

# The Rhodora



## POEM TEXT

*On Being Asked, Whence Is the Flower?*

- 1 In May, when sea-winds pierced our solitudes,
- 2 I found the fresh Rhodora in the woods,
- 3 Spreading its leafless blooms in a damp nook,
- 4 To please the desert and the sluggish brook.
- 5 The purple petals fallen in the pool
- 6 Made the black water with their beauty gay;
- 7 Here might the red-bird come his plumes to cool,
- 8 And court the flower that cheapens his array.
- 9 Rhodora! if the sages ask thee why
- 10 This charm is wasted on the earth and sky,
- 11 Tell them, dear, that, if eyes were made for seeing,
- 12 Then beauty is its own excuse for Being;
- 13 Why thou wert there, O rival of the rose!
- 14 I never thought to ask; I never knew;
- 15 But in my simple ignorance suppose
- 16 The self-same power that brought me there, brought you.



## THEMES



### THE VALUE OF BEAUTY FOR BEAUTY'S SAKE

Ralph Waldo Emerson's "The Rhodora" celebrates the loveliness of the humble flower of the poem's title. The poem's speaker comes across a rhodora bush (a kind of flowering shrub) while taking a walk and describes how its immense beauty enhances its rather bleak surroundings. While wise men might wonder what higher purposes its beauty serves, the speaker muses that it doesn't matter; the rhodora is beautiful, and that is reason enough for it to exist. Beauty, this poem suggests, is valuable for its own sake.

The speaker spends the poem's first half emphasizing the rhodora's remarkable beauty. Even a bird with red feathers can't compete with the flower's "fresh," brightly-colored petals, which the speaker declares rivals those of the more famous rose.

So beautiful is the rhodora, in fact, that it has the power to brighten the dreary landscape in which it grows. The flower "pleases" the "sluggish brook," for example, its "purple petals" making the "black water with their beauty gay" (that is, happy). In other words, the rhodora's beauty transforms and delights this otherwise austere setting. It follows, then, that this beauty is something worth valuing and celebrating.

The poem builds on this idea in its second half, when the speaker addresses the rhodora directly. The speaker anticipates that "sages," or wise men, may one day ask the flower why its beauty is "wasted on the earth and sky." The speaker knows that some may question what point the flower serves out there in the woods, where no one's around to witness its loveliness. This question also suggests that some may question the value of something as "earthly" or secular as the beauty of a flower, especially in comparison to spiritual pleasures or pursuits.

In response, the speaker instructs the flower to say that "if eyes were made for seeing, / Then beauty is its own excuse for Being." Beauty, the speaker believes, doesn't need some external reason to exist. In these lines, the speaker succinctly sums up the central tenet of a philosophy known as aestheticism: that beauty is valuable simply for its own sake, without needing to serve some broader ethical or spiritual purpose.

#### Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 2-12



## SUMMARY

*Written in response to the question, where did the flower come from?*

In May, when the only sound that cut through our loneliness was the howling wind over the sea, I found a beautiful Rhodora bush in the woods, blooming in a damp, secluded corner and brightening up the barren landscape and a nearby, slow-moving brook. Some of the flower's purple petals had fallen into a puddle, and their beauty made the black water seem more cheerful. A red cardinal might come here to cool off in the water and flirt with the flower, whose beauty makes even the bird's bright feathers seem cheap and dull. Rhodora! If wise men ask you what point your beauty serves out here in the woods, with only the earth and sky to witness it, tell them, dear, that just like people's eyes are made for observing the world, beauty is valuable for its own sake. It never occurred to me to ask why you, a flower whose beauty rivals that of the rose, were there in the woods; I never knew why. But, in my humble opinion, I assume that the same higher power that placed me here also placed you in my path.



