Selected Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson Study Guide

Selected Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson by Ralph Waldo Emerson

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Plot Summary

This collection of sixty-one essays and twenty-three poems gives a well-rounded view of an important figure in the evolution of American literature. Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882) addressed most of the controversial issues of his time with an incisive mind and an articulate pen. Some of his views and beliefs have helped shape American literature and to define the American character. He is an example of "the American Adam," an open-minded, curious, innocent who confronts the world with zeal, optimism and the ability to think freely without a need to fit himself into any particular tradition—rather, to help explore, experiment and define the new experience of American culture.

Henry David Thoreau, author of Walden Pond, lived on Emerson's property and was a close associate. Emerson also collaborated with Margaret Fuller in publishing The Dial, a literary journal, which is where most of his essays were originally published. He eventually earned international recognition for his essays and for his political involvements. Emerson's essays bring a fresh look and a new perspective to their subjects that make them interesting more than 120 years after original publication.

His poetry, although a sideline, is rich with the fruits of his transcendentalist involvement with nature, as well as more personal triumphs and losses.

Nature

Nature Summary and Analysis

Nature is Emerson's first essay publication (1836) in which he expostulates the foundations of what would later be known as transcendentalism. One of the basic beliefs is that through solitude and immersion in nature, man can develop his spiritual awareness of a divine power. In solitude, one is able to see more clearly the hand of an ultimate creator in the forms and functions of nature—stripped of the human need for property, rank and power.

Emerson separates the world into four categories: commodity, or "all those advantages which our senses owe to nature;" beauty (both manmade and natural); language as "a vehicle of thought;" and discipline which is apparent in nature as well as orderly human affairs. Idealism, according to Emerson, is the natural result of discipline. Emerson's transcendentalism is one step removed from pantheism, which holds that living creatures are actually gods, and views nature as the prism through which humans—limited in vision and intellect—can see the workings of a divine power. But when man perceives the world to be broken and ugly, it is because humans themselves have become disunited. Only by redemption of the soul can humans experience the world in its "original and eternal beauty," Emerson asserts.

The American Scholar

The American Scholar Summary and Analysis

Emerson gave this Phi Beta Kappa address at Harvard in 1837, in which he refutes the popular notion that scholarship and books are idle, passive pursuits removed from the mainstream of life. To the contrary, he insists, they are the tools humans use to advance themselves from ignorance to knowledge. Academics need not feel uncomfortable that their has been called "the age of introversion," for it is through inward searching that both knowledge and spirituality advance, according to Emerson.

Emerson eerily prefigures Darwin in his awareness of an ever-changing world: "It is a mischievous notion that we are come late into nature; that the world was finished a long time ago. As the world was plastic and fluid in the hands of God, so it is ever so much of his attributes as we bring to it." Emerson exalts in the plethora of new ideas and thoughts that are uniquely American and says "we have listened too long to the courtly muses of Europe." It is the challenge of American scholars to foster and support the development of truly American thought and culture, Emerson declares.

An Address

An Address Summary and Analysis

In this polemic, Emerson delivers what amounts to a shot across the bow of established religions—especially the varied forms of Christianity—by accusing them of having become a mere imitation of their fiery inheritance. Emerson, himself a preacher, says Christianity has allowed the soul to become separated from the pulpit to its detriment and to the devaluation of Christian values. The church has permitted this by presenting the teachings of Christ and other prophets as something external, to be imposed upon men, instead of respecting the fact those teachings merely reflect the universal values in all men.

Emerson decries the "vulgar tone of preaching" he sees in the church, and the fact churchgoers are constantly assailed by miracles and cowed by fears instead of being encouraged and supported in making their own personal connection with a divine power. The second major failing of the Christian church, according to Emerson, is presenting revelation as a past event instead of a living presence. Christian teachings in America too often "come out of the memory, and not out of the soul [and] aim at what is usual and not what is necessary and eternal," Emerson writes. In this manner, Christianity subverts the truly moral character of man.

The Transcendentalist

The Transcendentalist Summary and Analysis

In this lecture delivered in 1842, Emerson strongly links the then current philosophy of transcendentalism with Buddhism and strongly emphasizes its spirituality. He also draws a clear distinction between "materialism" and "idealism," and claims the latter category for his brand of philosophy. Materialism relies on the senses and our awareness of the physical world for its orientation, but idealism arises from a spontaneous form of consciousness that is not bounded by physical forms or categories, Emerson says.

Although there is no specific transcendentalist doctrine or party, Emerson says, it is most similar to Buddhism in its spiritual inclusiveness of "anything grand and daring in human thought or virtue, any reliance on the vast, the unknown, any presentiment, any extravagance of faith." Emerson attributes the term transcendentalism to the German philosopher Immanuel Kant, who used the moniker for consciousness that arises in man without direct origins in the senses, or "intuitions of the mind itself."

The Lord's Supper

The Lord's Supper Summary and Analysis

Delivered as a sermon in the Second Church of Boston in 1832, this statement of belief resulted in Emerson's resignation from that institution. He takes the view that communion, a Christian tradition that traces its origins to Jesus' last supper with his disciples, is a meaningless ritual that only serves to focus attention on the physical, dramatic aspects of Jesus rather than his teachings. Further, Emerson declares that the wine and bread shared by Jesus with his disciples was a farewell ceremony, never intended to be repeated for century after century.

The biblical accounts of the last supper are contained in the gospels of Matthew and Mark, who were in attendance at that event, and there is no intimation in either writing that the final feast was intended to become a permanent ritual, according to Emerson. Only in the gospel of Luke, who was not present at the last supper, is there any suggestion that the event should be remembered and repeated. Whatever Jesus said or did on that occasion. "the intention of commemorating it should not appear, from their [Matthew and Mark narrative to have caught the ear or dwelt in the mind of the only two [disciples] among the 12 who wrote down what happened," Emerson says.

Emerson also calls into question the "degree of veneration" to which Jesus is entitled, arguing that communion attributes an authority for Jesus which he did not claim for himself. Furthermore, he says, this inappropriate deification of Jesus tends to distract Christians from their worship of a single God. When the church refuses Emerson's request to drop communion, he resigns.

History

History Summary and Analysis

Human history is merely the record of individual men discovering, or rediscovering, principles of the universal mind that already exist in the individual mind as laws, according to Emerson. Each of these laws is made prominent by circumstances, but the limits of nature "give power to but one at a time." Thus, history should be understood as biography, and by reading the biographies of individuals in history, we read our own biography and discover principles of the universal mind that are eternal and unchanging. Emerson says. In others, we learn about our own natures, whether the learning comes in the form of poetry, science, deeds of heroic accomplishment, architecture or great suffering. The enlightened individual "should see that he can live all history in his own person," Emerson believes.

The power of the arts—poetry, music, painting, sculpture—lies in their ability to awaken us to the universal and timeless laws of man and nature. The correlation between individual and universal mind: "Everything the individual sees without him corresponds to his states of mind, and everything is in turn intelligible to him, as his onward thinking leads him into the truth to which that fact or series belongs." Does this line of reasoning resemble an intellectual scaffold for the later development of the philosophy of "positive thinking" and its later iterations in American popular culture? It would be possible, also, for the reader to see a parallel between Emerson's emphasis on the personal consciousness and the cult of the individual that came a century after his death. "The idiot, the Indian, the child and the unschooled farmer's boy stand nearer to the light by which nature is to be read than the dissector or the antiquary."

Self-Reliance

Self-Reliance Summary and Analysis

Emerson extends the individualism and independence ingrained in the American spirit since the Revolutionary War to create a philosophy, or world-view based on self-affirmation. Trust your own intuition and inner thoughts more than the received wisdom of long-deceased prophets and wise men, he says. Emerson deplores philanthropic efforts to recompense the poor and to give them a decent life, and "I grudge the dollar, the dime, the cent I give to such men as do not belong to me and to whom I do not belong."

