

Emerson: The Mind on Fire: A Biography Study Guide

**Emerson: The Mind on Fire: A Biography by Robert D.
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Plot Summary

This book is a biography of Ralph Waldo Emerson's life and work. The author equally focuses on Emerson's private and public lives, because they are so intertwined.

The biography begins with Ralph Waldo Emerson visiting the tomb of his wife, who had died the year before. He opens her coffin to try to convince himself that she is truly dead. This story of some of the deepest sadness in Emerson's life then jumps eleven years earlier when he was a senior at Harvard. His college life is described, as well as aspects of his character. The book then rewinds one year earlier to his junior year and those events and people that inspire Emerson in his life and ideas.

The book rewinds still further back to his childhood and family life, describing his family and Emerson's relationship with them. His Aunt Mary Moody Emerson was a large influence on his life. After graduating from Harvard, Emerson joined the family teaching tradition. He also read books of all varieties but seemed most interested in Scottish Common Sense. It contradicted and critiqued Hume in a way Emerson would throughout his life. The book returns to describing the Emerson brothers and their close relationship. This chapter focuses on each brother in turn. The story then returns to Emerson's teaching. This was a very isolated time in his life; he wished for so much more.

As William goes to Germany to study religion, Emerson creates his own vision of Germany through the works of Mme. de Stael. Emerson grows more productive with his reading and writing and decides to study divinity. He gives up teaching and goes to Cambridge and registers for divinity school. As he studies various theories on religion, he never gives up reading and writing about other topics. After some time in the south recovering from illness, he returns to Boston to preach in his father's church. On Christmas Day 1827, he meets Ellen Tucker, an event that would forever change his life. Soon Emerson is preaching in the Second Church in Boston and married to Ellen; these were some of the best years of his life. Sadly, Ellen's health deteriorates as Emerson's religious views begin to change. With Ellen's death, Emerson is not only separated from his wife but also from the church and social obligations. He leaves the church and leaves the country.

Emerson spends many months traveling throughout Europe, seeing the sights, making friends, and speaking with other writers. After returning home, he falls in love and marries Lydia (Lidian) Jackson. The remainder of his life sees the birth, and death, of children, the development and success of his career as a writer, editor, and public speaker, and many trying and exhilarating times.



Preface and The Student

Preface and The Student Summary and Analysis

The Mind on Fire: A Biography tells the story of R. W. Emerson's life and career. Richardson has written this book in a way that reflects Emerson's own idea that the biographies of great men can be used to prove that there is much to be found in common among all human beings. This book reveals the genius and flaws of a man who was, among many things, a great writer and thinker.

In the Preface, Richardson gives background information into Emerson's personality and life and then thanks many individuals for their contributions to this work. A poem by William James ends the Preface.

In The Student: Chapter 1: Prologue, Emerson, at the age of twenty-eight, still grieves for his wife, who passed away over a year before from tuberculosis. He opens her coffin to convince himself she is truly dead. At this point in Emerson's life, he has hit rock bottom; the life he and Ellen had planned was now in ruins, and his career as a pastor is coming to an end due to drastic changes in Emerson's religious beliefs. This day is a turning point in Emerson's life; he sails to Europe on Christmas day, 1832.

In The Student: Chapter 2: Emerson at Harvard, the author jumps back eleven years to Emerson's last semester at Harvard. Waldo is described as only a fair scholar who was boyish, yet with a sense of self-possession. Emerson's liberal, yet practical, education is described. Being poor, Emerson helps to support himself through school by various means. The author delves more into Emerson's experiences in college, as well as his personality. The chapter ends with the author describing the various ways the world was changing by the time Waldo graduated from Harvard.

In The Student: Chapter 3: The March of Mind, Emerson has reached a turning point in the middle of his junior year of college; he has become more focused on writing and reading and has a changing sense of self. Waldo is influenced by Edward Everett, a young and forceful professor of Greek literature. Waldo learns about becoming more eloquent from Edward Channing, a famous teacher of oratory. His college years, it seems, were full of contradictions. The chapter ends with the telling of Sampson Reed's oratory. Sampson's beliefs resonate with Waldo.

In The Student: Chapter 4: Home and Family, Waldo returns to Boston, and his childhood of poverty is described; although poor, his family strongly believed in education and life-long learning. Ralph Waldo Emerson was the middle, silly, child in whom others saw the least promise. Waldo recalls much of his early life, including his stern father, the Reverend William Emerson. Waldo's mother, Ruth Haskins, is left to raise her children after the early death of her husband; much of Waldo's interest in religion came from his deeply religious mother.



In The Student: Chapter 5: The Angel of Death, it is said that Mary Moody Emerson provided the Emerson boys with their most profound education; she had a strong character and boundless energy. Mary Emerson is compared to Dickensian characters with small stature and coffin-shaped bed. "Her life was one of destitution, pain, and anticipation of death, but there is a seventeenth-century vigor to her morbidity" (p. 26). The chapter continues to reflect on Mary's personality and her influence on Waldo, the rest of the family, and others.

In The Student: Chapter 6: Scottish Common Sense, Emerson becomes a teacher while living back in Boston after graduating at eighteen. He continued to write and read voraciously, with a focus on Scottish philosophers of common sense. This chapter focuses on the beliefs and work of Dugald Stewart. Emerson believed much of what this philosophy taught but felt it was also too restrictive. The chapter ends by telling the reader about the turmoil in the world at the time and in Emerson's heart.

In The Student: Chapter 7: The Brothers Emerson, Emerson was very close and attached to his brothers and their various activities and ambitions; they, in turn, were also very involved in the goings on in each other's lives. Each of the living brothers is described in turn; all suffer from various illnesses and other difficulties.

In The Student: Chapter 8: The Young Writer, Waldo taught at William's women's school for two years after college graduation and was considered a mediocre teacher; writing is what Waldo wished to be doing. Beginning in college, Waldo kept many notebooks filled with poems, quotes, and other thoughts and observations on a wide range of topics. Emerson's writings begin to reflect his opposition to Hume. This would be Waldo's focus for the rest of his life, uncovering the sources of power that exist in people and in the world.

In The Student: Chapter 9: The Paradise of Dictionaries and Critics, the author describes Waldo's growing interest in William Ellery Channing's ideas regarding Unitarianism. The chapter continues to discuss Channing's beliefs and other ideas regarding Unitarianism and its criticism of other Christian denominations, as well as Hume. Germany would have a very negative impact on William, and his religious beliefs would be forever tainted by the Biblical critic Johann Gottfried Eichhorn. William's early experiences in Germany encourage and lift up Waldo's downtrodden spirit.

In The Student: Chapter 10: Mme. de Stael and the Other Germany Divinity Studies, William's attitude regarding Germany contrasts with Waldo's view of Germany through the reading of Mme. de Stael's "Germany". Emerson's emotions fluctuate throughout this chapter from gloomy to reinvigorated; with the support of his aunt Mary Moody Emerson, Waldo stops teaching and gives most of his time to the study of divinity. In February of 1825, Waldo registers for Cambridge's divinity school. The chapter ends with Emerson's eyes failing and an inability to study, only a month into his new schooling.



Divinity

Divinity Summary and Analysis

In Divinity: Chapter 11: Pray without Ceasing, it is stated that Emerson's eye disease was probably caused by tuberculosis. Emerson spends much of this chapter wrestling and critiquing Hume's ideas, as well as Plato's. William returned from Germany and he and Charles both ended their careers in divinity. Emerson suffers from several bouts of illness and becomes depressed. In June Emerson writes his first sermon, "Pray without Ceasing", and the summer is a turning point. The chapter ends with Emerson heading to South Carolina due to increased health concerns and a warmer climate.

