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<https://doi.org/10.61796/ejheaa.v1i6.612>**THE EVOLUTIONARY DIALECTIC OF NATURE:
A STUDY IN RALPH WALDO EMERSON'S THE
SNOW-STORM****Aida Thamer Salloom**Department of English/ College of Education for Human Sciences
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Abstract: The forefather of Transcendentalism or the American Romanticism that pervaded the political and literary scene of America in the mid-19th century, Ralph Waldo Emerson is a prolific and distinguished American essayist, lecturer, philosopher and poet. He strived to create a new American spirit, a new cultural basis and a heroic narrative that maintain an elevation of the American self. Though simple in their language and poetic diction, Emerson's essays and poems reflect his philosophical and thoughtful ideas in a dignified and melodious system. The study attempts to explore Emerson's appreciation to the dynamic, creative and evolutionary power of nature, advocating a unity between man and nature to help develop his intuition and regain his divine knowledge. Having a qualitative method, the study presents a reverent consideration to Emerson's essay Nature as a basic theoretical part for his concepts of the power of nature. A practical exemplification of Transcendentalism and the connectedness between nature and the human experience is thoroughly presented in the analysis of Emerson's poem "The Snow-Storm".

Keywords: Ralph Emerson, Transcendentalism, Nature, "The Snow-Storm" and the Organic Theory.

This is an open-access article under the [CC-BY 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/) license**Annotation**

"Nature is but an image or imitation of Wisdom, the last thing of the soul; nature being a thing which doth only do, but not know."— Plotinus

Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882) was ranked as an outstanding American philosopher, who started his career as a Unitarian minister in Boston, but achieved a worldwide fame that rendered him as "a philosopher among the poets and a poet among the philosophers" (Kumar, 2015, 768). Emerson championed Romantic Transcendentalism as a metaphysical and spiritual movement, founded in New England, emphasizing that "no knowledge (or authority) exists outside of the self" (Wayne, 2010, p. 5). Transcendentalism focused on the supremacy of the individual conscience over materialistic concerns, favoring, instead, a spiritual union with nature. It is a philosophy proposed in Germany by

Immanuel Kant, Friedrich Schelling, and Friedrich Hegel, highlighting idealism and spiritual truth (Wayne, 2010, p. 5).

In his lecture "The Transcendentalist" delivered in Boston as part of the winter 1841–1842 series *The Times*, Emerson clarified and historicized the new movement, assuring that "What is popularly called Transcendentalism among us is idealism." It upholds a propensity to intuitions or inborn knowledge and "colored the conversation and poetry of the present day" (Wayne, 2010, p. 268).

Amongst the basic premises of Transcendentalism that was persistently encouraged by Emerson is to be close to nature. He asserts that an individual is the spiritual center of the universe - and in an individual can be found the sign of nature, history and, eventually, the cosmos itself. Nature as a living mystery, full of signs - nature is symbolic and representative.

Emerson's Transcendentalism is influenced by the Platonic idealistic thought of the world of forms. He depicts a dichotomy concerning his view of man's relation to Nature, perceiving the universe as constituted of "Me" and "Not Me," of similarities and differences, with oneness and otherness, of which both sides of the dialectic cannot be realized but through their relation to each other and their reciprocal influence on each other. Emerson's idealism has restated the distinction between the two sides of the argument he states in his essay. He ends this duality in the 1849 edition of *Nature* with a sense of monism, identifying both nature and man as two sides of the same coin, each representative of the essential spirit of the other (Porter, 1979, p.524).

Nature, as a well-acclaimed idealistic essay has been first mentioned in a diary entry made in 1833, after Emerson's return from his European visit where he was fully acknowledged of the works of Wordsworth, Coleridge and Carlyle. The first five-chapter edition published in 1836 was prefaced with the words of the Neo-Platonic philosopher Plotinus, where Plotinus depicts nature as "but an image or imitation of wisdom, the last thing of the soul; nature being a thing which doth only do, but not know" (Perkins, 2002, p. 333). The essay, *Nature* has been later elaborated and published in its fascinating shape which reflected the modifications in religious doctrine and in the sectarian initiatives that sprang from the New England Unitarianism and Transcendentalism (Perkins, 2002, p. 329).