To be a man, one must be a nonconformist, Emerson says. While all the laws, rules and protocols of society were created to provide a modicum of security for the most people, these also tend toward the extinction of the authentic self, the true kernel of divinity and genius that lies below the surface of a man. One must speak one's mind, clearly, unequivocally without regard for either the past or the future—simply to practice honesty in the present. "A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds," he states. But if one chooses the path of self-reliance and nonconformity, he should be prepared for the scorn of society and those encumbered by its tendrils of propriety, according to Emerson.

To achieve self-reliance, one must recognize and respect the existence of a "supreme cause" that can both reveal our path to spiritual freedom and growth. Such a one should announce to his family that he is sick of living in an unreal relationship to them based on social conventions and will henceforth follow "no law less than the eternal law," Emerson argues. The important thing is to be one's authentic self. All the great figures of history became important for their contributions because they were self-reliant and charted their own course, Emerson declares.

"Nothing can bring you peace but yourself," Emerson says. "Nothing can bring you peace but the triumph of principles."

This is an interesting statement from a transcendentalist who sees God in nature. Unless Emerson means the god within, as part of nature, when he advocates total self-reliance, What, after all, is the point of knowing a higher power revealed through nature but then relying on one's human self for peace and sanity?

Compensation

Compensation Summary and Analysis

Appearances to the contrary not withstanding, the natural, spiritual and human realms achieve a stasis or balance between positive and negative forces, Emerson observes. For every human defect, there is a compensating trait; for every profit a corresponding loss; for every action a reaction. Mankind, like nature, is defined by a "dualism [that] bisects nature, so that each thing is a half, and suggests another thing to make it whole," according to Emerson. The perception of the common man that the evil go unpunished for their misdeeds is refuted by the fact that the wealthy and powerful are soon brought down to the same level as the rest of mankind by the levelling force of nature and the world.

Indeed, Emerson argues, history shows that those who appropriate for themselves undue amounts of power, wealth, prestige and position actually begin to rot from the inside as they create resentments that can fuel revolution. Whether fairly or unjustly, peaceably or violently, nature's laws that reflect the balance and order of the universal mind will bring about a compensation wherever there is an imbalance, Emerson says. However close to the sun man flies on wings of self-will, Icarus-like, he will be brought down to earth. Thus, to help maintain a healthy balance on earth one should repay all debts—financial or spiritual—as soon as possible so the resulting imbalance will not be righted through calamity or tragedy. Deaths of a spouse, friend, child or lover become "guides" to the development of character and with it, a new foundation for love and happiness, Emerson says.

Spiritual Laws

Spiritual Laws Summary and Analysis

Although the world is prone to admire and adore the men of great achievements, such as Caesar and Napoleon, their accomplishments are only possible by marshalling spiritual powers, Emerson says. In the case of warriors, their minds are formed in a certain direction and once they have removed the chatter and illusions of the world and the intellect, they are able to exercise their talents in spectacularly successful ways other men call "genius." Simplicity is the key to peace of mind and success, according to Emerson. Such simplicity derived from spiritual principles is evident in nature and in the universe, where the mind and will of humans is utterly powerless. By misusing our mind and will, we create our own evils when surrendering to the "optimism of nature" is all we need for a good life.

Emerson uses the humorous example of Sunday School to demonstrate how force-feeding youngsters with questions and answers of little interest to them create a barrier to later spiritual development, when a walk in nature paying careful attention to everything about them would probably do more for the actual spiritual advancement of those same children. In this manner, the "natural and beautiful" way in which children inquire about their world be much more effective than a rigid didacticism. Man's purpose would be to imitate the simplicity of the universe, which is completely different from the machine, Emerson says. The former opens the mind to inspiration, while the latter narrows and deadens the mind, he argues.

Each person has their own vocation that can be discovered by the talent, or direction of their mind. If that work is mechanical in nature, one can elevate the nature of work by discovering how one's own talents can best be used within that vocation. But by truly discovering his own spirituality and values, a man can find or create work that is a manifestation of his connection with the divine spirit—work that elevates himself and others and is immensely rewarding, Emerson says. In either case, one's potential is realized not by following the rigid teachings of preachers, professors and prophets, but by following one's own inner wisdom and genius. In this manner, each person becomes their own Caesar, Napoleon, Newton or Shakespeare, according to Emerson.

Love

Love Summary and Analysis

Emerson takes a spiritual view of human love, but acknowledges that the love between a man and woman usually begins in hot-blooded youth with a passionate longing and devotion to the beloved. This highly personal form of love reads to marriage, children, the hard work of survival, and eventually to the formation and nurturing of whole communities. The passion of this type of love produces music, poetry and art and even makes the world anew to serve the needs of the lovers, Emerson observes.

At the same time that love drives people into each other's arms, it also opens the senses and awareness to all things of beauty and to the sublime beauty of nature. By giving himself totally to another person, Emerson says, he becomes "a new man with new perceptions, new and keener purposes and a religious solemnity of character and aims." The lover sees and worships the beauty of the beloved, and this passionate yearning gradually becomes expanded to other beautiful forms, characters and thoughts. This vantage point then becomes the basis for "a love which knows not sex, nor person, nor partiality but which seeks virtue and wisdom everywhere."

Although a period of disenchantment inevitably follows the first rush of passionate love, the lovers soon rediscover what it is they love about each other and reconnect in a deeper way, according to Emerson. Then their love expands and encompasses the spiritual realm, which then draws them both closer to each other and ultimately to God, Emerson says.

Friendship

Friendship Summary and Analysis

Friendship and goodwill create a "cordial goodwill" that is evident everywhere; we grow intellectually and spiritually through affection, Emerson says. Through friendship. two people can meet on common ground and then be inspired, lifted up to a higher level of consciousness. Through friendship, we learn to fully appreciate and sincerely admire the assets and accomplishments of another; our friend's successes and goodness give us joy, according to Emerson. In the presence of a friend, "there is no winter and no night; all tragedies, all ennuis vanish." At the same time we appreciate the fine qualities of our friends, a part of us knows the humanity and fallability of ourselves as well as the other. One purpose of friendship, Emerson says, is to allow our soul to enter into a deeper solitude because "in strict science all persons underlie the same condition of an infinite remoteness."

Emerson prefers a rough type of friendship filled with sincerity but allowing for tenderness and declares he values the company of "ploughboys and tin-peddlers" to the fatuous, insincere blandishments of so-called friends one meets at dinner parties and taverns. Friendship should be durable enough to provide "aid and comfort through all the relations and passages of life and death," Emerson says, not unlike a marriage that is sealed with a vow to help each other "for better or for worse, in sickness and health, til death do us part." True friendship requires humility sufficient to meet another at their level; the best way to have a friend is to be one, according to Emerson.

Oddly, Emerson concludes with the observation that he can't afford to spend much time with his friends lest he "study their visions" and allow them somehow to supplant his own. A modern psychologist might recognize an ambivalence in Emerson's views of friendship that could signal a fear of real intimacy, or perhaps latent homophobia. In any event, Emerson's admission that he needs to maintain firm boundaries with his friends seems to contradict all the lofty, spiritual language that precedes it.

Prudence

Prudence Summary and Analysis

Emerson calls prudence "the virtue of the senses," and freely admits he has little prudence in managing his own life. His essay, Emerson tells the reader, is meant to counter the lofty abstractions he presents in the previous essays on Love and Friendship. The world of the senses has no discernible structure or purpose, but exists alongside other laws and principles of intellectual and spiritual growth. Prudence, although perhaps inferior to other traits of character, influences the surface of life but not the interior—except when it serves to awaken man to the beauty of the natural laws within the realm of the senses, according to Emerson.

Prudence manifests itself in people of three categories—those who use prudence to achieve health and wealth for themselves; those who love the beauty of prudence including artists, poets and scientists; and those who go beyond symbols to love what they represent. Emerson says the first group has common sense, the second taste, and the third "spiritual perception." Prudence that puts the senses at the center of life is "the god of sots and cowards, and is the subject of all comedy, Emerson declares. True prudence does not question natural laws, but uses them to its own benefit.

