

# Emerson's Conception of Nature Embodied in *The Rhodora*

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**Abstract**— *The Rhodora* is Emerson's shortest and favorite poem, in which Emerson presents a very vivid depiction of the obscure rhodora and shows his great esteem for it. In Emerson's eyes, the rhodora as a natural object represents nature in its entirety. It is converted into spirit and thought, and is always educating humans. This article is a tentative analysis of the poem in terms of its artistic form and Emerson's conception of nature embodied in it in order to provide a new perspective for the appreciation of the poem.

**Keywords**—Emerson, *The Rhodora*, conception of nature.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882) is a well-known American Transcendentalist, essayist and poet. In China Emerson and his works has been very popular with literary critics and many common readers for far too long. So far there have emerged a great number of research results of Emerson's works, especially his essays, for example, *Nature*, *The Oversoul*, *Self-Reliance*, *The Poet* and so on. However, all the time in China few people set foot in the research of Emerson's poems. Hence less research results of his poems have emerged. Some researches are only limited to the general introduction to Emerson's poems, compiled selected poems, and some translations. Recently in China there has appeared a good tendency to pay close attention to Emerson's poems and conduct research on them. Through all his life Emerson wrote a lot of poems of nature, among which *The Rhodora* is the shortest one,

which is also acknowledged to be one of the greatest American poems, memorized by generations of American students who has never seen a wild azalea.

This short poem was written in May 1834, and first published in the *Western Messenger* 7 (July 1839). Later it was collected in Emerson's 1847 *poems*. A month earlier, Emerson had visited Mount Auburn Cemetery in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and experienced a deeply spiritual communion with the natural setting there<sup>[1][62]</sup> As Emerson noted, the rhodora grows in the wild at lower elevations, usually in swamps, bogs, and hammocks blooming pink-purple in early spring, and in the mountains it is found growing in moist soil in exposed locations. Though an obscure and inconspicuous flower, in Emerson's eyes, the rhodora is of its "intrinsic value", and the hidden and incomparable beauty. In the poem Emerson presents a vivid depiction of the beauty of the rhodora, and its positive influence upon the existence of other things, including the nook, the desert, the brook, the pool, the black water, and the red bird. In this sense, the rhodora represents the natural and spiritual beauty. *The Rhodora* reflects Emerson's preference for nature. This paper provides an tentative analysis of The poem mainly in terms of Emerson's perception of nature.

## II. AN OVERVIEW OF EMERSON AND HIS PERSPECTIVE OF NATURE

Emerson was born into a priest's family in 1803. At the age of 8, his father died, and then he was brought up by his mother and aunt. When he was 14 years old, Emerson

entered Harvard University and was appointed freshman representative. During his schooling, he read a large number of works by British Romantic writers, enriching his thoughts and broadening his horizons. In 1821 Emerson graduated from Harvard University. From 1821 to 1825, he taught at Boston Women's School opened by his brother. In 1829 he became a pastor of Boston's Second Church, and resigned from the post of minister in 1832. In 1833, he traveled to Europe, visited Coleridge, Wordsworth, Carlyle, and was deeply influenced by Kant's transcendental philosophy. In September 1835, Emerson and other like-minded writers founded the Transcendental Club. In 1836 he published his first important work, *Nature*, which focused on his transcendentalist views, and was called the Declaration of Transcendentalism. In 1840, Emerson became the editor-in-chief of the Transcendentalist magazine *The Dial*, further advocating Transcendentalism. From then on Emerson and Transcendentalism was inextricably linked until his death in 1882.

As is known to all, one of the major features of American Transcendentalism is that Emerson and other Transcendentalists offered a fresh perception of nature as symbolic of the Spirit or God. According to Emerson, "The universe is made up of Nature and the Soul. Strictly speaking, therefore all that is separate from us, all which Philosophy distinguishes as the NOT ME, that is, both nature and art, all other men and my own body, must be ranked under this name, NATURE"<sup>[2]96</sup>. Here nature is not just a kind of matter. It is the symbol of the Oversoul or the Spirit, a garment of immanent God. Emerson's Transcendentalism belongs to the category of idealism. In his eyes, every natural fact is a symbol of some spiritual existence. The physical world is the terminus of the spiritual world, or rather, the spiritual world is contained in the phenomenal world. Every natural object, if observed properly, demonstrates a kind of spiritual power. According to Emerson, nature plays a very important role

in the man-nature-God relationships. Among the tree, he highly values the function of nature. Take an excerpt from *Nature* for instance: "Standing on the bare ground, my head bathed by the blithe air and uplifted into infinite space, all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eyeball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or particle of God"<sup>[3]29</sup>. Here "I" stands for humans, "the bare ground" stands for nature, and "the Universal Being" stands for God. Emerson places nature in the central position among the man-nature-God relationships. Apparently nature acts as a medium or a carrier, through which man can get a direct spiritual communion with god. Emerson holds that nature is symbolic of God, and mediates between man and God.