Emerson's philosophical and literary evolution through the eight years following the publication of the first edition is articulated in his epigraph presented in *Nature, Addresses, and Lectures* (1849), where the concept of evolution in Nature's forms is fully depicted and is seen as supporting the idea of progress and unity with man (Perkins, 2002, p. 334). In the 1840s edition, the medium Emerson adopts is that man will be gaining knowledge through Nature's revelation that elevates one's understanding of his universe, hence the Creator, with no need to any formative institutional mediator. He believes that Nature is the door to the spiritual world or the "Over-Soul," a term that he coined as part of his basic principles of Transcendentalism, reflecting his notion of the unity between man, nature and the divine. In his essay "The Over-Soul" (1841), Emerson confirms that every individual is born with certain divine quality and developing familiarity and direct experience to nature endowed him with a receptive quality to be all-seeing and to contain all knowledge (Wayne, 2010, pp.110, 167).

Emerson pioneered, with Walt Whitman and David Thoreau, to initiate the American Renaissance of the 1830s and 1840s, as a reaction to the stern theological teachings and convictions of the Puritans (Halleck, 1911, p. 118). He tends to be completely platonic and anti-formative and this tendency urges him to see 'form' as everything that is constraining and intimidating of man's essential entity, an entity that he sees to reside primarily in man's soul rather than the body. He guides

his audience toward this process of transcending the physicality of the world in which they live, towards its metaphysical domain where man achieves his fullest integrated relation with his Creator. As a result, he resigned the Unitarian ministry to which he used to belong, as far as resignation was for him an anti-authoritarian more than as an anti-religious attitude (Porter, 1979, p. 518).

Many critics see that Emerson's 1844 *Nature* is captivating not only for what messages Emerson includes, but more importantly for the way he says these thematic messages. Emerson used to denote that "I have no system" (Yoder, 1969, p. 312) a matter that makes it very difficult to summarize or paraphrase his essays. The significance in his essays lies in their rhetorical and dialectic primacy. John Holloway, the critic who used to write on the Victorian sages as Carlyle, Newman and Arnold and who constantly considers Emerson alike in his rhetorical excellence, maintains in *The Victorian Sage: Studies in Argument* (1965) that the profound philosophical domain of those Victorian writers cannot be expounded or proved within a logical frame of an argument (Holloway, 1965, pp. 10-11). That is why, a writer like Emerson would tend to give expression to his outlook generating his own peculiar argument. Holloway, further, states that for Emerson what matters is not convincing his readers of what he says as much as he makes of his content a whole experience to his readers to live in and fully absorb (Lauter, 1990, p. 66 and Yoder, 1969, p. 315).

Prior to 1840s Emerson tended to discuss issues in his essays by way of Hegelian progressive dialectic (thesis, antithesis and synthesis) which seems to follow a logical scheme. *Nature*, as it appears in his 1836 essay, swaggers from the level of materialistic apprehension to a source of spiritual insight, with smooth transitions and with no hesitations. But, in the 1940s edition *Nature* is presented in a way to distinguish the passive landscape from the active and creative agent. Emerson repeats that in man's attachment to Nature he would see things all anew, because now man is examining nature beyond his experience of nature through his senses. There appears an evolutionary processing by which man is attaching himself to nature in a progressive and accumulative realization. Nature is a setting where man experiences happiness and sadness at the same time. The very use of paradoxes and repetitions magnify the role of Nature as accommodating all states of man; it is encompassing and overwhelming. Nature seems fearful that it makes man's "mean egotism vanishes," because walking in the woods reminds man of his position in the midst of nature. Nature triggers man's intellectuality and spirituality and makes him worthy enough to be served by Nature:

Standing on the bare ground... I see all, the mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eye-ball; I am nothing; I see all the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me.

(*Nature*, I: 9)

To feel the real beauty of apprehension, man will be able to see through the beauty of nature his own innocence that has been lost in his indulgence into the material life. Nature becomes a metaphor of the human mind because the state of harmony revived between man and Nature enables him to "see beyond the range of sight" as Henry David Thoreau puts it (Halleck, 1911, p. 119). Metaphorically, man is restoring his innocence when seeing into nature, like the snake that rejuvenates itself anew by crawling out of its old skin to re-live its original physical frame. Similarly, man, when in the woods, and only if willing to rejuvenate his innocence, can go along within the metaphysical residing beyond nature and becomes reunited with the universe. Emerson announces this illumination in the simplest way yet with a profound meaning:

The sun will illuminate 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 into the era of manhood.