In Divinity: Chapter 12: The Prince of Lipona, Emerson is greatly affected by his first trip outside of New England; he soon decides South Carolina is still too cold and heads for St. Augustine, Florida. Florida would have an even large impact on Emerson than South Carolina. The greatest event that takes place for Emerson while in Florida is meeting the former crown prince of Naples, Achille Murat. Emerson is troubled by slavery in the south. He soon returns north, reinvigorated, but feels a change coming in the future of religion in America.

In Divinity: Chapter 13: The Balance Beam, Emerson travels for several months through the north, visiting friends and giving occasional sermons. He is still struggling with becoming an author or a preacher, but he is strongly leaning toward divinity. He continues to read literature and write poetry; by fall, the balance beam begins to tremble with everything connected to his sermons and all that is connected to poetry; his moods and convictions change, as do his feelings about his career. The chapter ends with a statement regarding the importance of him meeting Ellen Tucker.

In Divinity: Chapter 14: Ellen Tucker, Ellen Tucker, Emerson's future wife, is described as beautiful with a vibrant spirit. She and Emerson are engaged within a year of meeting each other. During this period of his life, Emerson falls in love with Ellen, must deal with his brother Edward's mental breakdown, and the possibility he may be called by the Second Church to preach.

In Divinity: Chapter 15: Ordination and Marriage: Love and Reason, Emerson is ordained by the Second Church in Boston; he is soon gaining conviction in his belief that the self is one's only path to the divine. There are pros and cons to his new career as a preacher. Emerson and Ellen marry; this marks a period of happiness and prosperity in his life.

In Divinity: Chapter 16: We Are What We Know, both Waldo and Ellen are busy during the fall of 1829. Emerson becomes friends with the shouting Methodist, Edward Taylor; although their beliefs are very different, they have a profound respect for each other. Waldo's theological beliefs become more modern and humanist, as being influenced by the beliefs he already had and by the life he and Ellen struggle to live with her illness.



As Ellen lay dying, Waldo turns to from religion to science, wondering if Pantheism could be expressed through science.

In Divinity: Chapter 17: Gerando and the First Philosophy, Ellen's condition worsens and Emerson prepares to give up everything to help her. Emerson begins reading a new book by Joseph de Gerando, which focuses on the importance of philosophy and gives Waldo a guide in his despair. As winter approaches, upheaval is taking place around the world and in Emerson's life.

In Divinity: Chapter 18: The Wreck of Earthly Good, Ellen bravely and serenely dies; a comment regarding her death by Waldo is the title of this chapter. The author sees her death and Emerson's spiritual crisis as his "second birth", yet he never truly overcomes the grief and regret he felt at her death (p. 110). Waldo is seen as untraditional by turning inward for comfort and support.

In Divinity: Chapter 19: In My Study My Faith is Perfect, Emerson begins reading the Bhagavad Gita, as described by the French philosopher Victor Cousin. This study shows a new world of intelligence and philosophy in a non-Christian, non-Western culture. Emerson visits Ellen's grave every day and writes her poetry. Both Charles and Edward are ill, and Waldo's path seems dark and uncertain.

In Divinity: Chapter 20: Separation, Emerson's separation from Ellen led to his separation from many other aspects of his life; her loss now frees him from his many responsibilities. Emerson decides to write a book, which is later published as "Nature". Emerson opens Ellen's coffin and decides to focus on the living; his sermons and actions reflect this. He soon leaves the Second Church.

In Divinity: Chapter 21: A Terrible Freedom, Emerson begins to grow more interested in astronomy than conventional Christianity, which leads to a final break with the church. This break from the church leads to both feelings of freedom and fear, as well as disappointment from his family. On Christmas day of 1832, Emerson spontaneously boards a ship bound for Malta; his family is shocked.



The Inner Light

The Inner Light Summary and Analysis

In *The Inner Light: Chapter 22: The American Eye*, as Emerson approaches Europe, which he sees as the Old World of history, science, and art, he becomes a defensive American. After a five-week voyage, he arrives in Malta; Emerson enjoys all that Italy has to offer, including its architecture, churches, art, and people. He already feels rejuvenated.

In *The Inner Light: Chapter 23: I Will Be a Naturalist*, Emerson travels through Switzerland and Paris. He is amazed and moved by the multitude of plant species found in the Paris botanical garden.

In *The Inner Light: Chapter 24: A White Day in My Years*, the botanical garden turns Emerson away from theology and toward science. In England, Emerson visits Coleridge, an old writer who Emerson considered a "citizen of the universe" (p. 143). Emerson meets the essayist Thomas Carlyle. The two men hit it off right away and spent the day together, a day that Emerson called "a white day in my years" (p. 148). After nine months in Europe, Emerson prepares to sail home, happy for his experiences but impatient to return home and begin his new plans.

In *The Inner Light: Chapter 25: The Instructed Eye*, Emerson is restless as he waits for strong winds to die down in Liverpool and allow his ship to return to the U.S. While he waits, he returns to journaling about his religious views. Upon arriving in Boston, Emerson busies himself with visiting his family and giving science lectures regarding the importance of science and observation.

In *The Inner Light: Chapter 26: Mary Rotch: Life without Choice*, Emerson meets the Quaker Mary Rotch, whose story about being expelled from the Quaker church interested him. Like the Quakers, he too believed everyone had an "inner light", or inner voice, one must completely trust (p. 158) and that the Bible was important but secondary, with the spirit being superior.

In *The Inner Light: Chapter 27: A Living Leaping Logos*, after much time apart, the Emerson family is dispersed throughout various cities, which gives Emerson the freedom to do as he chooses. Through Emerson's reading of Frederic Hedge's manifesto, which he called a living leaping logos, American Transcendentalism is born. In 1834, Emerson falls in love Lydia Jackson.

In *The Inner Light: Chapter 28: A Theory of Animated Nature*, Emerson's year of wonders, 1834, is discussed; he has many new ideas to study. Emerson turns to Goethe and his beliefs about reverence. The author discusses Emerson's belief in the importance of reading but not allowing reading to be the end result and Emerson's interest in self-realization. Emerson's poetry is finally developing.



In The Inner Light: Chapter 29: Each and All, the author continues the discussion of the year of wonders. His writings and ideas are finally coming together, with the help of various inspiring individuals. Emerson begins a notebook specifically for his poetry. Emerson has learned to give over himself to life and every day he is alive; his writing has finally matured.

In The Inner Light: Chapter 30: Confluence, Emerson moves in with his stepgrandfather, Ezra Ripley, and finds his home a good place to work; Ruth and Charles also join him. Edward dies, and Emerson grows closer to Charles that year. Mary Moody then moves in with the rest of the family. Emerson's process to the creation of his first book "Nature" is described; Emerson is ready to work.



Nature

Nature Summary and Analysis

In Nature: Chapter 31: Lidian, Lydia Jackson was the new love in his life that he saw as a "commissioned spirit" (p. 191). Soon after his proposal and her acceptance, he begins calling her Lidian. Lidian is described as a tender and passionate woman, although her outward relationship to Emerson was one of traditional New England reserve; she also has dark, anxiety-ridden moments.

In Nature: Chapter 32: The New Jerusalem, Emerson gives biography lectures that reflect his new hope and vigor. Emerson continues to prepare for his "little book on nature" (199).