### III. THE STRUCTURE AND ARTISTIC FORM OF THE POEM

This 16-line short poem is unanimously acknowledged as the best among Emerson's short poems. Structurally speaking, the poem can be divided into 4 sections. The first 4 lines form a stanza, in which the speaker tells us when the rhodora blooms, and where it grows. The next 4 lines constitute the second stanza, in which the speaker tells us the influence of the presence of the flower upon other things around, and their reaction to the beautiful obscure flower. From line 9 to line 12 is the third stanza. In this stanza appears the poet's voice, which is regarded as the communication of the inner mind between the poet and the rhodora. The last 4 lines constitute the fourth stanza. In the first line of this stanza the speaker raises a question to the rhodora "why thou wert there", and then he, instead of the rhodora, answers the question, which is a response to the subtitle of the poem "On being asked, whence is the flower?"

Artistically, this poem is exceedingly good in terms of its structure, rhyme scheme, rhythm, imagery, lyricism and rhetorical devices. As for structure, stanza 1 is similar

to stanza 3, with the same rhyme scheme aabb(4 heroic couplets). Stanza 2 is similar to stanza 4, with the same rhyme scheme abab(2 quatrains). As for rhythm, the poem is written in iambic pentameter, which is the most common meter in English poetry. The symmetrical structure, the appropriate foot rhyme and the proper use of iambic pentameter make the poem sound rhythmic, therefore generating a kind of musicality. One of the major features is the use of imagery. For instance, the poet uses such images as “damp nook”, “desert”, “sluggish brook”, “black water” to highlight the beauty of the rhodora. Besides that, colour imagery such as “purple”, “red”, “black” are used, which presents a kind of visual impact upon the readers. As Mularam Joshi said: “Emerson describes the titular rhodora mostly through the sense of sight by focusing on color, particularly its vibrancy in contrast with the dark pool, though he ignores other senses like smell and sound”<sup>[4][5]</sup>. Another point which is impressive to the readers is lyricism embodied in the poem. As is known to all, lyricism constitutes the artistic life of poetry. It is meaningless to talk about poetry without lyricism. In the poem the speaker expresses his ardent love of the rhodora, and he even calls it “dear”, so in this sense, the poem is actually a lyrical one. One more feature of the poem is the use of rhetorical devices. For instance, the capitalized Rhodora is the use of personification, that is, the flower is personalized by the speaker, who even “might the red-bird come his plumes to cool and court the flower that cheapens his array”, and at the same time, the rhodora itself symbolizes nature in its entirety. The method of contrast is also used in the poem. The vibrancy of the rhodora forms a striking contrast with the lifeless nook, the spiritless desert, the sluggish brook, and the black water in the stagnant pool. Last but not the least, it is the proper use of metaphor. The speaker compares sea-winds to a kind of positive force which boosts the growth of the rhodora, array to the red-bird’s plumes, and the rival of the rose to

the rhodora. All in all, all these artistic forms add a lot to the content of this poem.

#### IV. EMERSON’S CONCEPTION OF NATURE REFLECTED IN THE POEM

In the beginning of the poem the speaker mentions the sea-wind which pierces our solitudes. The spring sea-wind coming from the sea is fierce and full of vitality and spirituality. Just as Emerson once said in *Nature*: “Spirit primarily means wind”. So wherever the spring wind goes, everything is full of vitality. When it blows into the solitudes of humans, the wind even awakens those living in seclusion. Awakened by sea-wind, the speaker walks into the woods and comes upon the fresh pink-purple rhodora. As is known, Emerson has a complex of woods, that is, he has a preference for woods. Emerson writes in *nature*: “In the woods, a man casts off his years, as the snake his slough...In the woods, is perpetual youth...In the woods, we return to reason and faith. There I feel that nothing can befall me in life---no disgrace, no calamity”<sup>[3][29]</sup>. For Emerson, the woods stand for nature. They are also the symbol of spirit. Entering the woods, man can immediately be evoked to feel calmed down and inspired. On seeing the rose-like rhodora growing in a damp nook, the speaker is all at once evoked and inspired by her beauty. Then he finds that the presence of the flower produces a favorable effect on her surroundings such as the desolate land, the sluggish river, the black water and the unwholesome pool. Even the red-bird, on seeing the beautiful rhodora, might come to cool his plumes and courts the flower. All these things around are in high glee on account of her company. At the same time, seeing that, the speaker can’t but feel delighted. As for the function of the rhodora’s effect, it is not hard to understand this because Emerson has already formed his ideas about nature’s beauty, influence and power. Here it is clear that he has made the rhodora transformed into a certain spiritual state. Emerson recreates the image of the humble