(Nature, I: 8)

Emerson finds in this natural illumination a therapeutic path to man's soul. The cure of man's soul resides in the beauty of nature, not only through its rocks or rivers but through the energy it creates in man. In the second chapter of the essay, "Commodity", and in subsequent chapters, Emerson shows how Nature turns to be in the service of man even through its storm and solitude where its music lies. That is why the energy potent in Nature can manifest itself through arts, a matter that triggers the very intellect of man to articulate Nature's beauty. Yet, Emerson recommends that unless the beauty of man's soul is treading toward Nature's beauty, the whole quest for transcending the physical being is doomed to be in vain. He states that because it is only when man "In proportion to the energy of his thought and will, he takes up the world into himself ... convincing his readers of what he says virtue" (Nature, 16). Therefore, the human mind, as part of the beauty of man's spirit, would translate the natural beauty via different forms. Also, as Nature manifests the beauty of the universe, it can serve at the same time as a vehicle of expressing this beauty.

Emerson's radical idea lies mostly in this chapter, in which he deviates even from Plato's ontological views on the relation between nature and word. Almost all of the linguistic views tend to consider the arbitrariness of the relation between words and the objects or things these words describe or signify. Yet, Emerson maintains that Nature provided man with the language, with which he communicates. Emerson, and some of his contemporaries, verb that there is a natural relation between a world and the thing it signifies and this natural relation is derived from the nature as a symbol of the Spirit. In this way, Emerson considers that Nature provides man with this tool of language.

Emerson goes further to consider that the language which is connected to man's thoughts and which he uses for utterance depends highly on the simplicity and innocence of the speaker. The man who uses language without losing Truth is a man who is a lover of truth. That is why language is seen to have been corrupted because man himself has been corrupted when distanced himself from the essential Truth of his existence and being. Eventually, in *Nature*, Emerson testifies his dialectic in method and intention. He has made a balance between his objective and his style by employing an evolutionary dialectic in depicting the transcendentalist process by which man's "Inner Individual" is acknowledged and with the help of Nature's revelation.

2. Emerson's "The Snow-Storm"

Nothing is art if it does not come from nature.

- Antonio Gaudi/ a Spanish Architect.

Written during the years of Transcendentalism and performed in Emerson's first volume of poems on Christmas Day in (1946), "The Snow-Storm" (1841) is one of Emerson's poems that reflect the spiritual transcendentalism and evolutionary power of natural forces. The poem stands as a literary portrayal of the transformative power of nature and the necessity of man to be close and mimic the unseen hand of the artist that shapes the world.

In terms of the structural building of "The Snow-Storm," the poem consists of two stanzas that encompass 28 blank verse half-rhymed lines, escalating the poem's gothic wildness that harmonizes the theme of intuition and sensitive awareness. As far as poetic technique is concerned, Emerson utilizes a considerable amount of repetition, alliteration, caesura, personification, and enjambment; all of them orchestrate the thematic representation of the dynamicity of nature and man's vital communion to the natural scenes. Remarkably, the word "work" is frequently repeated at the end of multiple lines, an epistrophe showcasing and emphasizing both the creativity of nature and that of the author;

Speeding, the myriad-handed, his wild work (II, 15)

A tapering turret overtops the work. (II, 22)

Built in an age, the mad wind's night-work, (II, 27)

"The Snow-Storm" portrays the unexpected appearance of a severe winter storm, which is referred to as the creative spirit of nature that "seems nowhere to alight" and converts the New England landscape into a white apparition (Shrestha, 2013, p. 1). The skillful "whited air" covers and "Hides hills and woods, the river, and the heaven, / And veils the farm-house at the garden's end" (I, 3-4)1. The abrupt invasion of the snow has an apocalyptic eminence and subversive power, blurring the typical life-death distinctions and terminating the normal course of human life.