## THE DIVINITY OF NATURE

Upon coming across a beautiful, blooming rhodora bush while out for a walk, the speaker of "The Rhodora" attempts to answer the question, "whence is the flower?" That is, they wonder where the flower, which stands out so starkly against an otherwise bleak landscape, came from. Ultimately, the speaker decides that they may never truly know the answer to this question. However, they speculate that the flower, like the speaker themselves, has been placed there by God. In doing so, the speaker implies that nature is itself divine—and that human beings can thus find a healing, nourishing connection to God by enjoying nature's beauty. The speaker concludes the poem by saying that whichever "self-same power" brought the speaker to the woods also placed the rhodora in their path. In other words, the speaker believes that God is responsible for bringing the speaker and the rhodora together. In fact, the speaker implies that man and nature are kindred spirits in the sense that they are both God's creations.

The speaker thus feels a deep connection with the rhodora, which they address directly like a friend and call "dear." The speaker had earlier lamented their "solitude," but the rhodora appears as a divinely-gifted antidote to that feeling of loneliness.

The flower's effects on its surroundings, meanwhile, mirror its positive effect on the speaker. For example, the flower's "purple petals" make the "black water" of a nearby brook seem more cheerful and also "please the desert," brightening the dull, dreary landscape. The speaker's depiction of the rhodora beautifying its surroundings illustrates the healing power of nature's beauty—a beauty that the speaker ultimately attributes to God. It follows that people can seek God through communion with the natural world.

### Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-3
- Lines 9-16



## LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

### BEFORE LINE 1, LINE 1

*On Being Asked, Whence Is the Flower?*  
*In May, when sea-winds pierced our solitudes,*

The poem has a subtitle that reveals its context: the speaker is writing "The Rhodora" in response to the question "whence is the flower"—meaning, "where did the flower come from?"

The first line of "The Rhodora" then establishes the poem's setting and mood. The speaker notes that it's May and that they're somewhere near the sea. Right away, this setting seems

pretty bleak: the harsh "sea-winds pierce[]" the speaker's "solitudes." The [sibilance](#) of "sea-winds," "pierced," and "solitude" mimics the hiss of those winds, which seem to send a cold chill through the line.

Note how the speaker uses the plural first person here, mentioning "our" solitudes. This is the only time in the poem that the speaker does this. After this first line, they'll use the singular "I" to refer to themselves. This gives readers some insight into the speaker's identity and worldview: "our solitudes" suggests not only that the speaker feels lonely and isolated, but that they believe this feeling is somewhat universal—a state afflicting others around this time of year as well.

This first line is written in [iambic](#) pentameter: five poetic feet called iambs, which follow an unstressed-stressed syllable pattern:

In May, | when sea- | winds pierced | our sol- | itudes,

It's possible to scan the third foot here as a [spondee](#) (two stressed beats in a row, "winds pierced"), but this is a minor variation that doesn't disrupt the overall iambic rhythm.

### LINES 2-4

*I found the fresh Rhodora in the woods,  
 Spreading its leafless blooms in a damp nook,  
 To please the desert and the sluggish brook.*

On this windy May day, the speaker comes across a rhodora bush while walking in the woods. A flowering shrub native to New England, the rhodora's bright purple blossoms stand out against the rest of the landscape that the speaker describes.

The "fresh" flower spreads "its leafless blooms," or its blossoms, in a "damp nook," a small, sheltered area. Readers might picture a dark wood interrupted by a sudden burst of life and color, the vibrancy of which contrasts sharply with the "sluggish," or slow, plodding, stream and "desert." This isn't literally a desert; clearly, there's water and greenery around. The speaker's use of this term conveys just how lifeless the forest seems.

The speaker also [personifies](#) the natural world here, declaring that the blooms in order to make the rest of the landscape happy. This personification makes nature seem more human and alive.

The poet strays from [iambic](#) pentameter in the poem's third line, which begins with a [trochee](#) (a foot consisting of a stressed syllable followed by an unstressed syllable), and ends with a pyrrhic (two unstressed syllables) followed by a [spondee](#) (again, two stressed syllables):

Spreading | its leaf- | less blooms | in a | damp nook,

This change in the poem's rhythm calls attention to the flower's

power, as the "Spreading" of its blooms disrupts the line's expected metrical pattern.

Note, too, that lines 1-4 are written in an AABB [rhyme scheme](#). However, the first and second lines end on a [slant rhyme](#): "woods" doesn't line up perfectly with "solitudes." This is the only end slant rhyme in the poem. The effect is one of slight discordance, much like the irregular rhythm in the poem's third line. All of this helps reinforce the bleak, off-kilter mood of the poem's first [quatrain](#).