In Nature: Chapter 33: The Art of Writing: Jakob Boehme, Emerson is continuing to work on "Nature", as well as a volume of essays. Public lecturing has improved his abilities as a writer. Jakob Boehme's "Aurora" reiterates Emerson's view that God can be found within one's own heart. Emerson vows to himself to stay positive and enthusiastic.

In Nature: Chapter 34: Marriage and Concord, Emerson's speech on Concord's two hundred year anniversary is his first printed work. Besides this address, Emerson is busy with other studies, writings, and lectures. Emerson and Lidian are married on September 14, 1835 and move to their one and only home in Concord. A detailed description of Concord is given.

In Nature: Chapter 35: Alcott and English Literature, Bronson Alcott is a frequent visitor to the Emerson home and one who Emerson considers a modern prophet. Emerson works on a series of lectures on English literature before returning to "Nature". Emerson champions an American literature, which up to this point had been considered a branch of English literature.

In Nature: Chapter 36: All in Each: Writing Nature, the Emerson household is a bustling place with many guests and a baby on the way for Lidian and Waldo; also, Charles and Waldo grow closer as Charles' health worsens. Emerson continues to be a voracious reader and is interested in Alcott's views of childhood, most likely brought on by the imminent birth of Emerson's first child.

In Nature: Chapter 37: Nature: The Laws of the World, Charles dies, and Waldo and Charles' fiancée, Elizabeth, take solace in each other's company and discussions of Charles. Emerson's book, "Nature," is published. Many other books, along with this one, show that modern ideas regarding religion are emerging.

In Nature: Chapter 38: Nature: The Apocalypse of the Mind, the most important part of Waldo's book, is the exploration of the relation of nature to human beings. "Nature" is seen as modern stoicism. Emerson is more than each of the philosophers and writers he studies; he finds his own views in each of them.



In Nature: Chapter 39: Margaret Fuller, Margaret Fuller comes to stay with the Emersons for an extended visit. After an uncertain start, they got on quite well, although their relationship would always be rocky; she with her persistent tone and he with his too quick defenses. Emerson had fallen in love with her; the only person he may have loved more was Ellen.



Go Alone

Go Alone Summary and Analysis

In *Go Alone: Chapter 40: The Symposium*, Emerson and several other prestigious men meet to discuss the organization of a symposium to periodically discuss the unsatisfactory state of thought in America; this later became known as the Transcendental Club. Over the next four years, the lives of many of these remarkable members would become intertwined.

In *Go Alone: Chapter 41: The Forging of the Anchor*, during this great year of 1836, Emerson's writing is filled with descriptions of forging and birth, the forging of new friendships and ideas and the birth of the club and, most importantly, his son, Wallie. This new life renewed a defenseless, exposed Emerson that had not been seen since the time of Ellen.

In *Go Alone: Chapter 42: We Are Not Children of Time*, Emerson gives his *Philosophy of History*, his first venture completely on his own. The "immovable anchor" in Emerson's thought is that the human mind is common to all but is unique because of an individual's nature; all humans are both similar and connected, as well as individual and unique.

In *Go Alone: Chapter 43: The American Scholar*, shows how the Panic of 1837 affects all Americans; along with these financial struggles, Emerson suffers other personal adversity. Emerson speaks at the Cambridge commencement ceremony; this speech is very uncharacteristic of Emerson and many are offended. Emerson would return time and time again to this idea of the American Scholar.

In *Go Alone: Chapter 44: Casting Off*, Emerson's calm, outward appearance is very different from the turmoil he feels inside; his moods and beliefs are constantly changing. The shocking killing of an abolitionist minister by a mob in Illinois adds to Emerson's already emotional state. Emerson becomes more involved the abolitionist movement; a movement in which Lydian is already ahead of him.

In *Go Alone: Chapter 45: Human Culture*, Emerson begins his new lecture titled "Human Culture." Like his previous lecture series, it is carefully focused. He discusses how one can be defeated and how reality is not masked by imagination but by daily routines.

In *Go Alone: Chapter 46: The Peace Principle and the Cherokee Trail of Tears*, the peace movement is an issue at the same time as the antislavery movement. "The Peace Principle shows war as a primitive form of self-help that should be brought to an end in modern times. Emerson is outraged by this fraud that is the treaty sending the Cherokees west.

In *Go Alone: Chapter 47: Henry Thoreau*, at thirty-five, Emerson is feeling a mid-life depression. Thoreau is a new friend of Emerson's, a twenty-year-old Harvard graduate

much like Emerson. Thoreau becomes both brother and son to the Emerson family. Although they are close and have many similarities, they also have many differences.

In *Go Alone*: Chapter 48: *Go Alone: Refuse the Great Models*, as Emerson is immersed in various aspects of his busy, stressful life, he accepts an invitation to address the seniors of the Harvard Divinity School. His speech is an attack on formal historical Christianity. Divinity is found in humanity because Christianity was founded on human nature, not the Bible.



These Flying Days

These Flying Days Summary and Analysis

In *These Flying Days*: Chapter 49: *New Books, New Problems*, Emerson gives a lecture at Dartmouth about the inadequate imagination of American work; but, he had hope for the American writers of the future. Emerson is deeply troubled in this chapter after Andrews Norton bashed him and others in a Boston newspaper article. Emerson is very uncomfortable with all the publicity that had come due to this attack; he keeps out of the debate and feels he did not need to explain his views. This first taste of public censure would stay with him for the rest of his life.

In *These Flying Days*: Chapter 50: *Jones Very*, many of the new people in Emerson's life are members of various movements, with the strangest being Jones Very. Emerson is impressed by his inner-directedness and intelligence; Very, in turn, is impassioned by Emerson's July divinity school lecture and decides he is, literally, the vehicle for the Holy Ghost and the second coming, the Messiah. He is placed in a mental institution for some time for his crazy antics; later in life the spirit left him, and he lived the rest of his life as a mediocre minister who had seen God.

In *These Flying Days*: Chapter 51: *The Attainable Self*, Emerson begins a new lecture series with changes in some of his original beliefs and the exploration of new subjects.

In *These Flying Days*: Chapter 52: *Home and Family*, Lidian gives birth to a daughter she names Ellen; she could never quite fill Ellen Tucker's shoes, and she sees this as a way of giving Emerson the Ellen he had lost. Emerson is very grateful and moved by this act. Family life is warm and spirited. Throughout this chapter, Emerson is reminded of how important his "all-in-each" principle is (p. 317)

In *These Flying Days*: Chapter 53: *Writing Essays*, Emerson puts a volume of Jones Very's poems as his own poetry is not going well. His focus now is on prose, sometimes editing the prose of others. This editing and organizing of others' works is so successful, he is asked to do the same for Carlyle; this is a very large undertaking. The large amount of published work humbles Emerson, and he begins to fervently work on a book of his own essays. The chapter ends with Emerson's new myth of the growth of consciousness.

In *These Flying Days*: Chapter 54: *The Heart Has Its Jubilees*, Emerson is busier and more full of energy than ever. He also makes many new, intimate, acquaintances. His marriage seems to become an open one, although emotionally and not physically. He also criticizes the institute of marriage, seeing it as unnatural for two individuals to be tied to each other for life, although he stays married.