Interestingly enough, the people identified as "great" by their fellows are also those who demonstrate the greatest imprudence. Emerson says this is because of a general defiance of natural laws by humans combined with the tendency of mankind to leave spiritual and natural laws to "the dream of poets." But Emerson says poetry and prudence should be intermingled, and poets should become "lawgivers." This line from an essay published by Emerson in 1841 is strikingly similar to a line in "A Defense of Poetry" published in 1821 by the English poet, Percy Bysshe Shelley: "Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world." This parallel (or perhaps plagiarism) is doubly interesting in light of Emerson's fierce insistence elsewhere in this volume that Americans need to develop a unique, individual culture that does not look to Europe for any artistic models.

Heroism

Heroism Summary and Analysis

Contemporary literature is bereft of models of heroism, according to Emerson. To find examples of true heroism, he says, one must read the historical portraits of Plutarch. These "Lives" challenge the "despondency and cowardice of our religious and political theorists," Emerson declares. The essence of heroism is self confidence and its defining characteristic is persistency. Viewed from the standpoint of prudence, heroism often appears "ragged and dangerous," but the individual as well as society require that a man be acquainted with the means and ends of warfare and have the courage to stand up to the mob by "the absolute truth of his speech and the rectitude of his behavior."

Heroism is the product of a supremely balanced mind combined with an unwavering determination to do the right thing, according to Emerson. Therefore, heroism is an extreme expression of individuality, the awareness by a man "that his will is higher and more excellent than all actual and possible antagonists." Someone who is heroic disdains the superficial indulgences and pleasures of the world and stands for all that is virtuous in the face of any disapproval or even physical threats. Comparable to the tenets of the Hippocratic oath by which physicians swear to "first, do no harm," the heroic man acts on the oath to suffer no dishonor to his own worthiness whatever the cost.

Emerson especially urges women to experience their own heroism and forge for themselves an independent identity, regardless of the approval or scorn of the world. Women, like everyone, should never let fear rule their lives, he states.

The Over-Soul

The Over-Soul Summary and Analysis

The oversoul is the essence of human consciousness, of spirituality, of an indwelling sense of God, according to Emerson. In this essay, Emerson slips into his clerical robe and delivers a sermon on transcendentalism. Man only sees pieces of the divine spirit in glimpses, but enough to arouse his soul and the desire for a greater unity with the oversoul and with all of humanity. Indeed, "man is the facade of a temple wherein all wisdom and good abide" although his physical manifestation often misrepresents what it means to be human, Emerson says.

Humankind is bound by physical, natural and societal laws but the soul is limitless and free to rise above the petty circumstances of daily life and to merge with the universal spirit—in himself, in other humans and in nature. The soul is not bounded either by time or space, and its growth in an individual is measured in spiritual ascension rather than in mathematical formulas, according to Emerson.

Each person's soul is a piece of the universal consciousness, or the oversoul; when individuals come together for the purpose of spiritual growth their combined energies the result is revelation or the "disclosure of the soul," according to Emerson. In such a situation, individual wills are overcome and "character teaches over our head" and thoughts previously unknown rise to the surface from obscure sources to advance the spiritual progress of each soul. This energy "comes to the lowly and simple; it comes as insight; it comes as serenity and grandeur," Emerson concludes.

Circles

Circles Summary and Analysis

Long before Albert Einstein's theory of general relativity ushered in the age of quantum physics, Emerson seems to hint at the same principles in this essay. He observes that the circle seems to be the central organizing principle of the universe and that permanence is only an illusion created by man to make order where all is "fluid and volatile." Impermanence is the only permanent thing about the universe, as one circle encompasses another as time proceeds. Ever-expanding circles describe the progress of human thought as well as the operation of the physical and natural world, Emerson says.

The direction of nature and human consciousness is endless expansion, or the creation of ever-widening circles. To adapt to this state of constant change, we must be willing to let go of old ideas and patterns of thinking and behavior in favor of new horizons, new awarenesses, Emerson states. We hope to be shocked out of the old patterns, to do something "without knowing how or why—in short, to draw a new circle." Although drugs and alcohol may help to conjure a new direction, the vision is impermanent and the consciousness altering substances make those dreams all but impossible to achieve, according to Emerson. To continue expanding one's circles, the genuine "flames and generosities of the heart" are irreplaceable.

Intellect

Intellect Summary and Analysis

In this essay, Emerson asserts that there is an intuitive, instinctive consciousness in man that mirrors the ceaseless action of the universal mind; reflection upon the workings of this universal mind yield insights and truths that permit intellectual and spiritual advancement. This viewpoint prefigures the dawn of the phenomonological movement in modern philosophy by a half-century. Emerson expresses it succinctly: "The making a fact the subject of thought raises it." In other words, one must allow the instinctive river of consciousness to flow unimpeded but also maintain an aware, rational mind to be able to understand the meaning of "experience." When we can withdraw from the onrushing stream of stimulation and events in the world for only a few moments, Emerson says, the truth is revealed as "a certain wandering light appears and is the distinction, the principle, we wanted."

Art

Art Summary and Analysis

Art gives us a new experience of reality as evidenced through the artist's personality, according to Emerson. All art, however new and contemporary, evolves from art created previously as the concentric circles of artistry and consciousness expand. It is the function of art to open our eyes to beauty in all of its manifestations—the beauty in the world around us that most people never notice, Emerson says. This newness within some kind of tradition combined with art's evolution of new forms, is what causes art to be regarded at times as scandalous and shocking. But in reality, all good art seeks a higher form of simplicity as the most direct route to the soul and mind of the viewer. The capacity of art to distill the essence of experience into something priceless and universal, while omitting the mundane details, is the reason why humans of many different backgrounds and educational levels can come together in harmony, according to Emerson. Like transcendentalism, art has the power to lift the soul to the level of universal mind. Emerson advises readers to follow their hearts when acquiring and to ignore the prattlings of "professional" art dealers and marketeers.

The Poet

The Poet Summary and Analysis

Too often, Emerson observes, the "umpires of taste" can judge and categorize art and literature, and speak at length on esthetics although their own lives are "selfish and sensual." The poet, rather than the critic, is one who can see though appearances, trends, poses, fads and vanities to seize life by the throat and utter words of unvarnished truth and wisdom, according to Emerson. This, of course, does not endear the poet or any other artist to their contemporaries; indeed, it often further isolates them in their sensibilities and their art. In speaking his or her own truth, the poet draws on signs and symbols from nature—from anywhere whether the source be cosmic or comic. The essential job of the poet is to write the truth as they experience it, Emerson says. This, then, can provide a fixed reference point for others who feel adrift in a seemingly chaotic and senseless world.

The primary tool of the poet is imagination, which can neither be taught nor learned, but which springs forth from the fundamental clarity, honesty and lyricism of the poet's heart and mind, Emerson says. He observes that poets as well as other creative artists can easily become slaves to stimulants or any kind of intoxication because of their search to remain connected with the abstract world of beauty. But, having sought vainly through "opium or wine" to attain this peak of consciousness, the poet learns at last that "the sublime vision comes to the pure and simple soul in a clean and chaste body," according to Emerson. Narcotics provide only a "counterfeit excitement and fury."

Experience

Experience Summary and Analysis

As time and life pass through our consciousness, largely unheeded, we rarely can mark those specific dates or places where "experience" was gained from a teachable moment, Emerson says. We stumble through life so unaware that it is miraculous we can acquire wisdom, experience poetry or gain virtue. Usually it is only in retrospect that we become aware of the changes in our lives brought about through experience, according to the transcendentalist writer. Emerson notes that people often make a dramatic display of grief, but says it is really a "shallow" emotion. When his son died, Emerson says, he at first felt deprived of "a beautiful estate", but later realized there is no way he can ever his son back or recover his lost estate.