## LINES 5-8

*The purple petals fallen in the pool  
Made the black water with their beauty gay;  
Here might the red-bird come his plumes to cool,  
And court the flower that cheapens his array.*

The speaker relays how the rhodora's petals brighten their surroundings. These colorful petals have fallen into a puddle (or perhaps the "sluggish brook" from the previous line).

Once again, the speaker [personifies](#) nature, saying that flower has "made the black water with their beauty gay" (meaning happy). The petals have will and agency here, while the water displays human emotion. This might also be read as an example of [pathetic fallacy](#)—of the speaker projecting their own feelings onto the natural world. Either way, the lines illustrate the positive effect of the rhodora's beauty on the otherwise unappealing puddle, and they also demonstrate the speaker's sense of kinship with nature.

The plosive [alliteration](#) of "purple petals" and "pool" calls readers' attention to the image at hand. This alliteration, combined with the fact that the line is written in perfect [iambic pentameter](#), also simply makes the poem sound pleasant, in turn mirroring the effect of the rhodora's beauty on its surroundings.

The speaker next imagines a red cardinal coming to cool his feathers in the water near the rhodora. The speaker personifies the bird, presenting him as a lover of and rival to the rhodora. The bird "courts," or tries to woo, the flower, which ultimately outshines him; his "array" of red feathers pale in comparison to the rhodora's petals. The flower isn't just lovely next to the "sluggish brook," then. It's so lovely that it would "cheapen" the beauty of a bird as vibrant as a red cardinal.

The sounds of the poem again evoke the beauty being described. Listen, for example, to the crisp alliteration of "come," "cool," and "court," as well as the long /oo/ [assonance](#) of "plumes" and "cool."

## LINES 9-12

*Rhodora! if the sages ask thee why  
This charm is wasted on the earth and sky,  
Tell them, dear, that, if eyes were made for seeing,  
Then beauty is its own excuse for Being;*

The speaker addresses the rhodora directly for the first time, a literary device known as [apostrophe](#). This marks a dramatic shift in the content of the poem, as it transitions from descriptions of the flower and the surrounding woods to musing about the inherent value of the flower's beauty.

The speaker anticipates that "sages," or wise men, may ask the rhodora why its beauty is "wasted on the earth and sky." This question might be interpreted in a number of ways:

- The speaker believes people might wonder why the flower's beauty is "wasted" in the middle of the woods, where few cross its path.
- People might also question the value of something as secular and perhaps frivolous as a beauty that's tied to the earth and mortal life.

In response, the speaker instructs the rhodora to tell any questioners that "if eyes were made for seeing, / Then beauty is its own excuse for Being." This neatly sums up a central theme of the poem: the idea that beauty is valuable for its own sake, without needing to serve a higher purpose.

The speaker's easy dismissal of the "sages" in line 9 also reflects Emerson's belief in individualism. Emerson helped pioneer a philosophy known as Transcendentalism, central tenets of which included self-reliance and independent thinking. Though the "sages" may be wiser and more learned than the average person, the speaker doesn't assign the sages' opinions any special weight.

In directly addressing the rhodora, even calling it "dear," the speaker also again demonstrates their kinship with the flower and with the broader natural world. In a sense, the flower becomes a friend that the speaker can converse with, a cure to the "solitude" that they complained of in the first line of the poem.

## LINES 13-14

*Why thou wert there, O rival of the rose!  
I never thought to ask; I never knew;*

The speaker finally returns to the poem's framing question: where did the flower come from? In line 13, they repeat the question, asking why the flower was placed there, in the woods, for the speaker to come across.

The speaker then again addresses the rhodora directly (more [apostrophe](#)), calling it a "rival of the rose." This emphasizes just how beautiful the rhodora is; even the famous rose is threatened by its beauty. In [personifying](#) elements of the natural world, the speaker also again demonstrates their respect for and sense of connection to nature.

