful and sacred, external and mentally mediated, law-governed and mysterious. The essay's power lies in making these tensions productive rather than resolving them completely.

Conclusion

Nature argues that modern people can recover originality by learning to perceive the world directly and interpret its relationship to mind and spirit. Emerson does not simply claim that nature is subjective or that it exists only through belief. He describes nature as the "not me" while showing that beauty, language, and symbolism arise through human participation. Commodity, beauty, language, discipline, idealism, spirit, and prospects form a progression from practical use toward spiritual renewal. The essay remains influential because it challenges passive inheritance and material reduction. Its limitations—especially its abstract individualism, settler perspective, and tendency to overlook unequal access—should be confronted rather than concealed. Read critically,

Nature still offers a demanding invitation to unite attention, imagination, science, and ethical responsibility.

References

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