In *These Flying Days*: Chapter 55: *Identity and Metamorphosis*, the busy days continue in Emerson's life with his main focus being a new lecture series called "The Present



Age", although he is also concerned about his volume of essays he is preparing to have published. In July, the first number of "The Dial" appears; it is forward-thinking but also memorializes the dead. The chapter ends with Emerson's realization that change is the only constant.

In These Flying Days: Chapter 56: Brook Farm and Margaret Fuller, Emerson is confronted by Fuller; she wants a closer relationship with him, and he is in conflict. "These flying days" speak of the emotional roller coaster that is Emerson's life during the change from summer into fall. He lives very much in the present at this time, a time that is very euphoric and hopeful. Emerson decides it is not in his best interest to join the commune called Brook Farm; the individual is too important for a group such as this.

In These Flying Days: Chapter 57: Pythagoras and Plotinus, Emerson's book of essays is sent to the printers, and he begins other projects. Emerson is interested in the first philosopher, Pythagoras; he realized that not everything was in flux. He also took the idea from Plotinus that is in regard to the union of the self with the One.

In These Flying Days: Chapter 58: Osman's Ring: A Work of Ecstasy, with May comes spiritual growth for Emerson. Emerson is absorbed in details about his aunt's creativity, which seems to encourage him to study his own. He writes a poem using the power of his daemon, Osman; Osman's ring in the story is power over an empire. Emerson spends much of this chapter trying to find ecstasy, or a feeling of being outside of time, place, and self. Emerson's essay on ecstasy is a failure, but is interesting in Emerson's attempt to connect ecstasy to nature.

In These Flying Days: Chapter 59: The Frightful Hollows of Space, Emerson's stepgrandfather passes away; the focus of the beginning of the chapter is on young Waldo and his parent's view of him. Edith is born after Lidian has a strange dream. Due to financial concerns, Emerson goes back to lecturing. Young Waldo dies from a fever, and the Emerson's are engulfed in grief, a grief that is the start of Lidian's decline.



Children of the Fire

Children of the Fire Summary and Analysis

In Children of the Fire: Chapter 60: The Dream of Community, Emerson pulls himself together for his family and his work. Emerson goes to lecture in New York to make money; he makes many new acquaintances. One of the men Emerson sees in New York, Albert Brisbane, is interested in the French utopian ideas of Charles Fourier; many communes, including Brook Farm, begin to appear in the U.S. For Emerson, especially after Waldo's death, Fourier is too shallow and too optimistic.

In Children of the Fire: Chapter 61: Children of the Fire, Emerson takes over as the editor of "The Dial" when Fuller resigns. He also continues to try to convince friends to move to his neighborhood to create his own commune. Emerson begins his essay "The Poet", which the author considers one of the best pieces about the literary process. Emerson is affected but not destroyed by Waldo's death, and this is revealed in this essay.

In Children of the Fire: Chapter 62: Emerson's Dial, Emerson put much of his energy for two years into trying to save "The Dial". Emerson works on a new volume of essays and spends much time with friends. Emerson's efforts toward "The Dial" results in a unique magazine that focuses more on literature and less on the arts and had a section that contained scripture from many world religions. The editing of The Dial reflects Emerson's writing change; he is writing less original works and editing more.

In Children of the Fire: Chapter 63: New Views, the world changes greatly during this period of time, yet much of Emerson's beliefs about the individual and idealism stays the same, although some changes have taken place due to Waldo's death, which causes Emerson to be less innocent.

In Children of the Fire: Chapter 64: The World, Emerson's down-to-earth streak is threatening to overtake the other side of his personality. As Emerson approaches his fortieth birthday, his work becomes darker and about isolation and hiding. Much turmoil exists below the surface of Emerson's seemingly successful and serene life.

In Children of the Fire: Chapter 65: The Young American, 1844 seems like a year of endings; many of Emerson's friends are no longer in Concord, and some had left the country altogether. Emerson continues to read and lecture as changes continue to take place in his friends. Many of Emerson's friends and colleagues disagree with his views at this time, especially his positive view of business.

In Children of the Fire: Chapter 66: Emerson's Emancipation Address, Emerson decides to take an active role in the anti-slavery movement; the cause of this change is only speculated.



The Natural History of Intellect

The Natural History of Intellect Summary and Analysis

In The Natural History of Intellect: Chapter 69: Representative Men, Emerson writes a unique Pantheon course of lectures using great men as educators; the list includes no Americans. Emerson sees great people as being examples and symbols and uses them to show that there are no common men. After discussing each of the men included in this series of lectures, the chapter ends with Emerson agreeing with Goethe that we must put what we know into practice.

In The Natural History of Intellect: Chapter 70: The Lecturer, many changes are taking place with the replacement of old faces with new ones. Emerson begins his lecture series on great men; the author then looks back at Emerson's extensive career as a lecturer, including how taxing it was on him, though often enjoyable, and the fact that the audiences always responded, either positively or negatively.

In The Natural History of Intellect: Chapter 71: Persia and Poetry, Emerson is consumed by lecturing and discovers the Persian poet, Hafez who was one of the greatest Persian lyric poets. Emerson is drawn to this Sufi and Sufism, which is not a religion but religion. Several of Hafez's poems are included in Emerson's Orientalist notebook, and his own poetry has a marked Persian quality from now on. Studying this Persian writing also brings back an interest in other art forms, such as prints and music. This poetry awakens a passion in him, possibly for Caroline Sturgis or Lidian; it surprises him.

In The Natural History of Intellect: Chapter 72: The New Domestic Order. Poems, the Emersons turn their home into a boardinghouse, and a small school for the Emerson children, as well as a few others, is created out of a portion of the barn. The hustle and bustle of this busy home, or Bush Community as Emerson calls it, lasts for about a year and a half. A volume of Emerson's poems is printed; this poetry shows the far from stoic, calm side of Emerson.

In The Natural History of Intellect: Chapter 73: The Orchard Keeper, Emerson has a new interest in fruit trees; the author is now saddened that very little remains today of this ambitious hobby.

In The Natural History of Intellect: Chapter 74: I Shall Never Graduate, during much of 1847, Emerson is restless and unhappy; on the surface he is still very successful, but many obligations, family matters, and financial concerns burden him. He compares the wasted energy he feels he has to American intelligence and thought. Emerson continues to be moody as he prepares to go to England on a lecture tour; it is suggested that this mood might partially stem from the end of his correspondence with Caroline Sturgis, who soon married William Tappan.



In *The Natural History of Intellect*: Chapter 75: England, Emerson arrives in England and is shocked by the speed, size, and other differences. He is shocked at the poverty as well; he has much criticism of the England of this day. Emerson is a celebrity as he lectured in England. The chapter ends with his realization that he and Carlyle no longer see eye to eye, yet their years of correspondence keeps the friendship intact.

In *The Natural History of Intellect*: Chapter 76: *The Natural History of Intellect*, Emerson prepares emotionally for his trip to England, which he knows would challenge his beliefs. Emerson does a lot more writing than reading on this trip, completing a group of miscellaneous lectures. This odd group of lectures greatly contrasts the very organized series called "*The Natural History of Intellect*."

In *The Natural History of Intellect*: Chapter 77: *Chartism and Revolution*, Emerson witnesses two of the revolutions that erupted in Europe in 1848; the first was the Chartist demonstration, with which Emerson sympathized, and the other is an uprising led by Blanqui against the National Assembly and subsequent uprisings, which appalls Emerson. These various revolutions teach Emerson a great deal about politics and the individual; he is reassured that goodness must be in regard to the individual, because it can never be found in society.



