

A précis

A précis, dear students, is a summary; a summary that expresses the gist/central idea of a passage in as few words as possible. A much more accurate way to define it will be to say that it is **a highly compressed rewording/ reproduction of the message of the original passage**. Because it is a reproduction or rewording, we have to use our own words to express the message contained in the passage of which we have to write a précis. It is usually agreed that a précis must not have more than a third of the number of words in the original passage. At the same time it must contain all the essential points of the original, so that a reader gets the full message contained in the original without having to read it.

To compress the core message/meaning of, say, an essay, we must comprehend it first. Well, this is easier said than done. To get at the kernel of an essay, we will probably have to read it many times. We will have to get acquainted with every twist and turn of thought in the essay, before we can reproduce it in a lucid but compressed form. And we will, most probably, have to go through several drafts of our précis before we have achieved the objectives of 1) compression (we cannot exceed the conventional one-third limit, no sir!), 2) lucidity (the wording should be such that the message contained in the original passage must be instantly clear), and 3) comprehensiveness (despite all the precision and brevity, the message of the original passage has to be expressed in full; that is, all and only the essential points have to be included).

Let us try to write a précis of an essay titled “Everything I Need to Know I learned in the Forest” written by a famous ecological thinker named Vandana Shiva. It is one of the essays included in your text book— you can read it there.

The Development of Thought in the Essay in Detail:

We will begin by tracing the development of thought in the essay. The author begins by saying that most of what she knows about ecology was derived from her association with the Himalayan forests and ecosystems during her youth. It was probably because of her familial background (her father was a forest conservator and her mother was a farmer who composed songs and poems about trees and forests) that she had a chance to have such an intimate association with the Himalayan forests. She goes on to describe how she became a volunteer for the Chipko movement which started in response to the large scale deforestation in the Himalayan region of Garhwal in the 1970s. It was a non-violent movement which involved the women of the region hugging the trees that the authorities had come to fell. It was mainly the women who were affected by the shortage of water, fodder and fuel caused by all the logging in the region because it was they who had to cover longer distances for these basic needs. The author tells us of how in 1977 a woman named Bacchni Devi from the Himalayan village of Adwani organised resistance against her own husband who had been given a contract to cut the trees in the region.

Shiva moves on and tells us of how she transferred the lessons she had learned from the bio-diverse forests of the Himalayas to the preservation of biodiversity on farms. She informs us about how she

began to save seeds of different varieties from farmers' fields and she came to realise that she needed to establish a farm to demonstrate why bio-diverse farms (which grow different crop varieties and species at the same time) should replace farms each of which grow a single high yielding crop variety (monocultures). So she established a bio-diverse farm in the Doon valley located in Uttarakhand. The farm was called Navdanya Farm. She succeeded in conserving more than 630 varieties of rice and 150 varieties of wheat on the farm. She also informs us that the farm grows more food per acre than the monoculture-based farms. We are told that 100 community seed banks have been established across India under Navdanya, a movement for biodiversity conservation and organic farming. Farmers are also being helped under this movement to move from fossil-fuel and chemical-based monocultures to bio-diverse farms nourished by the sun and the soil.

The author then moves to the idea that humans need to recognise the fact that they are an integral part of nature and cannot engage in environmentally destructive behaviour without causing serious harm to themselves. In this connection, she mentions the April 2011 conference on harmony with nature organised by the U.N. General Assembly and the report of the U.N. Secretary General titled 'Harmony with Nature' issued in conjunction with the conference. She says that the cause of human disharmony with nature and violence against it is the mistaken perception that nature is separate from humans. Here she mentions the famous South African environmentalist named Cormac Cullinan who calls this false perception of nature as other as eco-apartheid and considers it much more serious than the apartheid that existed in the past in South Africa.

This perception of otherness must necessarily lead to the idea that because we are living, the other must be dead. Here she describes how this perception of nature as dead resulted in the beginning of a violent assault on the earth. Because human beings saw earth as dead matter they had no compunction or hesitation in digging into her entrails for raw material to drive the industrial revolution. From Terra Madre (a living Mother Earth) she turned into Terra Nullius (dead empty land ready to be occupied). The author here traces this shift in perspective to the leaders of scientific revolution like Francis Bacon (who said something to the effect that science had the power to shake nature to her foundations) and the famous 17th century chemist Robert Boyle (who believed that the image of nature as a living goddess was an impediment to man's domination over God's inferior creatures). With regard to the above mentioned shift in perspective she also mentions and quotes the philosopher and historian Carolyn Merchant.

The author says that the remedy for the above situation is to move from nature-as-dead-matter paradigm to an ecological paradigm, for which the best teacher is nature herself. That, she says, is why she started the Earth University at Navdanya Farm, to teach Earth Democracy. Earth Democracy means that all the species on the earth have the freedom to evolve within its varied ecosystems, and that humans, as part this Earth Family, must recognise, respect and protect their rights. That will ensure an ecologically sustainable availability of food and water for the human species.