In line 14, the speaker admits that they "never thought to ask" why the rhodora exists and that they don't know the answer to this question. This reveals a humility in the speaker, which is

also evident in the admiring and self-effacing way they speak about the world around them. At the same time, it sets the speaker apart from the "sages" mentioned in line 9, who would question the presence of the rhodora rather than simply appreciate its beauty.

## LINES 15-16

*But in my simple ignorance suppose*

*The self-same power that brought me there, brought you.*

The poem's final two lines introduce another key idea: through a connection with *nature*, human beings can also find a connection with *God*.

The speaker admits that they're "ignorant" and don't know why they found the rhodora in the woods. However, they believe that "the self-same power" (i.e., God) that brought the speaker to the woods also placed the rhodora in their path.

The speaker's profession of their "simple ignorance" reflects the humility that they have demonstrated throughout the poem. The speaker doesn't consider themselves an authority on the subject but is merely stating what they believe: that God is responsible for the scene at hand.

This suggests, in a way, that the speaker and the rhodora are equals, or at least that they share an origin; both are God's creations. Appreciating the flower is a way to appreciate God; communing with the flower, and natural beauty in general, is a way to connect with a higher power.



## SYMBOLS



### THE RHODORA

Throughout the poem, the speaker praises the rhodora's beauty and its ability to brighten its surroundings. The rhodora is a real presence in the poem, but its beauty also comes to more broadly represent the beauty and divinity of the natural world.

The speaker repeatedly emphasizes the rhodora's loveliness and the effect this loveliness has on the landscape. The flower "please" and makes "gay" the nearby brook, for example. The flower even has the ability to cheer up the speaker, who initially complains about their "solitude" but later finds a sort of spiritual kinship with the flower and addresses the blossom as one would a friend. The flower's interaction with its surroundings and the speaker [symbolizes](#) the healing power of nature's beauty.

And this beauty, the speaker concludes, ultimately comes from God; God brought both the speaker and the flower to this spot in the woods. In connecting with the flower, the speaker is *also* connecting with God.

### Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 2-9:** "I found the fresh Rhodora in the woods, / Spreading its leafless blooms in a damp nook, / To please the desert and the sluggish brook. / The purple petals fallen in the pool / Made the black water with their beauty gay; / Here might the red-bird come his plumes to cool, / And court the flower that cheapens his array. / Rhodora!"
- **Line 13:** "Why thou wert there, O rival of the rose!"



## POETIC DEVICES

### PERSONIFICATION

"The Rhodora" is filled with [personification](#) as the speaker repeatedly grants human characteristics to various aspects of nature. All this personification supports one of the poem's central arguments: that human beings and nature are kindred spirits because they are both God's creations.

The speaker personifies nature for the first time in line 4, describing the rhodora as "pleasing" the landscape and the nearby "sluggish" brook. The rhodora's petals also make "the black water" of a puddle (or perhaps that same brook) "gay," or happy. By attributing human emotions to their natural surroundings, the speaker illustrates the healing power of the rhodora's beauty.

Of course, this also might be read as an example of [pathetic fallacy](#)—as the speaker projecting their own emotions onto the landscape. Still, the language brings the environment to life, emphasizing that people may find a sense of fulfillment and connection by engaging with the natural world.

The speaker also personifies a bird to show that even some of nature's most beautiful creations cannot compare to the rhodora. The "red-bird" in line 8 attempts to "court," or woo, the rhodora, but the flower petals outshine the bird's own "array" of red feathers.

Finally, the speaker treats the rhodora itself as remarkably human-like throughout the poem. The speaker addresses the flower directly several times through [apostrophe](#) and instructs the rhodora to defend itself against sages who question the larger purpose of its beauty. The speaker treats the rhodora like a being with will and agency because, on a certain level, the speaker views them as equals. Both come from God, and the speaker thus feels intimately connected to the flower.

### Where Personification appears in the poem:

- **Lines 3-4:** "Spreading its leafless blooms in a damp nook, / To please the desert and the sluggish brook."
- **Lines 5-8:** "The purple petals fallen in the pool / Made

the black water with their beauty gay; / Here might the red-bird come his plumes to cool, / And court the flower that cheapens his array."

- **Line 11:** "Tell them, dear"
- **Line 13:** "Why thou wert there, O rival of the rose!"