The Science of Liberty

The Science of Liberty Summary and Analysis

In *The Science of Liberty: Chapter 78: Return: Quarrel with Thoreau*, Emerson returns home from England an unhappy and almost angry man; he feels he has no control over his life. He is glad to be home, though, and he returns to daily family and career life. After almost a year abroad, he sees his friends with new eyes, and a rift begins between him and Thoreau; although their friendship is tested, it is never ended, and Emerson always considered Thoreau his best friend, even when he had at some points been his enemy.

In *The Science of Liberty: Chapter 79; The Walden Sierras: Quetelet*, upon returning from England, Emerson took many walks with Ellery Channing, discussing the landscape and how one can be affected by it. In between these walks he is swamped with various affairs. Emerson lectures on England; the book that impresses him the most is "A Treatise on Man" by L. A. J. Quetelet, the father of social statistics. He surprisingly follows Quetelet's disregard for the individual fairly far; Emerson has lost some of himself in England, and his dreams reveal this loss.

In *The Science of Liberty: Chapter 80: Therienism and the Hegelian Moment*, Emerson adjusts to being home with the help of the Hegelian idea about the importance of history. He also feels more at ease in his relationships with others. Emerson begins an essay that praises the common man; it is based on the woodcutter Alec Therien. Emerson is filled with creative energy, being inspired again by Hegel via Stallo, a key figure in the Ohio Hegelians.

In *The Science of Liberty: Chapter 81: The West*, there is much political turmoil as politicians either try to break up the Union or keep it together; at this time, Emerson takes his first trip out west. He is fascinated by what he sees on this journey and returns nearly every year afterward on his lecture series.

In *The Science of Liberty: Chapter 82: The Matter of Margaret*, Margaret Fuller Ossoli dies in a shipwreck with her two-year-old son and husband. A memorial volume of her work is published with the help of Emerson and others who knew her. It may not have been a completely accurate portrayal of this woman, but it is one that shows her at her best.

In *The Science of Liberty: Chapter 83: The Tragic*, Emerson is immensely affected by Margaret's death, seeing something out of place in the universe; he appreciates his children more and begins to recuperate, although it seems to be more difficult with each loss in his life. Through his readings, the more he reads about tragedy and loss, the more he looks to science and himself for proof of order.



In *The Science of Liberty*: Chapter 84: *The Conduct of Life*, Emerson works on "The Conduct of Life", a series about what he had learned about life from his experiences since the mid-1840s.

In *The Science of Liberty*: Chapter 85: *The Fugitive Slave Act*, the Emersons agree to assist on the Underground Railroad, which had become very active since *The Fugitive Slave Law* came into existence. Emerson becomes an activist when a runaway slave is found, taken to Savannah, and publicly whipped. His most emotional speeches over the next years regard slavery.

In *The Science of Liberty*: Chapter 86: *The Science of Liberty*, Emerson works on the essay "Fate" for his series entitled "The Science of Liberty". It is an essay that confronts the dark side of life. Emerson believes the world exists to be the teacher of the science of liberty.



Fame

Fame Summary and Analysis

In Fame: Chapter 87: My Platoon, the focus is on social reform; very little of the activity in Emerson's life at this time has to do with Emerson's work. Emerson begins to seriously work on a book about his trip to England, but what seems most important to him at this time are his friendships. Several of his old friends and colleagues die, which greatly affects him; he sees the history of his life as the people in it.

In Fame: Chapter 88: Country Walking and the Sea, Emerson is feeling his age and the losses in his life. He continues his walks with Ellery Channing and goes on a long walk with William. His journal and letters focus more on the sea.

In Fame: Chapter 89: English Traits, Emerson's mother dies, and he is caught up in a new lecture season. His goal for this year is to get his book on his trip to England completed; it would be his least characteristic book and would finally separate England from America for Emerson.

In Fame: Chapter 90: Fame, the author describes Emerson as dangerously famous; he handled fame well, but by the early 1870s, he was so famous that it did not matter what he said when he spoke to a crowd. They were glad just to see him.

In Fame: Chapter 91: Whitman, Emerson is very busy once again, giving seventy-three lectures over the course of five months. During this year, Whitman publishes a book that is called an American Buddhist book; Emerson finds it extraordinary and soon writes Whitman a letter, which was to become the most famous letter in American literature history. The two men later meet and have much praise for each other. "Emerson found in Whitman the great modern poet he was seeking. Whitman found in Emerson the justification for literature itself" (p. 531).

In Fame: Chapter 92: The Remedy at the Hour of Need, at the close of an anti-slavery convention, it is decided to hold a national convention for women's rights. Emerson believes at this time that women should have equal rights if they want them, but that they did not want them. Lidian is again ahead of her husband in this movement. The chapter ends with the title of this chapter being explained: as men are accused of fraud during voting, women ask for voting rights; Emerson sees the inclusion of women in voting as the cure for the problems with men.

In Fame: Chapter 93: The Power and Terror of Thought, Emerson revisits some of his old themes after years of experiences and returns to his old politically radical days. Emerson continues to write new lectures. Emerson finds beauty in a new cemetery that is created and moves his mother and Waldo's coffins to a plot in this cemetery; he opens Waldo's tomb but nothing is known of how he felt.



Endings

Endings Summary and Analysis

In Endings: Chapter 94: Memory, memory becomes important to Emerson; he sees it as a key to both the future and the past. The general course of his life changes, and his last twenty-five years are punctuated by a series of endings. Many changes take place in Emerson's personal life, the lives of his friends, and the country at large. Emerson is impatient to read Darwin's "The Origin of Species."

In Endings: Chapter 95: Civil War. Death of Thoreau, the Civil War begins; Emerson disapproves of a war solely for the purpose of saving the Union. He mostly gives talks about non-war subjects, including one on old age. He meets Lincoln and is surprised by how impressed he was by this man. His relationship with Thoreau is revisited. Emerson is thrilled by the Emancipation Proclamation.

In Endings: Chapter 96: Terminus, Emerson has become a popular public figure; these public events contrast the more private events that bring him back to his origins. His family life finds a place between these public and private events. The chapter ends with Emerson reading a poem about the end, where the focus is on the voyage and not the end; this reflects Emerson's life at this point.

In Endings: Chapter 97: May-Day, Emerson is extremely busy lecturing and traveling. The high point of 1867 is the publishing of his second book of poetry, "May Day and Other Poems". As Emerson's memory begins to fail, and he goes out less and less, Lidian's health improves, and she becomes more social than ever; this change occurs with what seems to be renewed love between them.

In Endings: Chapter 98: Harvard. California. Fire, William dies. Emerson works less and less due much to memory problems; his participation in a failed Harvard lecture series may be seen as his last say on the nature of the mind. He, along with family and friends, goes to California to recuperate. His home catches on fire, and money is raised to help rebuild; this almost entirely brings to an end his career.

In Endings: Chapter 99: Philae and Parnassus, Emerson has been physically and emotionally weakened by the house fire. Emerson travels with Ellen, with a stop in Egypt. A trip to Philae brings to a close Emerson's pilgrimage of losses. His memory worsens; he grows increasingly embarrassed and is seen less and less in public. He works with Edith to produce "Parnassus", a book filled with the works of authors who are family favorites. Toward the end of his life, he stops worrying about memory loss and is happy. His last public speaking engagement is at a Carlyle memorial meeting.

In Endings: Chapter 100: Fire at the Core of the World, Emerson often regarded fire as power and energy. At this point in his life, his fire is burning low. Emerson goes about

his evening routine, to many complaints from his family members, before dying from pneumonia.