Our own temperaments color our experience and are a large part of the "system of illusions" that we use to try to understand life, according to Emerson. But temperament, which is a large factor in everyone's life, is seldom acknowledged. Yet it is one's temperament that curbs and quiets the upheavals of mind that disregard common everyday modes of thought to produce real insight and genius, Emerson says. Through the native intelligence and uninhibited working of the intellect one can understand and learn from experience—not from "fineries or pedantries." Careful analysis does not produce inspiration or creativity, but a reliance on one's own reading of experience can develop strengths of character and insights of genius, he says.

Character

Character Summary and Analysis

Character is "a reserved force which acts directly by presence and without means," like the wind which is perceived more by its effects than by any physical manifestation, according to Emerson. Character is a "stellar and undiminishable greatness" that is larger than circumstances or contingency—a goodness that not only endures but triumphs in the face of adversity or disadvantage. Emerson observes that nature is "bipolar," with both negative and positive poles. If magnetisim also is bipolar, the north would be action and the south resignation; character is thus aligned with the north. Emerson believes. Character evidences itself by a cheerful self-sufficiency, an immutable mass or presence in the soul that manifests itself as "the impossibility of being displaced or overset." Another trait of character in a person is "incessant growth" of the soul by which an individual increases his or her capacity to serve others, according to Emerson.

Manners

Manners Summary and Analysis

The primary purpose of manners is not to establish social ranking so much as to facilitate the creation and function of society, Emerson says. However, there is often an overlap of fine manners with the upper class which leads some of the lower classes to emulate the mannerisms of their superiors without really understanding the purpose of social graces, or manners. The behaviors that grease the wheels of fellowship gradually become distilled into a repertoire or pattern of interaction that favors the mean over the eccentric, Emerson says. But if a person demonstrates otherwise their fitness to enter into this mannered upper class, their eccentricities will become a matter of amusement rather than a threat to the status quo.

Geniuses and those with special gifts will be given wider leeway by society, but in general, its conventions and manners are good or bad according to how well they enable people to come together (convene) for the greatest good, Emerson says. Fashion does not encompass good sense, per se, but rather the format for entertaining company. Fashion disapproves of "corners and sharp points of character" as well as ill-tempered, egotistical or gloomy people.

Fashion is but a faint reflection of proper manners, or "virtue gone to seed," as Emerson observes. "It (fashion) does not often caress the great, but the children of the great. Great men are not commonly in its (fashion's) halls; they are absent in the field working, not triumphing."

Gifts

Gifts Summary and Analysis

Giving gifts to others is far more complex than it appears, according to Emerson. The best gift is always something that comes directly from and reflects the giver, and that acknowledges an essential truth about the receiver. Fancy jewelry and rings, because they represent only the skill and work of the jeweler, are not gifts "but apologies for gifts," Emerson says. It is especially difficult to find the right gift for a man, hardened as they all are to be independent. Most people at some level cannot forgive a giver because it smacks of dependency. But we are able to receive any kind of gift of love, "for that is a way of receiving it from ourselves," Emerson says. The preacher/philosopher says he admires and believes the Buddhist axiom: "Do not flatter your benefactors." This brief essay seems to reflect the Yankee values of self-sufficiency as well as the emotional baggage that can accompany gift-giving and receiving.

Nature

Nature Summary and Analysis

Man is as much a part of nature as the trees, flowers, sunsets and snowflakes, Emerson observes. Nature is what nurtures and heals mankind; the cities and towns do not provide this connection with the divine through nature. Within nature man finds his "moral sensibility" as if by osmosis rather than through his own will or intellect, according to Emerson. Nature provides every creature with the means and tools of survival through the instincts, at the same time she equips another creature to kill the first for food. Nature equips every creature with "a small excess of his proper quality," Emerson says, with the result instincts such as fear may cause us many false alarms but also may well save our life by enabling us to avoid real danger.

Our instincts for security may produce an all-consuming greed, which never satisfies the person who is greedy because "we live in a system of approximations," not perfection, according to Emerson. Life, like nature, lures us ever onward although promise by far exceeds actual performance. The true beauties of nature and of man may be glimpsed but never possessed, but through careful observation and study important lessons may be learned, Emerson says.

Politics

Politics Summary and Analysis

Government and politics exist for the protection of persons and property. Democracy arose as the most equitable means of protecting individual rights, Emerson says. But all our laws and statutes exist as the most expedient way of solving a problem in the past, and are always subject to change as evidenced by the separation of church and state in the United States. To maintain a stable democracy, according to Emerson, citizens must trust that "beneficent necessity" of other humans lies behind all statutes because "government have their origin in the moral identity of men." Emerson believes that the less government, the better because the strongest organizing principle in society will remain the character and integrity of the individual.

Emerson declares that every individual in a free society has certain rights: employment, trust, love and reverence, Love has never been tried as the foundation of a state; instead there are governments all over the world based on force, according to Emerson. He questions the assumption that society must have jails and "artificial restraints" on human behavior; the society based on love would not need visible means of regulation any more than does our solar system. In terms of contemporary politics, Emerson's views seem highly idealistic and would probably fit well within the Libertarian viewpoint.

Nominalist and Realist

Nominalist and Realist Summary and Analysis

In this essay, Emerson delves deeper into the "biploar" nature of man, mentioned in the previous essay on character. When we greatly admire or revere someone we raise them in our minds to the level of perfection, overlooking the character flaws that are in all persons. We focus on the general rather than the particular, according to Emerson. Thus, we identify certain traits of nations (i.e., Germans are disciplined, French are romantic) that bear no relationship to the number of citizens and thus can not be defined numerically or quantified. In the dispute between nominalists and realists, Emerson notes, the realists have reason on their side; but the nominalists are more popular because general ideas about things and people are "gods" by which we intuitively understand the world.

Love, by revealing the admirable qualities of an individual, allows the admirer to extend those virtues to all of mankind through "the admirable science of universals," Emerson says. In truth, every man is both universalist and partialist and can move easily from one viewpoint to the other and back again. This is not duplicitous, according to Emerson, but simply the way the human mind works.

New England Reformers

New England Reformers Summary and Analysis

Everywhere he looks in the society of 1844—religion, education, politics—Emerson sees evidence of a defiant reformist mentality based on the worth of the individual. This is a natural consequence of the revolutionary heritage of America and something to be embraced rather than feared, Emerson says. This reformist attitude challenges the use of manure in farming, the credibility of the lawyer and clergyman, the institution of marriage, and traditional medicine with homeopathy. Early adherents to antinomianism (the belief that God's grace allows an individual to ignore all laws, divine and terrestrial) would be shocked by the upwelling of dissent, Emerson remarks. The establishment of three egalitarian communities, that would much later likely be called communes, so long as each member is willing to work as hard as every other. If not, Emerson predicts, the superior, harder-working members would probably defect and seek their fortunes in the lsarger world. There are no institutions that can give to an individual something he or she doesn't already possess. according to Emerson. Private enterprise, compared with public bureaucracy, is the best and most efficient type of economy for man, Emerson states. Once again, his views seem to parallel those of the Libertarians to twenty-first century America.

Plato, or, the Philosopher

Plato, or, the Philosopher Summary and Analysis

Emerson believes the ancient Greek philosopher Plato is the beginning and end of all philosophy, the template that thinkers of all times and places have used as a foundation for their own works. Indeed, Michelangelo and Shakespeare are but two of the many platonists throughout history, according to Emerson. Born in 427 B.C., Plato became a pupil of Socrates and his ideas seem, to Emerson, an example of "extreme modernness [in] his style and spirit." Whatever its era or precepts, Emerson says, philosophy is "the account which the human mind gives to itself of the constitution of the world." In fact, Plato's conception of the dichotomy of body and soul provides the foundation for the later development of monotheism in the form of Christianity, Emerson says. Plato's idea of opposites joined together through synthesis, or polarity, has been an invaluable tool for understanding our world through the ages. In estimating the power of the soul, Plato said: "Our faculties run out to infinity, and return to us thence. All things are in a scale and, begin where we will, ascend and ascend." In making this observation, Emerson says, Plato clearly emphasized the human soul and intellect over the body. Plato notwithstanding, however, "no power of genius has ever yet had the smallest success in explaining existence," according to Emerson.

