Background  During the 1830s and 1840s, Emerson and a small group of like-minded friends gathered regularly in his study to discuss philosophy, religion, and literature. Among them were Emerson’s protégé, Henry David Thoreau, as well as educator Bronson Alcott, feminist writer Margaret Fuller, and ex-clergyman and author George Ripley. The intimate group, known as the Transcendental Club, developed a philosophical system that stressed intuition, individuality, and self-reliance. In 1836, Emerson published *Nature*, the lengthy essay (excerpted here) that became the Transcendental Club’s unofficial statement of belief.

**Literal Analysis**

**Transcendentalism**

- Read the bracketed passage aloud.
- Ask students to identify the jarring image in the passage and to explain what Emerson means by it.
- Possible response: “I become a transparent eyeball” is a jarring image. Emerson means that he sees everything; the metaphor suggests the poet is like a single, huge eye.
- Ask students the Literary Analysis question: According to this passage, what is the relationship between Emerson and nature? Possible response: Emerson feels spiritually a part of nature and every living thing, as well as God.

**Vocabulary Builder**

blithe (blíª) adj. carefree

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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,\(^1\) 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, 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 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.

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1. common n. piece of open public land.
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 unacknowledged. They nod to me, and I to them. The

Vocabulary Builder

connate (kän′āt′) adj.
existing naturally; innate

Which emotions does Emerson experience when in the woods?

Reading Check

Answer: Emerson experiences delight.

Critical Viewing

Answer: Students may refer to the painting’s serenity, its apparent meshing of land and heavens, the reflection of the landscape in the water, and the complete absence of any traces of humankind.

Humanities

Sunset, by Frederic E. Church
Frederic Church, a student of Hudson River School leader Thomas Cole, became a key member of that group. This painting reveals his deep love of nature and his belief that painting should depict the natural world in a grand way. The painting glows with the vibrancy of nature at the most colorful moment of the day—sunset. Use this question for discussion:

• Is this painting an appropriate illustration for Emerson’s essay? Why or why not?
  Answer: Some students may say that the painting is appropriate because it portrays the enduring grandeur of nature. Others may say that a painting portraying a person appreciating nature would be more appropriate.

Differentiated Instruction

Enrichment for Less Proficient Readers
Given our fast-paced, technological society, students may have trouble understanding the basis of Transcendentalism. Explain that this philosophy centers on gaining spiritual knowledge through recognizing one’s connection to the universe, God, and the surrounding world. One way to achieve this is to reduce the unnecessary clutter in one’s life, striving for simplicity and a return to the basics. Create activities that encourage students to experience life in a more direct sense. For example, you could have them walk to a destination rather than ride in a car. They could also write their assignments out in longhand rather than type them. Encourage students to cook dinner or begin a craft. All these exercises will help them regain a transcendental connection to daily life. As they pursue such activities, students might consider whether they believe that all living things are connected, and if so, how.
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 a 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 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.

2. tricked v. dressed.