The very end of the book contains a family tree, a chronological listing of events in R. W. Emerson's life, principal sources, and notes.



Characters

Ralph Waldo Emerson

Ralph Waldo Emerson is the main character in this biography. He was born May 25, 1803 in Boston, Massachusetts to Reverend William and Ruth Emerson. Although poor, his family strongly believed in education and life-long learning. Ralph Waldo Emerson was the middle, silly, child in whom others saw the least promise. Waldo recalls much of his early life, including his stern father, the Reverend William Emerson. Waldo's mother, Ruth Haskins, is left to raise her children after the early death of her husband; much of Waldo's interest in religion came from his deeply religious mother.

He attended Harvard University as a teenager, graduating from college at eighteen. Emerson received a liberal, yet practical, education at Harvard, with much focus on religion. Waldo was described as only a fair scholar who was boyish, yet with a sense of self-possession. Being poor, Emerson helped to support himself through school by various means. Emerson reached a turning point in the middle of his junior year of college; he had become more focused on writing and reading and had a changing sense of self. Waldo was influenced by Edward Everett, a young and forceful professor of Greek literature. Waldo learned about becoming more eloquent from Edward Channing, a famous teacher of oratory. His college years, it seems, were full of contradictions.

Waldo taught at William's women's school for two years after college graduation and was considered a mediocre teacher; writing is what Waldo wished to be doing. Beginning in college, Waldo kept many notebooks filled with poems, quotes, and other thoughts and observations on a wide range of topics. Emerson's writings began to reflect his opposition to Hume. This would be Waldo's focus for the rest of his life, uncovering the sources of power that exist in people and in the world. With the support of his aunt Mary Moody Emerson, Waldo stopped teaching and gave most of his time to the study of divinity. In February of 1825, Waldo registered for Cambridge's divinity school. He continued to struggle with becoming an author or a preacher, but he was strongly leaning toward divinity.

Emerson met and fell quickly in love with the beautiful and vibrant Ellen Tucker. She and Emerson were engaged within a year of meeting each other. During this period of his life, Emerson fell in love with Ellen, had to deal with his brother Edward's mental breakdown and the possibility he may be called by the Second Church to preach. Emerson was ordained by the Second Church in Boston; he was soon gaining conviction in his belief that the self is one's only path to the divine. There were pros and cons to his new career as a preacher. Emerson and Ellen married; this marked a period of happiness and prosperity in his life.

Waldo's theological beliefs became more modern and humanist, as being influenced by the beliefs he already had and by the life he and Ellen struggled to live with her illness.



As Ellen lay dying, Waldo turned to from religion to science, wondering if Pantheism could be expressed through science. Ellen's condition worsened and Emerson prepared to give up everything to help her. Ellen bravely and serenely died. Emerson never truly overcame the grief and regret he felt at her death. Emerson visited Ellen's grave every day and wrote her poetry. Both Charles and Edward were ill, and Waldo's path seemed dark and uncertain. Emerson's separation from Ellen led to his separation from many other aspects of his life; her loss freed him from his many responsibilities. Emerson decided to write a book, which was later published as "Nature". Emerson opened Ellen's coffin and decided to focus on the living; his sermons and actions reflected this. He soon left the Second Church. On Christmas day of 1832, Emerson spontaneously boarded a ship bound for Malta; his family was shocked.

After a five week voyage, he arrived in Malta; Emerson enjoyed all that Italy had to offer, including its architecture, churches, art, and people. He already felt rejuvenated. Emerson traveled through Switzerland and Paris. He was amazed and moved by the multitude of plant species found in the Paris botanical garden, which turned Emerson away from theology and toward science. In England, Emerson visited Coleridge, an old writer who Emerson considered a "citizen of the universe" (p. 143). Emerson met the essayist Thomas Carlyle. The two men hit it off right away and spent the day together, a day that Emerson called "a white day in my years" (p. 148). After nine months in Europe, Emerson prepared to sail home, happy for his experiences but impatient to return home and begin his new plans.

In 1834 Emerson fell in love Lydia Jackson. 1834 is a year of wonders for Emerson. His writings and ideas were finally coming together, with the help of various inspiring individuals. Emerson began a notebook specifically for his poetry. Emerson had learned to give over himself to life and every day he was alive; his writing had finally matured. Emerson and Lidian were married on September 14, 1835 and moved to their one and only home in Concord. Soon the Emerson household was a bustling place with many guests and a baby on the way for Lidian and Waldo.

Throughout the rest of Emerson's life, he suffered many setbacks and challenges that led him to states of melancholy. But, most importantly, he was always able to heal and continue his research and studies with energy and vigor. By his death, he had become a famous orator and a well-loved father, husband, and friend.

Ellen Tucker Emerson

Ellen Tucker Emerson was a beautiful woman with an even more attractive spirit. She loved nature and animals. Her father had died, and she lived with her mother and stepfather. Ellen had intended to become a poet, and her best poetry, like her life, was marked with death. Tuberculosis was a family affliction for her; her brother had recently died from it, and she knew she would die from it as well.

She met Emerson when she was sixteen and he was twenty-four. They met on Christmas Day 1827. She and Waldo were engaged a year after they had met. Many



letters between them have been preserved; these letters show a couple very much in love with life and with each other. She and Emerson covered up the darkness of death with their love for each other. They were married September 30, 1829 in Concord, Massachusetts and moved to Boston to begin their life together.

By the fall of 1830, Ellen was very ill, too ill to travel south to warmer climates. She followed her doctor's advice and went on jolting carriage rides all over the countryside to try to loosen up the tuberculosis to infected her lungs. She slowly became worse as the months went by. When Charles came for a visit on February 2nd, Ellen was well enough to go riding twice. On Saturday, February 5th, Ellen had taken a turn for the worse. By Tuesday morning, Ellen was worse; she knew she would not survive much longer and said her last goodbyes to her family and friends. She passed away at nine o'clock on Tuesday morning. She was courageous during the last few days of her life; while Emerson's heart was with the dead, hers was with the living. Her last words were to Emerson.

Lydia (Lidian) Jackson Emerson

Lydia Jackson first saw Emerson as he spoke at a church in Boston; she had come to hear him speak. He fell in love with her several years later, and they were soon married. Their love was not like his and Ellen's, but it was both an intellectual and emotional bond. Soon after Emerson's proposal and her acceptance, he began calling her Lidian. Lidian is described as a tender and passionate woman, although her outward relationship to Emerson was one of traditional New England reserve. She had a clairvoyance that was eerily accurate; she also had dark, anxiety-ridden moments. The death of her first son, Waldo, was particularly hard on her. As Emerson's memory began to fail and he spent more time at home, she grew healthier than she had been in years and began to have a social life.

Aunt Mary Moody Emerson

Aunt Mary Moody Emerson was a large influence in Emerson's life. He often shared his troubles with her, and she willingly guided him.

Reverend William Emerson

Reverend William Emerson was Ralph Waldo Emerson's stern father.

Ruth Haskins Emerson

Ruth Haskins Emerson was Ralph Waldo Emerson's religious mother who played a large role in his religious and educational upbringing.



Charles Emerson

Charles Emerson was born in 1808 and was the youngest of the brothers. He was bright and generally a favorite, especially of Aunt Mary Moody Emerson. There was always a dark side to Charles; beneath his ambition was a yearning for eminence and greatness. In 1836, his health, which was never good, took a turn for the worse, and he died four months before his wedding.