Napolean, or, the Man of the World

Napolean, or, the Man of the World Summary and Analysis

Napoleon Bonaparte is the most famous and powerful person of the nineteenth century, according to Emerson, and represents the middle class in Europe as well as America. In addition, Napoleon was "the incarnate Democrat" and focused on material success although he was an intellectual. His leadership, his ability to act decisively on the battlefield, his cunning and his courage all support the notion that he was a genius, according to Emerson. His was a triumphant spirit that was undaunted by any kind of obstacle. No small part of Napolean's greatness rests on his ability to enlist the support and admiration of the common man in France on the heels of the French Revolution. His birth into the aristocracy and his proclivity for sustained difficult work also were helpful in his rise, Emerson says.

Napoleon possessed both the virtues and weaknesses of the average man, Emerson says. He was vain, self-deluded, a chronic liar and unfair to his generals. His vanity and fear of exposure led him to muzzle the press, to murder, steal, slander, cheat and disrespect others at will. Finally, Napoleon was completely amoral and ushered in an age of selfishness and materialism from which the West has yet to recover, Emerson asserts.

English Traits

English Traits Summary and Analysis

This lengthy essay is the result of two trips Emerson made to England, in 1833 and 1847. On his first trip, he was unknown and unpublished but made friends with many English writers including William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge. On his second trip as a published author, he was warmly received. He notes in his essay that the modern English race is a polyglot of Anglo-Saxons, Romans, French, Danish and Celtic strains and through this admixture a hardy, durable race has emerged. Emerson links race to various civilizations around the world, but then acknowledges that race is fluid and not an accurate measurement of human capabilities. Seven hundred-year-old bronze monuments of crusaders at English churches show the same faces as those of modern English—"an expression blending good nature, valor and refinement."

While the Englishman is of a happy and durable race, interested in "peaceably minding his business and earning his day's wages," they will fright savagely for individual rights, as evidenced in the Magna Carta, the American revolution, the establishment of the right to trial by jury, habeas corpus and other measures intended to preserve "a yeoman's right to his dinner," Emerson observes. The unity and fellowship of the English is another of their strengths upon which it has been possible for them to survive internal upheavals and external threats—as in the case of a European coalition led by the British that finally deposed Napoleon, according to Emerson. He admires the slow-to-anger steadiness of the English and their attachment to home and hearth.

The flower of the English aristocracy, and a trait of great pride, is the "well-educated gentleman," Emerson says. Although there are excellent universities all over Europe and other aristocracies, there is nothing that quite matches the English gentleman. The refinement of this trait has produced dozens of writers of genius, statesmen and politicians, scientists and artists of the highest caliber, Emerson says.

Conduct of Life

Conduct of Life Summary and Analysis

"Man was born to be rich," proclaims Emerson in this love letter to capitalism. He proceeds to identify the sources, types, maintenance and dissolution of material wealth. Its source is "applications of the mind to nature," whether it be farming or the performing arts. "Puff now, O steam!" he proclaims in an overabundance of enthusiasm. "He is born to be rich," Emerson repeats optimistically. The essential goodness of wealth derives from the fact that "poverty demoralizes," while the accumulation of wealth is a virtue because it secures a man his independence, according to Emerson. The truly clever man makes his wealth on a large scale by enlisting the support and enthusiasm of the masses and their leaders, as in the case of the railroads and all the other conveniences such as the telegraph that appear regularly from the fertile imaginations of men, Emerson observes.

Emerson says a dollar is not itself value but represents "moral values." Because a dollar increases in worth "with all the genius and virtue of the world," it is worth more when spent on a university rather than a jail, in a law-abiding community rather than "some sink of crime."

Our history has shown these attitudes toward wealth to be short-sighted and fiscally unhealthy—lessons from the Great Depression when the federal government spent billions in across-the-board wealth redistribution schemes. Whether moral or not, those programs are generally credited with pulling the country out of a depression which resulted from the rupture of a speculative bubble on Wall Street fueled by the insatiable hunger of the wealthy for more wealth.

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Culture

Culture Summary and Analysis

Culture is the mechanism that enables humans to modulate their instincts and to live together in harmony, according to Emerson. Culture develops out of the shared perception of benefits in society. Although culture—specifically the arts—is a product of individuals who contribute something of value out of their uniqueness, it is also threatened by an excess of egotism, Emerson says. Egotism is so common that it must be result of some primal instinct, such as sexual attraction which is linked to survival of the species, according to Emerson. "Nature has secured it [survival] at all hazards by immensely overloading the passion, at the risk of perpetual crime and disorder," Emerson observes.

Whereas the natural drive for survival has led plants and animals to find their own particular niche in nature to which they are confined, humans have the adaptability to learn new skills, new survival strategies and new behaviors. Thus culture, like humans themselves, is plastic. The fine arts are not the only expressions of culture; the gentleman characterized by "repose and cheerfulness" is also one of the most agreeable products of culture, according to Emerson.

Society and Solitude

Society and Solitude Summary and Analysis

Although solitude is necessary for the scientist, the poet, the philosopher to formulate their thoughts, it is through contact with the world and other humans that one truly learns, according to Emerson. One danger of over-refinement of the intellect is difficulty functioning in the unpredictable world of men. Some men of genius maintain their distance from others by solitude, some by courtesy and some by developing an acid tongue,Emerson says. Men who isolate themselves not only deprive themselves of friendship and love, but also make themselves unfit for marriage. Society isn't always achieved easily, Emerson says, but by "chemical affinity" and even then "in very small doses." Striking a balance between solitude and society is difficult because "solitude is impracticable, and society fatal."

Farming

Farming Summary and Analysis

The farmer is the "continuous benefactor" of mankind; his works feed and often clothe others who make the laws, decide fashion trends, discover scientific principles, and generally turn the wheels of civilization, according to Emerson. The farmer has "a strength and plain dignity" like that of nature; the hard work of farming is not done by university professors or poets but by "men of endurance—deep-chested, long-winded, tough, slow and sure, and timely" Emerson says. The farmer is blessed to work in and live close to nature but one should not "paint him in rose-color," for his work is that of necessity and generally yields him a very modest income. The farmer, says Emerson, has the same innocent, pure nature that we admire in children and in animals. He has "constitutional excellence," Emerson says.

Poetry

Poetry Summary and Analysis

The first poem in this collection, Goodbye, is a bittersweet faretheewell to the world from a poet who expresses considerable heartbreak. The poet says he will not miss the crowds, or the struggles for wealth, or the leaden hearts of his fellow man but looks forward to being "safe in my sylvan" home, one with nature and with God. The Problem reflects Emerson's split with the church and his deepening involvement with transcendentalism. It employs echoes of classicism evidently inspired by the English Romantic poets Keats and Shelley and uses a number of false rhymes in its A-A B-B C-C rhyming patters: "shrine/within," "sphere/air," "fell/oracle." Uriel attempts to invoke the mystical, haunted realms of the spirit so brilliantly expressed by Edgar Allan Poe—a contemporary of Emerson's. "This was the lapse of Uriel/Which in Paradise befell," is in the iambic pentameter so familiar to readers of Poe, which drifts toward free verse at the end of Emerson's poem. "Forerunners" is a simplistic nature poem that recounts how the poet's soul has been formed by nature, suggestive of Wordsworth's "Ode: Intimations of Immortality." Emerson, on one of his visits to England, spent time with the romantic poets William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge.