## APOSTROPHE

In line 9, the poem shifts from descriptions of the speaker's surroundings to musings on the value of beauty and the divinity of the natural world. The speaker, after describing the rhodora and its beautifying effects on the landscape surrounding it, finally addresses it directly.

The speaker calls out, "Rhodora!" They also call the flower "dear," speaking to it like a loved one and an equal, and instruct it to "tell" any wise men who question its existence that "beauty is its own excuse for Being."

The speaker clearly respects and admires the little flower. Beyond mere appreciation, however, this [apostrophe](#) emphasizes the speaker's sense of *connection* with the flower. The speaker feels *compelled* and *able* to converse with the rhodora because they both are children of God. In talking to the flower, the speaker is talking to a piece of God's handiwork. Direct communion with nature is a way to connect to divinity itself.

### Where Apostrophe appears in the poem:

- **Line 9:** "Rhodora!"
- **Line 13:** "O rival of the rose!"

## ALLITERATION

"The Rhodora" features frequent [alliteration](#), as well as the related devices [consonance](#) and [assonance](#). Together, these devices call readers' attention to certain images and ideas, and they also generally make the poem's language more musical. At times, the language becomes outright [euphonic](#), its gentle lyricism evoking the beauty of the flower being described.

In line 1, for example, the hiss of /s/ alliteration ("sea-winds," "solitudes") and more general [sibilance](#) ("pierced") mimic the sound of the wind over the sea. These /s/ sounds are like a cool wind whooshing through the line. The /f/ alliteration in the following line ("I found the fresh Rhodora") emphasizes the vitality of the flower, which the speaker seems to suddenly stumble upon.

Listen, too, to the string of /p/ alliteration in line 5:

The purple petals fallen in the pool

There's consonance here too, with the internal /p/ sound of "purple." As the speaker describes the profound effect of the

rhodora's beauty on the "pool" beside it, the poem itself also sounds beautiful to the reader. The /b/ sounds in "beauty" and "black" in the next line have the same effect, as do the crisp /c/ and assonant /oo/ sounds in lines 7-8

Here might the red-bird come his plumes to cool,  
And court the flower that cheapens his array.

In line 12, alliteration emphasizes the thematic connection between "beauty" and "Being"; beauty just *is*, the speaker argues, and it doesn't require a specific reason for existing. The guttural /r/ sounds in "rival of the rose," meanwhile, add some energy to the speaker's praise of the rhodora.

Finally, the poem's closing lines feature another string of /s/ alliteration (and consonance, with the /s/ of "ignorance"):

But in my simple ignorance suppose  
The self-same power that brought me there, brought  
you.

Here, the sibilance adds a smooth, gentle hush to the lines, reflecting the speaker's reverence for the "self-same power" (that is, God) "that brought" the speaker and flower together in the woods.

### Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "sea-winds," "solitudes"
- **Line 2:** "found," "fresh"
- **Line 5:** "purple petals," "pool"
- **Line 6:** "black," "beauty"
- **Line 7:** "come," "cool"
- **Line 8:** "court"
- **Line 12:** "beauty," "Being"
- **Line 13:** "Why," "thou," "wert," "there," "rival," "rose"
- **Line 14:** "never knew"
- **Line 15:** "simple," "suppose"
- **Line 16:** "self-same"

## IMAGERY

The poem's [imagery](#) makes the natural world all the more vivid for the reader and also highlights the immense beauty of the rhodora itself.

Much of the first half of "The Rhodora" contrasts the radiant rhodora with the bleak, dreary landscape that surrounds it. The imagery of "piercing" "sea-winds" in line 1 conveys the chill of the speaker's "solitude," while the speaker's descriptions of a "damp nook," "sluggish brook," and "black water" make the landscape feel cold and inhospitable.

The speaker [juxtaposes](#) this imagery with that related to the rhodora. While the landscape seems dim and dreary, the flower is "fresh" and vibrantly alive. Its bright blooms are "Spreading"

through the darkness, and those "purple petals" stand out all the more clearly against the backdrop of "black water." Readers can easily envision a dark forest punctuated by the flower's sudden burst of color and life.