The forceful start of the poem and the announcement of the sturdy coming of the "snow" by "all the trumpets of the sky" portray the greatness of the conquering force. "The Snow Storm" might be a direct response to Coleridge's "Frost at Midnight". However, the "Tumultuous privacy of storm" and "the frolic architecture of the snow" convey an almost a mocking sense of Coleridge's "secret ministry of frost."

Man forcefully responds to this victorious and powerful storm, hence people lodge and shelter inside their houses. All travels are stopped and "the courier's feet, Delayed," everyone turns inward to themselves and their housemates, seeking warmth beside chimney corner. The contrasting images between the outer snowy scene and the inner "radiant fireplace" create a horrifying separation portraying the wind as a skilled and powerful craftsman that affects human's structures (Baldwin, 2021, p. 4).

Next morning, the sun finally comes up and the speaker in an exclusive Romantic sense recollects everything that has been created overnight. There are "turrets" and "bastions;" there are "swan-like" creations and "wreaths" that appear to be made of marbles, all of them were influenced by the forceful storm and prove the transcendentalist semantics of nature.

"The Snow-Storm" is a remarkable representation of the beauty and power of nature, its great arrival and its noticeable departure depict it like a victorious army walking over the field, hence, recalling the theme of power of nature that is difficult to be confronted. Its power reflects the serenity people feel while looking at the artful landmarks after a snowstorm. However, the poem also discusses the devastating qualities of the snowstorm and talks about its fanciful, elegant, and attractive attributes, which could be read as a dramatization of the creative and evolutionary power of nature. Nature is both creative and creating in the sense that, in one hand, it has the power to change and on another, its dynamic structure motivates people to surpass their usual limits. What the snow does next is to delay the people from going on with their normal course of life; however, they are invited to the authority of nature (Shrestha, 2013, p. 2).

Influenced by Wordsworthian ramble (Bloom, 2007, p. 125) and love of nature, Emerson personifies "the north wind" as "masonry" and "fierce artificer" that presents the fascinating aestheticism of nature. He invites man to enjoy seeing the crafty effect of the north wind and not to be merely terrified by the potentially fatal force of the nature (Wayne, 2010, p.190). He further assures that the wind and snow make art that man can imitate what nature does so easily, hence be as creative as nature:

... astonished Art

To mimic in slow structures, stone by stone,
Built in an age, the mad wind's night-work,
The frolic architecture of the snow. (II, 25-28)

Emerson's discussion of the beauty of nature leads to his organic or romantic aesthetics of art, assuming that the purpose of art is to further inspire by reflecting the natural recreation of beauty or recreating nature's beauty. This is notably depicted in "The Snow-Storm," interpreting his attachment to the organic theory, in which any work of art should mimic projects, patterns and the decent organic forms of nature (Duensing, 1966, p. 49)

As a philosopher of aesthetic doctrine, Emerson emphasizes the sovereignty of poetic experience over practical skills. Therefore, "The Snow-Storm" explores the inspirational power of nature that the snow is like a skilled craftsman who is capable of creating "bastions" out of snow. There is a "projected roof / Round every windward stake" (II, 4-5). These fanciful architectures are formed and influenced by the "tree" or "door" around which they make, yet, the snowstorm furthermore works 'mockingly,' poring over and hiding the things that men have made (Wayne, 2010, p. 242). In this sense, Emerson dismantles the dichotomy between art and nature or more specifically between practical arts and fine art, stating that in "nature, all is useful, all is beautiful" (cit. in Wayne, 2010, p. 33). For Emerson, architecture is the "frozen music," (*Nature*, 24) that could meticulously play its harmonious melody.

Advocating the organic theory of nature, Emerson states that:

Nature is not fixed but fluid. Spirit alters, moulds, makes it. The immobility or bruteness of nature is the absence of spirit; to pure spirit it is fluid, it is volatile, it is obedient. Every spirit builds itself a house, and beyond its house a world, and beyond its world a heaven (*Nature*, 42).

Demonstrating the importance of the organic theory to Emerson's thinking that all beauty is organic, Duensing (1966) asserts that the organic representation is not consciously contrived but comes out of man's approximation to nature as a direct source of inspiration and creativity. As a method of communicating the abstract ideas, the metaphor stands as a concrete image stemmed from man's perceiving of nature and its power to evoke his innate inventiveness (Duensing, 1966, p. 40).

