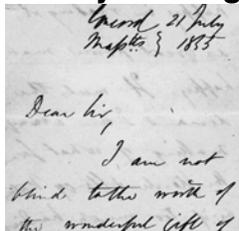


## Teaching with Primary Sources Assessment

**Grade Level:** High School (9-10)

**Standard(s) or Objectives:** CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.9-10.4 Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including figurative, connotative, and technical meanings; analyze the cumulative impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone (e.g., how the language of a court opinion differs from that of a newspaper).  
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.9-10.6 Determine an author's point of view or purpose in a text and analyze how an author uses rhetoric to advance that point of view or purpose.

### Library of Congress or Morris Special Collections Resources:



Ralph Waldo Emerson, July 21, 1853 (Letter to Walt Whitman)

<https://www.loc.gov/exhibits/whitman/0017-trans.html>

### Topic Background:

The most important letter in American literary history shows the leader of Boston's literary establishment recognizing Whitman's brilliant innovation and new voice. In his essay "The Poet," Ralph Waldo Emerson had called for a voice to celebrate the poem of America itself, "Our log-rolling, our stumps and their politics, our fisheries, our Negroes, and Indians, our boasts, and our repudiations, the wrath of rogues, and the pusillanimity of honest men, the Northern trade, the Southern planting, the Western clearing, Oregon and Texas." Whitman began writing poetry that seemed to record everything Emerson called for, and his preface to the 1855 *Leaves* paraphrases Emerson: "The United States themselves are essentially the greatest poem." He sent a copy of his unsigned but registered book to Emerson and received in return the letter that launched his career as America's premier poet.

Excerpt from: <https://www.loc.gov/exhibits/whitman/leavesofgrass.html#0017>

### Source(s) Used:

The source used for this assessment is the letter sent from Ralph Waldo Emerson to Walt Whitman after Whitman's anonymous publication of *Leaves of Grass*, his first collection of poetry. In his letter, Emerson showers praise upon the new poet and requests to meet him.

### Answer Key:

Question 1 – B

Question 2 – C

## Letter from Ralph Waldo Emerson to Walt Whitman Concord, Mass., 21 July 1853

DEAR SIR--I am not blind to the worth of the wonderful gift of "LEAVES OF GRASS." I find it the most extraordinary piece of wit and wisdom that America has yet contributed. I am very happy in reading it, as great power makes us happy. It meets the demand I am always making of what seemed the sterile and stingy nature, as if too much handiwork, or too much lymph in the temperament, were making our western wits fat and mean.

I give you joy of your free and brave thought. I have great joy in it. I find incomparable things said incomparably well, as they must be. I find the courage of treatment which so delights us, and which large perception only can inspire.

I greet you at the beginning of a great career, which yet must have had a long foreground somewhere, for such a start. I rubbed my eyes a little, to see if this sunbeam were no illusion; but the solid sense of the book is a sober certainty. It has the best merits, namely, of fortifying and encouraging.

I did not know until I last night saw the book advertised in newspaper that I could trust the name as real and available for a post-office. I wish to see my benefactor, and have felt much like striking my tasks, and visiting New York to pay you my respects.

R.W. EMERSON

### Questions:

1. Emerson writes:

"I rubbed my eyes a little, to see if this sunbeam were no illusion; but the solid sense of the book is a sober certainty."

Which statement best describes Emerson's meaning? (CCSS.RI.9-10.4)

- a. Emerson has sensitive eyes and he finds the book blinding.
- b. Emerson almost can't believe how brilliant the poetry is.
- c. Emerson finds the book heavy and serious.
- d. Emerson has read and re-read the poetry, looking for flaws.

2). According to the close of the letter, what does Emerson want of Whitman? (CCSS.RI.9-10.6)

- a. He wants Whitman to write another collection of poetry.
- b. He wants to begin a correspondence with Whitman.
- c. He wants to put aside his own work to visit Whitman.
- d. He wants Whitman to find joy in his work.