Now begin the concluding paragraphs of the essay. The author says that the Earth University is inspired by Rabindranath Tagore who started a forest school in Shantiniketan in West Bengal to take inspiration from nature and to start a cultural renaissance in India. It later became a university in 1921 and turned

into one of the most famous learning centres of India. The author is deeply influenced by the writings of Rabindranath Tagore. She mentions some ideas from “The Religion of the Forest” and quotes from “Tapovan”. In the paragraph where she mentions the former for the first time she says that for Tagore, unity with nature is the highest stage of human evolution. In the quote from the latter, Tagore says that the best ideas of India came when man was in communion with nature and that the Indian social culture is deeply influenced by the culture of the forest (where many different species of animals and plants live in harmony) which teaches us life in diversity and democratic pluralism.

This unity in diversity (biodiversity), the author says, will ensure that the earth’s ecosystems are able to fulfil the basic needs (food and water) of the present generation without damaging their capacity to fulfil the needs of the future generations.

The author again mentions “The Religion of the Forest” in which Tagore says that our state of mind guides how we relate with the universe; we may try to conquer it or we may try to seek union with it; we may use power or we may try sympathy and compassion. The forest, she says, teaches us union and compassion. She goes on to say that the forest also teaches us enoughness, how to take from nature only as much as you we need, without resorting to exploitation and unnecessary accumulation. This, according to the author, will fill human lives with joy and happiness. The conflict within the human mind and society between the greedy exploitation of and harmony with nature is still on; and it is only the bio-diverse and democratic system of the forest, in the author’s opinion, that can guide us out of it.

The Development of Thought in the Essay at a Glance:

So the author moves from the observation of the wonderfully bio-diverse world of the Himalayan forests to the application of the lessons learned from that observation to conserving biodiversity on agricultural farms. From there she moves to the idea of human beings as an inseparable part of the biodiversity of nature. Then she comes to the false perception on the part of human beings that nature is something dead and separate from them. After that she insists on the need to turn back to nature and recognise and protect the rights of other species to the resources of the earth. Finally, she emphasises the necessity of human beings to live in harmony with all the other species (animal and plant), and take from nature only as much as they need, without hoarding and greedily appropriating the share meant for other species.

The précis:

Now let’s try our hand at making a précis of the essay. The essay contains approximately just over 1900 words. One third of 1900 is around 633. But because we want to make sure that we stay well within the one-third limit, we will strive to keep the word count of our précis to fewer than 600.

You are usually asked to supply a title for your précis. It may be a word, phrase or short sentence that sums up the main subject. So, we will begin by thinking of a title for our précis that reflects the main message of the essay. I think it should be “Forests teach us Harmony with Nature”. Here is my attempt at a précis of the essay under consideration:

The bio-diverse world of the earth's forests, like those of the Himalayan mountain range, is a wonderful example of how the different species that inhabit earth can live in perfect harmony with each other in an ecologically sustainable way. Human beings' inability to understand the advantages of biodiversity and the fact that they are a part and parcel of this bio-diverse world has led to ecologically destructive behaviour on their part. For example, the large scale deforestation and logging in the Himalayan forests which led to landslides and floods, and the shortage of water, fodder and fuel in the Himalayan region of Garhwal, against which the Chipko Movement was launched in the 1970s by the women of the region. Bio-diverse farms like Navdanya farm, which rely on the nourishment of the sun and the soil, have demonstrated the advantages of biodiversity by yielding more food per acre of land than monoculture based farms, which use large amounts of fossil fuels and chemical fertilizers.

Because we have shifted from the view that the earth is a living and nourishing mother to the view that it is dead matter, we don't hesitate in going after her resources indiscriminately, damaging and mutilating her seriously in the process. We do so without realising that this is unsustainable in the long run and the day will come when the earth will not be able to support her selfish children any more. The people responsible for this adverse shift in perspective were people like Francis Bacon (who said something to the effect that science had the power to shake nature to her foundations) and the famous 17th century chemist Robert Boyle (who believed that the image of nature as a living goddess was an impediment to man's domination over God's inferior creatures). Now attitudes like these led to the widespread view that nature was something which human beings had to conquer and subdue, as if they were supposed to rule it. Thus the need of the times is to turn back to the view of nature as living and susceptible to serious damage in case of indiscriminate exploitation, and live in harmony with it. We have to recognise, respect and protect the rights of all the other species with whom we share this wonderful world. We must realise that all the animal (including us) and plant species have an equal right to live and evolve within the complex and delicate web of life which this amazing planet supports. We must move away from anthropocentrism to ecocentrism. This is Earth Democracy.

The reason that the Indian social set up is so successful despite the varied elements of which it is composed is because, the Indian social culture, according to the Nobel laureate and India's national poet, Rabindranath Tagore, is based on the culture of the forest where all the different species coexist in complete harmony and peace, sharing the resources provided by the forest. We, as a species, must follow the same model. Rabindranath Tagore believed that unity with nature is the ultimate stage of human evolution. He also believed that we must deal with nature compassionately and seek union with her rather than start a war with her. We must take from nature without resorting to greed and appropriating the share of the rest of the living beings and without causing any harm to the planet in the process. In short, we must follow the example of the bio-diverse system of the forests.

There you have it: my attempt at a précis of the essay. Can you write a better one? If you can, write it and send it to me, so that we may all learn.

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