In depicting the rhodora as distinct from its surroundings, the speaker is able to later illustrate the healing effects of beauty. The flower makes the rest of the world seem brighter and happier; it also makes the speaker feel less alone.

#### Where Imagery appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-6:** "sea-winds pierced our solitudes, / I found the fresh Rhodora in the woods, / Spreading its leafless blooms in a damp nook, / To please the desert and the sluggish brook. / The purple petals fallen in the pool / Made the black water with their beauty gay;"



## VOCABULARY

**Whence** (Before Line 1) - From where. The speaker is asking where the rhodora came from.

**Rhodora** (Line 2, Line 9) - A bright, flowering shrub native to New England. Rhodora bushes often grow in wetlands, which explains the speaker's reference to a nearby "brook" and "sea."

**Desert** (Line 4) - An area of land that is dry and without vegetation. In this case, Emerson is exaggerating how barren and inhospitable the landscape seems by describing it as a desert despite the fact that there are plants and water nearby.

**Gay** (Line 6) - Lighthearted and cheerful.

**Red-bird** (Line 7) - A red cardinal.

**Plumes** (Line 7) - Feathers.

**Array** (Line 8) - The speaker is referring to the bird's display of red feathers (the "plumes" mentioned in the previous line).

**Sages** (Line 9) - Wise men.

**Why thou wert there** (Line 13) - Why you were there.

**Self-same power** (Line 16) - The speaker is referring to God. In using the phrase "self-same," the speaker emphasizes that the exact same power that brought the speaker to the woods placed the rhodora there, too.



## FORM, METER, & RHYME

### FORM

"The Rhodora" consists of 16 lines arranged into a single stanza. It can also be broken up into four quatrains, or four-line stanzas.

Although the poem uses a traditional [meter](#) and [rhyme scheme](#) (more on that in a bit), it doesn't fit into a typical poetic form. In

many ways, however, the poem looks like a [sonnet](#):

- It's written in iambic pentameter with a formal rhyme scheme.
- It's an ode to natural beauty.
- It contains a *volta*, or a turn of thought, in line 9, as is typical in a Petrarchan sonnet. Here, the speaker directly addresses the rhodora for the first time and shifts from describing the landscape to reflecting on the spiritual significance of beauty.

Sonnets have 14 lines, whereas "The Rhodora," again, has 16. It thus nods to the sonnet form without following it precisely.

### METER

"The Rhodora" uses iambic pentameter. An [iamb](#) is a poetic unit made of an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable, and pentameter means that there are five of these units per line (for a total of 10 syllables). Here's line 2 as an example:

I found | the fresh | Rhodo- | ra in | the woods,

This meter fills the lines with steady, predictable music that evokes the flower's beauty and charm. Emerson does occasionally stray from this pattern for emphasis, however, as in line 3:

Spreading | its leaf- | less blooms | in a | damp nook,

This line begins with a [trochee](#), or a stressed syllable followed by an unstressed one. This subtly calls attention to the rhodora's power, as the "Spreading" of its petals disrupts the poem's expected meter. The line then ends with a pyrrhic (two unstressed syllables) followed by a [spondee](#) (two stressed syllables). This, in turn, calls attention to the flower's damp, dark surroundings.

### RHYME SCHEME

The first [quatrain](#) of "The Rhodora" consists of two sets of rhyming [couplets](#), creating an AABB [rhyme scheme](#). The next quatrain follows a CDCD pattern, in which the first line rhymes with the third and the second line rhymes with the fourth. The third quatrain follows the couplet pattern, while the final quatrain returns to the alternating rhyme pattern. As a result, the full rhyme scheme looks like this:

AABB CDCD EEFF GHGH

Each letter above represents a rhyme *sound*, while the colors reflect the *pattern* of those sounds.

There is one [slant rhyme](#), when Emerson rhymes "solitudes" with "woods" in lines 1-2. Most of these [end rhymes](#) are perfect, however, in turn filling the poem with clear, steady music.



## SPEAKER

The poem's speaker is someone taking a walk in the woods, where they stumble across the flower of the poem's title. When the poem begins, the speaker is feeling lonely; they note that the "sea-winds pierce[] our solitudes." The use of the plural pronoun "our" might suggest that the speaker believes that many other people share in this loneliness.