and obscure rhodora, so a new and fresh image emerges in readers' mind, which arouses the readers' association and introspection. In *Nature*, Emerson writes: "the beauty of Nature reforms itself in the mind, and not for barren contemplation, but for new creation"<sup>[3]34</sup>. This reminds the readers of Emerson's three spiritual principles: awareness, transformation and introspection. Emerson expects the readers not only to be aware of the external beauty of the rhodora, but also to see her inner beauty which is regarded by the poet as the spiritual meaning and value of nature. Emerson asserts that nature is a transforming agent, and is of inherent power. He thinks that everything in nature corresponds to a certain spiritual state, and natural facts can be transformed into thought. In this sense, the rhodora has been transformed into a spiritual state with great energy. Through the depiction of the beauty of the flower, Emerson wants his fellow countrymen to introspect their excessive and crazy pursuit of the practical value provided by nature. As a liberal, learned, forward-looking and reform-minded man, Emerson, just like the rhodora, intends to awaken those who are obsessed with pursuit of wealth. He, like the sea-wind in May, wants to pierce his native country. So in this sense, the rhodora is the incarnation of Emerson.

In the third stanza, the speaker personalizes the rhodora through the use of the affectionate term "dear", seeing the flower as his sweetheart. Here Emerson transforms the rhodora into a talking creature with spirituality. According to Emerson, Nature has its own language, and can even speak. Emerson writes: "Nature says-- he (adult person) is my creature, and maugre all his impertinent griefs, he shall be glad with me"<sup>[3]29</sup>. One more example is his 1863 journal: "I cannot, like them, make lofty arguments in stately continuous verse, constraining the rocks, trees, animals, and the periodic stars to say my thoughts \_\_\_for that is the gift of great poets; but I am a bard, because I stand near them, and apprehend all they utter, and with pure joy hear that which

I also would say, and moreover, I speak interruptedly words and half stanzas which have the like scope and aim"<sup>[3]526</sup>. This shows a harmonious relationship between nature and humans. "The Rhodora expresses a spiritual connection with a primitive, deified nature and that man can share a kindred relationship with God through Nature"<sup>[5]100</sup>. However, some people are indifferent to that. Even the sages wonder why the rhodora wastes her charm "on the earth and sky", because they keep a very long distance away from nature, and therefore not aware of nature's "intrinsic value". Here Emerson plays off those including the sages who are deaf to nature's utterances and blind to nature's inner beauty. So he asks the rhodora to tell them that "if eyes were made for seeing, then beauty is its own excuse for being." In Emerson's view, eyes and ears constitute the external elements of human sense of beauty, and man should use their eyes and ears as a channel to make their souls introspect different forms of things. In this connection, "beauty is in the eye of the beholder", and the beauty of nature exists for its own sake, no other excuse. The business left for man to do is to find the beauty of nature with their own eyes and souls. In the last stanza, the speaker calls the rhodora "rival of the rose", showing his appreciation and respect for the flower. As for the beauty and the value of the rhodora, the speaker already has an insight into that. He clearly knows why the rhodora grows in the woods, so he thinks it unwise to ask that question, though he says "I never knew". The speaker uses "simple ignorance" to satire those who ask the rhodora silly questions. The last line of the poem is correlated with the subtitle. The word "there" in the last line refers to nature. It is the power of nature that brings both the rhodora and the speaker together there. So "the selfsame power" may refer to God. "In the Rhodora a poem replete with the language of Romance, the 'Power' that motivates the blossom and the observer, traditionally thought to be God"<sup>[6]225</sup>. Now both the rhodora and the speaker are nurtured by nature and gain

great strength from nature, because nature is the symbol of the Universal Being or God.

## V. CONCLUSION

Artistically, *The Rhodora* is altogether 16 lines long, which is Emerson's shortest poem and is also his favorite one. Though terse and pithy, it is exquisite in form, and thought-provoking in content. "The Rhodora uses a sophisticated form of purposeful symmetry combining octaves, quatrains, and heroic couplets"<sup>[7]B2</sup>. Structurally speaking, the poem is made up of 4 stanzas, and each stanza constitutes a quatrain. Rhetorically speaking, the poem skillfully uses personification, metaphor, symbolism, rhetorical question, question and answer, contrast and comparison, understatement and other techniques to depict vivid images, to draw readers' attention, and to make them get deep thoughts, lessons and aesthetic edification of the poem.

In terms of its ideological content, *The Rhodora* is impregnated with implied message. Throughout the poem, Emerson shows his great esteem and deep appreciation for the ordinary flower. So evidently the obscure rhodora represents nature in its entirety. Though obscure, the rhodora is of "intrinsic value", and of great power. Therefore, Emerson ardently asserted that humans must see the beauty in nature and show their great respect for its inherent power. As a Transcendentalist, Emerson holds that nature is emblematic of the Spirit or God. In Emerson's view, the rhodora as a natural entity is converted into spirit and thought, which forms his new perception of nature.

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