Robert Bulkeley Emerson

Robert Bulkeley Emerson, or Bulkeley as he was known, was mentally handicapped and either lived in an institution or at home.

William Emerson

William Emerson was the oldest of the brothers. He graduated from Harvard and soon became a teacher. He went to Germany to study theology; this time jaded his religious views, and he was never the same again.

Edward Emerson

Edward Emerson was two years younger than Waldo and was handsome and graceful. Edward had all the qualities that Waldo felt he lacked. He suffered a mental breakdown from tuberculosis and later died at age twenty-nine in Puerto Rico.

Phebe Emerson and Mary Caroline Emerson

These were two daughters born to the Reverend William Emersons who died in early childhood.

Thomas Carlyle, Coleridge, Wordsworth

R. W. Emerson met and spent time with Thomas Carlyle, Coleridge, and Wordsworth during his European travels.

Martin Luther

Emerson often compared those who were reformers to Martin Luther.



Philosophers, writers, reformers, leaders

Throughout Emerson's life he was constantly reading and studying the works of various philosophers, writers, reformers, and leaders.

John Clarke Emerson

John Clarke Emerson was the oldest Emerson brother who died at age eight.

Bronson Alcott

Bronson Alcott became a close friend of Emerson's. Bronson was a great teacher, albeit a non-traditional one. He is the father of Louisa May Alcott.

Margaret Fuller, Anna Barker, Caroline Sturgis, and Sam Ward

Emerson was good friends with these individuals. His marriage was what one might call an open marriage; he had emotional relationships with these individuals, although not physical ones.

Henry Thoreau

Emerson considered Thoreau his best friend and was much like Emerson. Thoreau became both brother and son to the Emerson family. Although they were close and had many similarities, they also had many differences.

Young Waldo Emerson

R. W. Emerson and Lidian's first son, Waldo Emerson, died at the age of five.

Young Ellen Emerson, Edith Emerson, Young Edward Emerson

These three were the children the Emersons had after Waldo. They all survived into adulthood.



Objects/Places

Harvard University

This is the university that all of the Emerson boys attended.

Europe

Emerson travels here after Ellen's death. He is rejuvenated by the sights that he sees and the people that he meets.

Baghavat Gita

This is a Hindu religious text. Emerson found this text very enlightening.

The Bible

This is the main religious text of Christianity. Emerson believed that it was secondary to the spirit.

Boston, Massachusetts

This is the bustling city where Emerson lived for much of his life.

Concord, New Hampshire

This is where Emerson lived for much of his life, as well as his married life with both Ellen and Lidian.

South Carolina and Florida

Emerson stays in these southern states to improve his health.

Quaker Church

Emerson agrees with the Inner Light belief of this religious organization.



Unitarian Church

Emerson preaches in this church until he comes to no longer believe in Communion; he eventually leaves this church to pursue other matters.

The American West

Emerson travels here many times to lecture. He is enthusiastic about what he experiences in these wild, open regions of the U.S.

The Civil War

Emerson both agrees and disagrees with the reasons for this war.

Tuberculosis

This is a pandemic in the early nineteenth century. Emerson, as well as many family members and friends, suffers from it.

Themes

Fire

One of the most important themes in this book is the theme of fire. First, the title of the book has to do with the mind on fire. This foreshadows the use of fire as a theme throughout this book. This fire has to do with power and energy. Emerson's mind was on fire throughout much of his life. As the author states in the Preface, Emerson's private and professional lives were intertwined; a biography about Emerson's career would be incomplete without his personal life. This fire, or energy, filled Emerson as a child in a family that put importance on education, when he studied in college and was inspired by various writers and professors as a young man. It continued in his careers as a minister and later as a lecturer. This enthusiasm for learning and thinking also bled into his personal life and hobbies. He was constantly reading, analyzing others' ideas, and creating his own beliefs.

This fire also existed in his relationships with others. He had a very close relationship with his brother, mother, and aunt. Throughout his life, his family's needs and activities were important to his own life. This energy and enthusiasm for family later included his friends and his wives. Many of his personal letters reflect this fire and passion he had for his life and the lives of those close to him.

Although this passionate fire burned for most of his life, Emerson, like many of us, had moments when the fire died down. He was often discouraged by the potential he felt he had that was wasted. The deaths of loved ones also weakened his fire. Often it took the fire and passion of others to build up Emerson's own personal fire.

Love

Love is another important theme in this book. Emerson's love for life and living an active life is apparent in the first chapter as Emerson opened the lid to be reminded that the love of his life was dead. This may seem like a crazy act, but it reveals the love he had for Ellen and for actively living one's life. It shows the depths of despair into which this love would often plunge him.

Emerson loved his family, his friends, and learning. These loves were constantly intertwined throughout his life. They were so intertwined that the author of this book could not write an intellectual biography about Emerson without including his personal life.

Besides loving his family and his own life, he also loved all other people. He was outraged when activists and other outspoken individuals were beaten down or killed for their views or actions. When the Cherokee were forced west, he became an activist. When the Anti-Fugitive Law went into effect, he became an activist. When women were



looking to gain more rights, he became an activist. His love for freedom and equality and for the oppressed built up the fire in him.

This theme of love was also felt by those around Emerson. His family, friends, and followers loved Emerson for the person he was and for his ideas. They also loved many of the same causes that mattered to Emerson.

The Individual

Another theme focuses on the individual. Emerson's biggest disagreement with organized religion was the belief that something outside of the individual was more important than the individual. He believed that the individual's soul, or inner light, or consciousness was superior to everything else, including the Bible and Jesus Christ. This belief was strengthened through his research and events that took place around him; these beliefs were also strongly rejected by many in the culture in which he lived.

This importance placed on the individual is also emphasized by the author who focuses on the individuals who were influential in Emerson's life. Entire chapters place emphasis on individuals such as Emerson's wives, aunt, friends, colleagues, and other inspiring writers and philosophers. This idea of the individual is also tied to Emerson's belief that there are no common men; there are many powerful similarities between all humankind. Great men do not exist to intimidate or put down; they exist to educate and inspire.



Style

Perspective

As this is a biography, the author is the narrator of Emerson's life. Much research on Emerson's life has been done by Richardson to make this story engaging and true. Due to the fact this is a biography, more than likely R. W. Emerson has had some impact on Richardson, which could lead one to believe that he could very well have a biased opinion of the Emerson.

Although this may be true, this book does not hide Emerson's flaws, weaknesses, insecurities, or failings. It is an honest account of Emerson's life, based on what resources are available regarding this man. Many other individuals' lives, interests, and ideas are included in this book to support the authors' claims about Emerson and to show the reader the paths that led Emerson to believe what he believed and what ideas existed at the time in which Emerson lived.

As the author began this intellectual biography, he soon learned that Emerson's intellect could not be studied on its own. His personal life was very much tied to his professional life; his friends and family were frequently his colleagues. His work was his life. The author shares this discovery he made by portraying Emerson as a man who never stopped learning and thinking and never saw the need to compartmentalize his life, for who we are and what we think is what we do; it is life.

Tone

The tone of this book is very objective but not unfeeling. The author gives facts about Emerson's life but does so in a way that causes the reader to care for Emerson and his plight in life. Richardson does not sugar-coat Emerson's flaws, but rather explains what leads to his various ideas, beliefs, and actions in a way that makes the reader empathize with Emerson. Quotes by both Emerson and others are included in this book to give the reader a taste of his work and the ideas of others. These quotes also support what the author has to say about Emerson and other individuals in his life. Although this is a work of non-fiction and the biography of a great man, it is written in a way that is both intellectual and also highly readable.