Threnody, one of the longest poems, is a melancholy reflection on the seeming absurdity of life and death. The imponderable cycles of nature only make sense, the poet concludes, as a manifestation of a divine power. Lines to Ellen seem to echo Poe's Helen in its rhapsodic celebration of a woman's classic beauty. Self-Reliance is a poetic restatement of Emerson's lengthy essay, On Self-Reliance: "Oh what is heaven but the fellowship/Of minds that each can stand against the world?" Walden is a celebration of the woods and pond on Emerson's property where he allowed another transcendentalist, Henry David Thoreau, to build his famous cabin and live in isolation. In summary, Emerson's poetry seems very heavily influenced by the work of contemporary English "romantic" poets such as Wordsworth, Keats and Shelley as well as by the haunting verse of Edgar Allan Poe. Although largely derivative, Emerson's verse does achieve a clarity and directness about the sacredness of nature.

Ezra Ripley, D.D.

Ezra Ripley, D.D. Summary and Analysis

Emerson wrote this tribute to his stepfather to share with the Social Circle of Concord—a group that gathered in various homes during the winter to discuss and share topical matters. Although Ripley graduated from Harvard in 1776, he was not so much a man of books as a preacher, which he practiced throughout his life. He entered college at the age of sixteen, after being a farmer. Emerson says his step-father was the last of the old line of Puritan preachers in New England, and viewed the world through "the parochial point of view." Although a rigidly self-righteous man, Ripley expected nothing from others that he did not practice in his own life, according to Emerson. He was "perfectly sincere, punctual, severe but just and charitable." Rev. Ripley was "a natural gentleman" with strong opinions but always open to the opinions of others, Emerson says.

Emancipation in the British West Indies

Emancipation in the British West Indies Summary and Analysis

Emerson delivered this tract Aug. 1, 1844 in recognition of Emancipation Day in 1838, when every black slave in the British West Indies and in every British colony or possession was freed. Former black slaves in Jamaica, Barbados, Dominica, Bermuda, the British Virgin Islands, as well as other British islands in the Caribbean and possessions worldwide spent the first Emancipation Day in prayer and thanksgiving—not rioting as some had anticipated, according to Emerson. In fact, the queen herself was moved to praise the orderly and peaceful transition of power. With emancipation, many of the stereotypes about blacks were washed away slowly as their white countrymen found them to be eager to learn, industrious, successful entrepreneurs and professionals. Emerson publicly deplores the institution of slavery at a time when it was heating up as a political and moral issue in the United States.

Slavery, Emerson observes, is an inherently evil practices that shackles owner and slave alike in a mutual dependency that goes beyond just economics. Even after emancipation, true freedom did not come to the slaves of the West Indies right away as planters continued to overwork, underpay and abuse their former slaves who did the hard manual labor in the tropical sun that sustained the island economies, according to Emerson. Emerson ends his polemic with a challenge to the state of Massachusetts to extend full citizenship rights to all blacks, as outlined in the Constitution and demand that Congress "instruct" the president to enforce the same principle nationwide.

The Fugitive Slave Law

The Fugitive Slave Law Summary and Analysis

Emerson attacks Daniel Webster for his tireless and vigorous support of slavery, in the form of the Fugitive Slave Law. The law reinforced the right of slaveholders to find, apprehend and return runaway slaves to their plantations. The thrust of Webster's argument is his acceptance that slavery is an established practice in America and that it should be allowed to continue, according to Emerson. Webster, a man of learning and great intellect, betrayed his reputation and the right-thinking citizens of Massachusetts by, in effect, throwing a Molotov Cocktail into the building inferno of controversy over slavery, Emerson says. The transcendentalist does not argue that Webster is deficient in oratorical or polemical skills, or wanting in worldly experience, but simply declares Webster wrong for siding with slavery. Although a major thought leader and public figure such as Webster supports slavery, Emerson says, history is on the side of human rights and abolition.

John Brown

John Brown Summary and Analysis

In this brief elegy, Emerson attempts to enshrine John Brown—who led an 1858 slave revolt in Harpers Ferry, Virginia—as a true American hero. After leading an unsuccessful assault on the federal arsenal, Brown and his followers were arrested; Brown was hanged on order of the governor of Virginia. Emerson calls Brown "an idealist" who believed in the Declaration of Independence and the "golden rule." He calls on his contemporaries to provide relief to the family of John Brown and to "secure freedom and independence in Massachusetts."

The Emancipation Proclamation

The Emancipation Proclamation Summary and Analysis

"That ill-fated, much-injured race" [African-Americans] has at last been delivered from the bondage of slavery with the Emancipation Proclamation, Emerson notes with relief and hope for the future. By signing the proclamation Sept. 22, 1862, President Lincoln fulfilled the fiery rhetoric of the Declaration of Independence and thus freed not only blacks, but whites as well from the ongoing "pestilence" of slavery, according to Emerson. Let the southern state secede, he says, but history will show that Lincoln and the Union did the right thing.

Thoreau

Thoreau Summary and Analysis

Perhaps the best-known nonconformist of his age, Henry David Thoreau was a "willing hermit" who lived as close as possible to his beliefs out of a genuine sincerity, Emerson says. Always an individualist, Thoreau once designed a highly superior pencil that won the acclaim chemists and businessmen but never had it produced because he saw no point in repeating himself. Thoreau was, according to Emerson, happiest in nature and simply walking through the woods near Walden Pond, which was on Emerson's property. Thoreau's book of the same name is a perennial of American literature and his values have inspired both dropouts and tree-huggers. Emerson concludes: "No truer American existed than Thoreau."

Abraham Lincoln

Abraham Lincoln Summary and Analysis

In remarks prepared for the funeral of President Abraham Lincoln in Concord, Massachusetts, Emerson reflects the spirit of other New Englanders in shock and sadness over the assassination of a man who Emerson says could only be compared with George Washington. With Lincoln, "this middle-class country had got a middle-class president, at last." A completely American person, Lincoln had never been to Europe, knew how to survive in the backwoods of Kentucky, and understood the value of hard work, according to Emerson. Lincoln, Emerson says, was the perfect man for his times, and although his labors in the White House were brief, they were of historic consequences and brought about changes for the good of America.

Carlyle

Carlyle Summary and Analysis

Thomas Carlyle is, first and foremost a "practical Scotchman" and then a writer and scholar of the first rank, Emerson says. Carlyle is very respected across British society for his intellect, but is a profoundly lonesome and unhappy person, according to Emerson. He is the opposite of a liberal and supports slavery, capital punishment and a protectionist economy. If elected to Parliament, Carlyle threatens to gag reporters. Strongly religious, Carlyle rejects dogma of any sort and seeks the genuine and authentic; he is like a hammer that "crushes mediocrity and pretension," Emerson says.

Characters

Plato

Plato is the ancient Greek philosopher who Emerson claims has had the greatest effect on western thought or any of the ancients. Plato was a student of the philosopher Socrates, whose style of debate known as the Socratic method has endured to modern times. It involves asking a series of questions until the interlocutor contradicts himself, then turning the debate around on that point. Plato's influence endures in the idea of the soul apart from the body, the notion that man is both body and soul. This precept was incorporated into early Christian belief and eventually developed into the idea that the body is unclean and the spirit is godly. Much of modern "holistic" medicine centers on reintegration of physical and spiritual (emotional) aspects of humans for balanced health.

Henry David Thoreau

Henry David Thoreau was a friend and fellow traveler with Emerson in the transcendentalist movement. Thoreau is perhaps best known for his book, Walden Pond, in which he describes building himself a shack in the woods away from civilization where he can live in constant contact with nature. Thoreau built his cabin on part of Emerson's property in Massachusetts. Undoubtedly, Thoreau's influence can be seen in the beatnik philosophy of living an uninhibited lifestyle with few possessions like a creature of nature, and certainly in the "tune in, turn on, drop out" lifestyle of the 1960s that produced communes, co-ops and other forms of alternative living apart from the mainstream of society. A pathological inversion of this ethos can be seen in the story of Ted Kazynski, the so-called "unibomber" who lived in a secluded cabin and mailed explosive devices to his former university associates.

John Brown

John Brown was the passionate abolitionist preacher who organized and led a slave rebellion and raid on the federal arsenal at Harpers Ferry, Virginia in 1858. The rebellion was put down and John Brown was hanged in Charlestown, Virginia. The uprising was one of the events that helped to bring about the Civil War in 1861. Emerson describes him as "an idealist" who believed passionately in "the golden rule and the Declaration of Independence."

