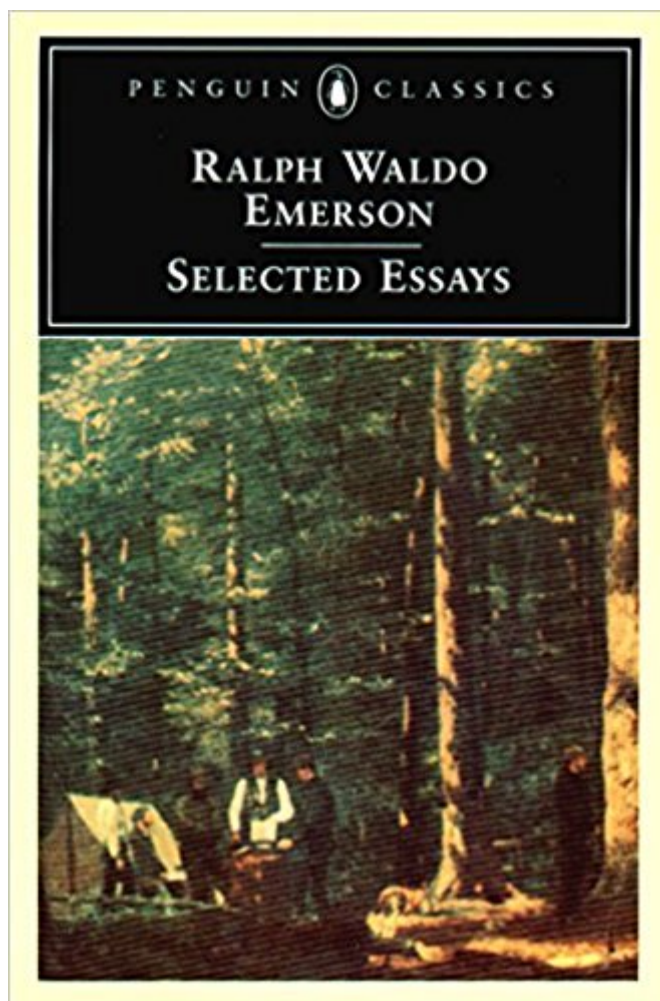


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Emerson: Selected Essays



Synopsis

Ralph Waldo Emerson believed that an appreciation of its vast natural resources would become the foundation of American culture. His assertion that human thought and actions proceed from nature, was a radical departure from the traditional European emphasis on domesticating nature to suit human needs. His philosophy is rich in common natural scenes of daily life, and expresses the inherent harmony between man and nature. This collection brings together 15 of Emerson's most significant essays, including "Nature", "The American Scholar", "Self-reliance" and "The Transcendentalist", as well as his assessments of Montaigne, Napoleon and Thoreau.

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Customer Reviews

Emerson is amazing, one of the most talented writers in the english language, full of dialectic sophistication, loving intuition, poetic beauty and astute observation. This is a great collection of essays, which contains a rare assortment of favorites: experience, self-reliance, history, and the skeptic.

This book really shows you the true wonders life has to offer. Would buy it again just to have a 2nd copy!

I've always been a huge Ralph Waldo Emerson fan. Any fan of literature and nature that has not read this definitely should.

If you are not acquainted with Emerson you must read at least several chapters of this book. His transcendental philosophy is both fascinating and enriching to the soul!

Book is ok, but had considerable underlining and notetaking not specified in advert.

When Ralph Waldo Emerson published "Nature" in 1836, he combined many of the transcendental ideas that were soon to be identified with his name. Not all of his readers were pleased. Those who were strict Calvinists opposed him since he repudiated the notion that humanity was irrevocably sinful and doomed to suffer the torments so well described by Jonathan Edwards in his *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God*. Nor were the Unitarians pleased since Emerson relegated logic and reason, the central pivots of their creed, to a much reduced status. Finally, even for those who might have otherwise been receptive to his message that intuition trumps logic, Emerson's prose style--abstract, allusive, and at times inconsistent--served to distance this message from the reader. It was hardly surprising that the sales of his initial book of essays were dismally few. Nevertheless, Emerson's essays in general and "Nature" in particular eventually caught on with an American readership that was becoming increasingly literate and attuned to similar such beliefs that were then slowly filtering in from Europe. In "Nature," Emerson took the essentials of Neo-Platonism, a system of values that connected objects of the material world with their spiritual counterparts, and allied them with the Wordsworthian creed that the world of physical nature is but a reflection of a higher nature that is itself a manifestation of God in nature. The philosophical glue binding man to nature and to God was Emerson's solid belief that man needed more than the evidence of his senses to apprehend a "true" picture of the universe. Those who used only their physical senses were no more than half-blind materialists groping in the dimmest of lights for a Truth that was freely available to all were they only willing and able to discard the self-imposed blinders of reason and logic. Emerson called this focus on logic the Understanding, a term that he borrowed from Carlyle. That system of thought which man used based on feeling and intuition he termed Reason. He did not

mean to imply that one was superior to the other, but he went to considerable pains to assert that man needed both to gain a truer apprehension of the world around him. The very attempt to peer behind and beyond the façade of nature must always pay dividends. There is no "failure" in the attempt. It is the striving itself which imbues the observer with a spiritual affinity both to nature and to God that was sorely lacking prior to a refusal to be satisfied with a one-dimensional view of the universe. In his introduction to "Nature," Emerson indicates that the current view of man in relation to nature was in need of an overhaul. The earlier views handed down to him by his forebears were shackles rather than liberators of thought. It was time for him to re-evaluate the very means by which man should place himself in the cosmic scheme of things. In each of the eight subheadings of "Nature," he analyzes, often in overlapping ways, how man might do that. Nature, he insists, is both source and destination for all of man's highest goals and aspirations. And for man to realize these hopes, he must acknowledge that there is a nature beyond this nature, thus necessitating the constant use of Reason to intuit its existence. Emerson's ubiquitous use of undefined terms and overly florid language often hide how the man of Understanding may transform himself to a man of Reason, but he implies that the process is an internal one. All that is needed is the will to do so, and the process of assimilation begins. The final subsection on "Prospects" is a summation of the preceding seven. Here, he notes that man can unite himself with God and nature at will. Running through "Nature" as well as nearly all of the remainder of his essays is the interlinking theme of Unity. Man Thinking is the man who has made the transcendent leap from seeing nature as no more than an infinity of unrelated things to one who now can see that each thing seen is united with every other thing in a universal ball of divine spirit. The world that he asks all men to build is a mental construct with the foundation of logic to perceive what is there and one of feeling to animate those men to aspire to be the semi-divine beings that Emerson insisted that they could be in the first place.

Emerson is one of the greatest of essayists. His thoughts have a poetic power. But they are often complex and paradoxical and difficult to understand. The title essay of this collection, 'Nature' is one of Emerson's most famous works. In it he in a sense talks about forgetting the fundamentalist reading of Scriptures and finding a true meeting with God through Nature. For Emerson, Nature is the great harmonizer and harmony. He writes of our proper moral relation to it as a way of bringing the divinity into our lives. Emerson makes an analogy between the moral and the spiritual which he claims we can only understand intellectually in proportion to our virtue or the goodness of our character. In writing of Language and Nature he writes that true poetic speech has a command over,

and can move and shape Nature. Emerson is famous for his optimistic tone and message, but as Stephen Whicher long ago pointed out Emerson also has a darker side and knows the evils that can come in life.

Just what I needed for my course.

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