Structure

The book is set up into eleven sections that each contain approximately ten chapters that are tied together by the title of each section. The story begins a year after Ellen's death when Emerson opens her coffin to prove to himself she is dead. This quickly reveals to the reader a little about Emerson's personality, his sense of loss, and the importance of living life and using one's senses. The book then jumps back eleven years to Emerson's senior year in college. The chapter after that goes back yet another



year to his junior year. This shows what leads up to his senior year and graduation from Harvard. The chapters continue to go back in time to give the reader information about Emerson's family and childhood. The book then jumps back to right after Emerson's graduation from college and then back to describe the individual and collective lives of the Emerson brothers. The book returns again to Emerson's life right after graduation. The chapters then continue in chronological order, discussing Emerson's readings, influences, and work.

The author mixes Emerson's personal and professional lives throughout the entire book; they are continually intertwined, as they were in Emerson's real life. As Richardson prepared to write this book, he learned that he could not do an intellectual biography on Emerson without including his personal life. Besides blending Emerson's public and private lives, as well as his personal and professional lives, the chapters blend from one to another. Each chapter ends with a sentence or two, leading the reader into the next chapter or section. This is especially helpful when the chapters do not follow a chronological order. Also, at least one chapter per section explains the meaning of the title of each section.

The beginning of the book is a short introduction of the author's experience when researching for and writing this book. He then thanks others for their help and support. The book ends with charts and notes that help to clarify information learned throughout the book.



Quotes

"[I]f there is no cause and effect, there is no power, no first cause, no God...the central work of whose (R.W. Emerson's) life was to be uncovering and making available those sources of power that exist in people and in the world."
p. 45

'With the sad hopelessness of age twenty, he [Emerson] complained that "the dreams of my childhood are all fading away and giving place to some very sober and very disgusting views of a quiet mediocrity of talents and condition."
p. 46

""[W]e put up with time and chance because it costs too great an effort to subdue them to our wills...""
p. 51

"No matter what else existed, Emerson knew he existed."
p. 51

""Religion is nothing if it is not everything, if existence is not filled with it, if we do not incessantly maintain in the soul this belief in the invisible, this self-devotion, this elevation of desire."
pp. 53-54

"Part of the power of Emerson's individualism is his insistence, at crucial moments, that individualism does not mean isolation or self-sufficiency. This is not a paradox, for it is only the strong individual who can frankly concede the sometimes surprising extent of his own dependence."
p. 88

"Emerson turned often to poetry to express his feelings for Ellen, and now he tried, like the Shakespeare of the sonnets, to face down death with letters and love and to defeat time with the countertime of verse."
p. 92

"It was Emerson's instinct - and a major key to his strength - that in extreme situations he tended to not reach for traditional supports, not even for the Bible, but to reach for his own resources and to go it alone."
p. 113

""I regard it as the irresistible effect of the Copernican astronomy to have made the theological scheme of redemption absolutely incredible.' The new astronomy had a revealed a world and a universe that could no longer usefully be described as fallen."
p. 124



"I will not live out of me. I will not see with others' eyes. My good is good, my evil is ill. I would be free."

pp. 126-27

"A comment on his fall of 1834 catches the feeling perfectly: 'I never was on a coach that went fast enough for me.'"

p. 181

"Henceforth I design to not utter any speech, poem or book that is not entirely my work."

p. 186

"[N]ot only he but any reader could find the link between his own life and the great person...All biography then is at last autobiography."

p. 190

"I will no longer confer, differ, refer, defer, prefer, or suffer. I renounce the whole tribe of fere. I embrace absolute life."

p. 205

"[T]he perception that each is an expression of all will be the immovable anchor of Emerson's thought."

p. 259

"Fame casts an anticipatory chill over current efforts because it awakens expectations that can never fully be met."

p. 525



Topics for Discussion

Emerson was born into a poor, yet well-educated family.

Part 1) Why is education so important? How does this emphasis on education influence Emerson throughout his life?

Part 2) How does Emerson deal with this poverty as a student? How important is money to Emerson throughout the rest of his life? Explain. How does Emerson instill this importance in education in his own family?

Part 3) How important is education in your own family? Explain. How does this affect your daily actions and beliefs?

Children grew up fast in the nineteenth century.

Part 1) Describe one's childhood in the nineteenth century. Why did children grow up quicker? How different was Harvard at this time because of this? What other aspects of the Emerson family life reveal this speed in development?

Part 2) How is this race to adulthood connected to death at this time in history? Is this intimacy with death found today? Why or why not?

Part 3) Do you believe that children grow up too fast today? Why or why not? How does this compare to the childhoods of those in the nineteenth century?

Emerson and friends created the Transcendentalist Club.

Part 1) Describe this club. How was it formed? Why was it formed? Who did it affect? Can people be affected by this club today? Why or why not?

Part 2) What is transcendentalism? How did Emerson come to believe in it? Did he continue to be a transcendentalist throughout his life? Why or why not?

Part 3) What is your opinion of transcendentalism? How is this opinion affected by your upbringing and current religious beliefs?

Emerson analyzed the beliefs of many philosophers and writers.

Part 1) Name four of these philosophers and writers. What are the beliefs of these individuals? Why does Emerson decide to study them?

Part 2) How do these beliefs help to mold Emerson's own beliefs? How do his beliefs change because of these beliefs of these individuals?



Part 3) Who has helped to form your beliefs? How have you come to believe what you believe? How have your beliefs changed or matured over the years? What has caused these changes and maturation?

Death is an important aspect of this book.

Part 1) What deaths occur in this book? How are they important in Emerson's life? How is he affected by each of these deaths?

Part 2) How are these deaths tied to his feelings of love for others? How do these deaths factor into his religious and spiritual beliefs?

Part 3) How important is death or the thought of death in your life? Explain. How much are your beliefs related to your feelings about death?

Emerson's strongest loved seemed to be for his first wife, Ellen.

Part 1) Describe Ellen. What drew Emerson and Ellen to each other? Describe their relationship. How was it special? How did Ellen's prolonged illness and death factor into Emerson's feelings for her?

Part 2) How did this love for Ellen compare to Emerson's love for Lidian, his children, and his love for others? How did his love for Ellen affect his ability to love others?

Part 3) Who do you love? How did you come to feel this way? How does this love affect your relationship with others? How would you react if this person were to disappear from your life?

Emerson's trip to Europe had a large impact on his life.

Part 1) Describe his trip to Europe. Why did he go? What did he do while he was there? How did this impact him?

Part 2) How did this experience in Europe influence his actions and beliefs upon returning to the United States? How different might his life have been if he had never gone to Europe? Explain.

Part 3) Describe an experience that profoundly affected your life. How did it affect your life? How different would you be today if this event had never occurred? Are you better off because of this event? Why or why not?

Emerson became an activist.

Part 1) Why did Emerson become an activist? Why did he not become active with movements prior to these events? How did this compare to Lidian's interest and participation in various movements and reforms?



Part 2) How were Emerson's writings, lectures, and beliefs affected by these movements and revolutions? Were these historical events as influential as the books Emerson read and the colleagues Emerson had? Explain.

Part 3) Are you or have you ever been an activist? If so, explain how and why you were an activist. If not, would you ever consider being an activist? Why or why not? How important is being active in current events? Explain.