Abraham Lincoln

Emerson describes Abraham Lincoln as a true American and the first middle-class president for a middle-class nation. His election to the presidency was "a triumph of the good sense of mankind and of the public conscience," Emerson says in his essay on

Lincoln. According to Emerson, Lincoln did more to advance the cause of humanity and equality under the Constitution in his brief six years as president than anyone who came before him. Lincoln's achievements can only be compared to those of General George Washington, Emerson says.

William Wordsworth

William Wordsworth was a founder and leading exponent of the romantic school of poetry in England whom Emerson admired and met on his first visit to that island country. Wordsworth was quite gracious in welcoming his American counterpart and introduced him to other writers including Samuel Taylor Coleridge, author of "The Rhyme of the Ancient Mariner" and "Kubla Khan." Emerson showed his esteem for Wordsworth and the romantics by emulating their style in a number of his poems in this collection.

Immanuel Kant

Immanuel Kant was a German philosopher, who first coined the term "transcendentalism" which became popular in America during Emerson's lifetime as an alternative to other philosophies and even organized religion.

Ezra Ripley, DD

Ezra Ripley was Emerson's step-grandfather and a man he admired. Ripley was a Harvard-educated preacher, like Emerson, and represented "the rear guard of the great camp and army of the Puritans", which in its heyday had been a driving force for the American Revolution. Emerson describes him as kind, sympathetic and a real gentleman who preached from his heart and not from texts.

Jesus Christ

Emerson's understanding of Jesus is that Christ was more of a rebel than is commonly known; that Jesus challenged the status quo and forced his disciples and contemporaries to really think about the meaning of their faith and their role on earth. In Emerson's view. Jesus probably would not approve of many of the rituals and practices that have been carried forward for centuries in his name because they represent the sort of rote, mindless repetition that Jesus challenged in his own ministry.

Napoleon Bonaparte

Napoleon Bonaparte is one of the "great men" of history for which Emerson holds a kind of disgusted admiration. Napoleon was a military and organizational genius who spread

French law and culture widely but who was also a cruel and savage man, inconsiderate of others and especially cruel to women, according to Emerson.

Ellen Tucker

Ellen Tucker was Emerson's first wife, who died two years after their marriage of tuberculosis in 1829. She is immortalized in Lines to Ellen, Emerson conflates his belief in transcendentalism with his grief over his departed wife: "Tell me, maiden, dost thou use/Thyself thro nature to diffuse?/All the angles of the coast/Were tenanted by thy sweet ghost/Bore thy colors every flower/Thine each leaf and berry bore."

Objects/Places

Second Church of Boston

The Second Church of Boston was where Emerson started and ended his clergical career. He clashed with church hierarchy over his assertion that communion is a meaningless ritual that should be stripped from Christian worship. He then resigned his position and started a new career as a writer.

Harvard University

Harvard University is where Emerson got his college education at approximately the same time as Henry David Thoreau. Harvard was the place where transcendentalist ideas were exchanged between the two.

The Emancipation Proclamation

The Emancipation Proclamation was an executive writ issued in 1862 by President Abraham Lincoln striking down any legal basis for slavery and paving the road to the Civil War. In one of Emerson's essays (The Emancipation Proclamation), he credits Lincoln with bravery and imagination for his actions. The proclamation came one year after the start of the Civil War in 1861.

Transcendentalism

Transcendentalism is the philosophy that Emerson and others of his generation, such as Henry David Thoreau, espoused. It holds that man can only approach God through nature and that nature is where we can get a glimpse of the workings of the oversoul, or divine principle. By inference, we can understand and communicate with the divine through nature. This is not to be confused with pantheism, which holds God is literally in nature—that there are actual deities in nature.

The Last Supper/Communion

The issue of whether Christ's last supper with his disciples should be institutionalized in the form of communion led to Emerson's departure from a pastoral position at the Second Church of Boston. Based on scripture and eye-witness accounts, Emerson believed that Christ never intended bread and wine to be literally taken as part of worship, rather that he spoke metaphorically using wine and bread as symbols of his teachings.

The Fugitive Slave Law

The fugitive slave law allowed slave owners to track down runaway slaves, apprehend them and return them to service on their plantations. Emerson is completely opposed to the law as a form of cruelty and inhumanity, and directs his fury both at the "imbecility" of the law and those who support its retention, including the orator and lexicographer Daniel Webster

Europe

Emerson asserts boldly that the New World needs its own original art forms based on the new direction available to freeborn Americans, independent of European traditions and viewpoints. Curiously, Emerson also made two lengthy trips to England and wrote an extensive essay on English Traits upon his return. Transcendentalism, the philosophy that Emerson and others in his Concord Group adopted, originated in Germany with the philosopher Immanuel Kant.

Walden

Walden is a wooded area, with a pond, on Emerson's property where he allowed Henry David Thoreau to construct his small cabin, roam about in nature and to compose the book that made him and Walden Pond famous.

Stonehenge

On one of his trips to England, Emerson visits the prehistoric structure known as Stonehenge and describes his visit in English Traits. He is struck by the fact this primitive temple has outlasted other sacred structures, and by numerous mysteries that it presents—who built Stonehenge? How was it built? For what purpose? Emerson says it conjures visions of Druids, Merlin and all manner of Anglo-Saxon magic and belief.

The Adirondacks

The Adirondacks are a mountain range in New York state that Emerson traversed with friends in 1858. His poem of the same name is an encounter with "woodgods" and other spirits of the forest, past and present. Its deep woods become, for Emerson, representative of how nature can induce the God experience for transcendentalists.

Harpers Ferry, Virginia

Harpers Ferry is the town in the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia where John Brown—lauded as a hero in one of Emerson's essays—led a bloody and unsuccessful slave

rebellion, was tried for treason and hanged. Later, he became a martyr for the union cause and for abolition of slavery.

Themes

Man and Nature

For this transcendentalist, nature is the face of God—the palpable presence of a divine power that can be experienced directly by man. There are two essays in this collection titled "Nature," the first published in 1836 and the second in 1844. in the first essay, Emerson describes man's position as part of the "oversoul," or divine power that links all creatures in their physical and spiritual forms. The purpose of natural history, Emerson says, "is to give us aid in supernatural history: the use of the outer creation to give us language for the beings and changes of the inward creation." By use of the word "supernatural," it appears that Emerson refers specifically to the oversoul—with or without psychic mediums, seances and reading of tea leaves. The sense of his essay is that, when joined physically with nature, man feels not only a physical but spiritual connection common to all creatures. Humans have the intellect to recognize this as a connection to the oversoul, or God, Emerson says..

By the time Emerson wrote the first of these two essays, his wife had died and he had lost his position as junior pastor at the Second Church of Boston. After a trip to Europe, when Emerson settled in Concord, Mass., a group of fellow spiritual travelers known as the Transcendentalist Club formed to discuss issues such as the connection between man and nature. Despite his separation from the church, Emerson retained his spirituality—as evidenced in this essay—as well as a proclivity for didacticism, or preaching. For example, in the first Nature essay, Emerson starkly asserts that man is "in the center of beings" and is the key to understanding nature, on no authority other than his own opinion. In the second essay, however, Emerson has toned down his rhetoric a bit and places nature at the center of all beings because nature "dwarfs every other circumstance and judges like a god all men that come to her."

In both essays, Emerson acknowledges the healing and restorative powers of nature for humans and finds it the source of all health and sanity.

The Individual and Independence

Like a true Yankee, Emerson is a strong advocate of self-reliance and individual responsibility. This is a theme of an essay published in 1841 and a poem published in 1867, both with the title Self-Reliance. He advocates knowing and speaking your own mind, no matter what others think and regardless of current social and cultural trends. The great geniuses and artists of history have all been men who listened to their inner voice and followed their "spontaneous impression with good-humored inflexibility then most when the whole cry of voices is on the other side." We ought to follow our inner voice, although that voice can become all but mute when one enters the world, Emerson says. So it is necessary for people to trust themselves—their own insights,

perceptions and feelings. "I shun father and mother and wife and brother when my genius calls," Emerson says, with no overabundance of humility.