The speaker's initial descriptions of a dull and harsh landscape might suggest that they're feeling down or bitter about the world. But by the end of the poem, the speaker's tone is reverent as they focus only on the rhodora, divinity, and beauty. The speaker feels a kinship with the flower, which makes the speaker feel less alone and brings the speaker closer to God.

Readers never learn the speaker's age or gender. That said, it's fair to interpret the speaker as Ralph Waldo Emerson himself. Emerson was a leader in the Transcendentalist movement, which championed the power of the individual and the divinity of the natural world.



## SETTING

"The Rhodora" takes place on a day in May as the speaker walks through the woods. At first, the speaker's descriptions of the setting make the landscape seem dark and dull. The speaker mentions piercing winds blowing off the ocean, a "sluggish brook," and a pool of "black water." By depicting the setting as dreary, the speaker leaves room for the beauty of the rhodora to stand out against and even brighten its surroundings. The [juxtaposition](#) of the bleak setting and the beautiful rhodora serves to make the flower seem that much more otherworldly and divine.



## CONTEXT

### LITERARY CONTEXT

Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote "The Rhodora" in 1834. This was just two years before he published one of his most famous essays, [Nature](#), in which Emerson detailed the beliefs that would form the foundation of the philosophical and artistic movement known as Transcendentalism.

Transcendentalists championed the power of the individual, the importance of self-reliance, the basic goodness of humanity, and the divinity of the natural world. Transcendentalism was heavily influenced by the European Romantic movement across the pond, which valued the awe-inspiring beauty of nature as well as intuition and emotion.

Emerson was familiar with the works of and even met Romantic poets such as Samuel Taylor Coleridge and William Wordsworth. While he shared the Romantics' appreciation for

nature, however, Emerson's writing and philosophy were relatively radical. He believed that everyone and everything was connected to God and thus inherently divine, a departure from more traditional views of spirituality at the time. Such beliefs are hinted at in "The Rhodora," where the speaker finds kinship with a humble flower based on the fact that they come from the "self-same power."

As the figurehead of the Transcendentalist movement, Emerson had a lasting impact on generations of American writers. Most notably, he became a mentor to Henry David Thoreau of [Walden](#) fame.

### HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote "The Rhodora" during a tumultuous time in U.S. history, which helped shape his personal beliefs and philosophies. Like its cousin Romanticism, Transcendentalism was in part a response to the Industrial Revolution of the late 1700 and early 1800s. While new technologies made manufacturing processes more efficient, they also led to the increasing urbanization of society, ecological destruction, and the devaluation of human labor. The rise in factory work specifically created major problems with overcrowding and pollution.

Both movements also grew in response to the Age of Enlightenment's intense focus on reason (as opposed to emotion and intuition) and scientific inquiry.

Finally, it's worth noting that the U.S. was expanding rapidly in the 1830s as Americans began to migrate west into land acquired by the Louisiana Purchase. This westward expansion fostered, in some, a newfound appreciation and respect for nature as they faced the unfamiliar territory of the midwest. Of course, this westward expansion also demonstrated nature's brutality, as thousands died during their treks through the wilderness.



## MORE RESOURCES

### EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- [Transcendentalism](#) — Learn more about the philosophical and artistic movement Emerson led. (<https://www.britannica.com/event/Transcendentalism-American-movement>)
- [Emerson's Life and Work](#) — Read a short biography of Ralph Waldo Emerson at Poets.org. (<https://poets.org/poet/ralph-waldo-emerson>)
- [The Poem Out Loud](#) — Listen to a recording of the poem. ([https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qWjdptp\\_8nl](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qWjdptp_8nl))
- [See the Rhodora](#) — Learn more about, and see some photographs of, the flowering shrub that inspired this poem. (<https://www.wildflower.org/plants/>)

[result.php?id\\_plant=rhca6\)](#)

## LITCHARTS ON OTHER RALPH WALDO EMERSON POEMS

- [Concord Hymn](#)



## HOW TO CITE

### MLA

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### CHICAGO MANUAL

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