Therefore, "The Snow-Storm" practices Emerson's spiritual and philosophical reflection on nature's influence on human as an inspirational power. In his article, "The Divinity School Address" (1838) Emerson, while attending an uninspiring preacher in the church, articulates his reaction to the outside the snowstorm:

A snow-storm was falling around us. The snow-storm was real, the preacher merely spectral, and the eye felt the sad contrast in looking at him, and then out of the window behind him in to the beautiful meteor of the snow (qtd. in Duensing, 1966, p. 8).

In Journal November 27, 1832, Emerson, anticipating the writing of "The Snow-Storm," states that "Instead of lectures on Architecture, I will make a lecture on God's architecture ... I will draw a sketch of a winter's day." He aimed to trace a rude outline of the contribution of the universe, in which the magical structure grows like a breath, reflecting the charm of the immeasurable deep (Emerson, 1903, pp. 4111-4112). Therefore, he portrays a snow storm that creates an architectural phenomenon to rival human efforts in art and writing, which is also reflected in his architecture of "The Snow-Storm." The evolutionary power of nature is represented in the wind, which is like a powerful and speedy craftsman completes its wild work with many hands and what it makes is "fanciful" and "savage" (Wayne, 2010, p. 242).

In the final lines of "The Snow-Storm," the speaker repeats the hours of work that the wind put into the creation of these forms. The sun will come out and reveal the "wind's night-work". The art that the wind leaves when the sun rises is "astonish[ing]" and the invisible and soundless artist retires, without the usual egotism of human artists: it retires as if "he were not". The sun symbolizes the reason and rationality for which the artist is not always compatible. The artist is intuitionally oriented and his creativity cannot be subjected to sagacity and logic. The "frolic architecture of the snow" is amazing to the observer, who is a poet aspiring to create such amazing works of art. The last line reemphasizes the personified wind and the joy-filled constructions it made during the night (Shrestha, 2013, p. 4).

The prevailing visual imagery in the poem and their quintessential stillness leaves no room for the auditory imagery to be heard, however, silence or the absence of sounds is fascinating enough to be as audible as the loud sounds. For Emerson, Nature is the speaking silence and it can be overheard. Its tranquility and soft quietness complement its beauty and endowed it with pleasurable qualities. In his essay, *Nature*, Emerson makes several references to the charm of the silent nature "the sky with Its eternal calm", the woods with its "eternal calm," the "silent sea," the farm's "mute gospel" and "deaf and dumb nature" (cit. in Duensing, 1966, p. 9).

Andrew J. Angyal (2011) asserts that the organic theory of art reached its fullest expression in "The Snow-Storm," which still offers the best example in Emerson's poetry of form following function, and human artistry imitating that of nature. Nature creates and humans imitate through art (Angyal, 2011, p. 9). "The Snow-Storm" as dramatization of the power and beauty of nature, rounds on the poet's implicit admiration of nature's work. The poem achieves a respectful reviews and criticism that influence American poets; among them John Greenleaf Whittier who includes few lines to be an epigraph to his poem "Snow-bound" (1865).

Conclusion

In his doctrine of Transcendentalism, Emerson suggests that humans should maintain a unity and oneness with nature. Man should embrace and appreciate the power and beauty of nature as a progressive and evolutionary power to be perceived as a source of inspiration and creativity. Rather than fearing or trying to control it, Emerson encourages people to deconstruct the dichotomy between man and nature, letting out their egoistic conduct. They should develop a close and continuous attachment to nature to regain their intuition. He writes, "Let us by love and reverence / Give homage to the snow." He encourages man to have a humble and reverent attitude towards nature, recognizing its majesty and the lessons it can present. As a peer advocator of Transcendentalism, Emerson focuses on the natural world as a source of inspiration, morality and general goodness, inciting people to be more natural and intuitive.

This evolutionary dialectic of nature is remarkably experienced in the theme of "The Snow-Storm" that is the power and beauty of nature to create and be creative. The poem highlights the overwhelming force of a snowstorm, its transformative qualities, and the importance of embracing and appreciating nature's power.

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