Emerson says he resents being asked to give to the poor and "grudge[s] the dollar, the dime, the cent I give to such men as do not belong to me and to whom I do not belong." For his loyalty to "a class of persons" with whom he has a spiritual affinity, Emerson says he would gladly go to prison. But he deplores "your miscellaneous popular charities, the education at coileghe of fools, alms to sots and the thousandfold relief societies." The price of nonconformity is to be "whipped" by the world's displeasure.

In his poem Self-Reliance, Emerson hopes to "forego the yoke of men's opinions," and imagines his epitaph as a remembrance that he "never swerved from his plan" of listening to his inner voice. "The days pass over me and I am still the same/the aroma of my life is gone with the flower with which it came."

It is striking that Emerson espouses transcendentalism with its belief that all living creatures are connected together and with the oversoul and yet disavows and disclaims any suggestion that, when it comes to money, he should share his with the wrong class of persons.

Legitimacy of the Christian Church

Emerson's literary career was launched on the ashes of his clergical career. In large part, his clergical career at Second Church of Boston ended because he challenged the ritual of communion. In his essay, The Lord's Supper, Emerson says the taking of bread and wine by Jesus with his disciples at the last supper was never intended to be enshrined in church practice as a ritual to be continued through the ages. Reviewing both the Old Testament and the New Testament, Emerson explains that when Jesus told his disciples to eat bread and drink wine in remembrance of him, the meaning was that they should follow his commandments—not actually consume anything except metaphorically. Thus, Emerson maintains, communion is an empty formality of the Christian church that should be purgef.

From this perspective, Emerson expands his broadside to include many of the rituals of Christianity centered on Jesus who is too often the focus of attention rather than God. Jesus is described in the Bible as "the mediator" between God and man and should not be confused with God, who is the right object of prayer, Emerson says. The distinction and value of Christianity, Emerson says, is that it is "a moral system, that it presents men with truths which are their own reason, and enjoins practices that are their own justification." In other words, a truly Christian church would abandon communion and other meaningless practices as anathema to the mission of the church. Many of these rituals derive from pagan and Jewish converts who brought their own practices into the church, and those practices were assimilated although their ancient origins may have nothing at all to do with modern Christianity, Emerson asserts.

Style

Perspective

In his essays, Emerson takes the global perspective of an observer of his times—a wise and well-educated thinker who can place current events and trends in an historical perspective. in fact, in his introduction, Emerson asserts, "Our age is retrospective." By this he means that current knowledge is built upon the foundations laid by previous generations of artists, philosophers, scientists, religious figures and law givers. In his first essay, Nature, and in many that follow, Emerson casts an historical eye to the civilization of the ancient Greeks to find the true meaning of beauty, art, spirit and truth—concepts that have deeply affected western thought and belief for a millennium. When he defines nature as the key element in the then-current philosophy of transcendentalism, Emerson looks back to a pre-literate time when words, per se, did not yet exist and written communications were more akin to drawings. The development of language has enabled man to express infinitely more and with greater subtlety but has not always facilitated the search for truth, Emerson asserts. In looking at the state of the Christian church, he reaches back to the pre-gospel Jews to uncover rituals and beliefs that long ago were incorporated into Christianity through a process known as syncretism.

In his poetry, Emerson reveals the softer heart of an artist rather than the decisive intellect of a philosopher. There is a melancholy strain in his poems that does not emerge from the essays. In Goodbye, for example, a spirit wounded by the world looks forward to a reunion with nature and the infinite as he says farewell to "crowded halls, to court and street; to frozen hearts and hasting feet." The natural world of New England is very much evident in his Frost-like poetry, such as The Snow Storm, where the world becomes quiet in a white blanket: "The sled and traveler stopped, the courier's feet/Delayed, all friends shut out/The housemates sit around the radiant fireplace, enclosed/In a tumultuous privacy of storm." Whereas in his essays Emerson explains how nature is man's touchstone to God, in his poetry he delights in physical descriptions of nature, as in The Adirondacks, where he describes a trek with friends: "The wood was sovran with centennial trees—/Oak, cedar, maple, poplar, beech and fir/Linden and spruce. In strick society/Three conifers, white, pitch and Norway pine."

Tone

The general tone of Emerson's essays is akin to a preacher in the pulpit—which is what Emerson was before he launched himself as a writer and philosopher. He adopts the tone of a man of wisdom who wants to share his thoughts with his readers, but most of these thoughts are his opinions, however well-presented and well-reasoned. For example, here is Emerson in the second of his essays titled Nature: "Man is fallen; nature is erect and serves as a differential thermometer, detecting the presence or

absence of the divine sentiment in man. By fault of our dullness and selfishness we are looking up to nature, but when we are convalescent, nature will look up to us."

Another tone that appears in Emerson's essays is adulation, or the tendency toward hero-worship. Among his heroes are Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, the German writer; George Washington; Abe Lincoln; Plato; Henry David Thoreau and a few others. For those whom Emerson deems not of his spiritual or intellectual stature, he harbors a thinly-veiled contempt that comes into clear focus when he rants about the injustice of charity for those unfortunate alcoholics or otherwise disabled or desperate people who should be able to improve themselves through will power and self reliance. When referring to that "class" of people, his tone shifts from one of a lofty ideal of brotherhood and unity of spirit to contempt.

Structure

Most of Emerson's essays follow the familiar pattern of a sermon or other form of public address: first comes the statement or idea that he wishes to communicate, or truth that he wants to share; next, the argument or rationale for the message; and finally, the message is repeated with only minor variations at the conclusion. For example, in Compensation, Emerson begins by challenging a sermon he heard in which the preacher maintained that the good are not rewarded in this life, but only in the hereafter and that the wicked reap the earthly benefits of "success." Emerson calls on his own experiences and observations to refute this hypothesis and to reiterate the premises of transcendentalism. "Men are better than their theology," Emerson says. "Their daily life gives it the lie." Nature, for example, is based on polarities and its energies are constantly seeking a balance, or compensation, he says. "All things are moral. Justice is not postponed. A perfect equity adjusts its balance in all parts of life," Emerson says. It is the nature of the universe, Emerson says, that every cause has an effect here and now. "Our action is overmastered and characterized above our will by the law of nature," he observes. He concludes by restating his theme that even calamity and tragedy have their compensations in this life if people are open to learning and growth.

Quotes

"The greatest delight which the fields and woods minister is the suggestion of an occult relation between man and the vegetable. I am not alone and unacknowledged. They nod to me, and I to them. The waving of the boughs in the storm is new to me and old. It takes me by surprise and yet is not unknown. Its effect is like that of a higher thought or a better emotion coming over me, when I deemed I was thinking justly or doing right."
Nature. p. 7

"We will walk on our own feet; we will work with out own hands; we will speak our own minds. The study of letters shall be no longer a name for pity, for doubt, and for sensual indulgence. The dread of man and the love of man shall be a wall of defense and a wreath of joy around all. A nation of men will for the first time exist, because each believes himself inspired by the divine soul which also inspires all men."
The American Scholar, p. 59

"Whenever the pulpit is usurped by a formalist, then is the worshipper defrauded and disconsolate. We shrink as soon as the prayers begin, which do not uplift but smite and offend us. We are fain to wrap our cloaks about us about us and secure, as best we can, a solitude that hears not. I once heard a preacher who sorely tempted me to say I would go to church no more."
An Address, p. 72

"The transcendentalist adopts the whole connection of spiritual doctrine. He believes in miracle, in the perpetual openness of the human mind to new influx of light and power; he believes in inspiration and in ecstasy."
The Transcendentalist, p. 84

"We are not accustomed to express our thoughts or emotions by symbolical actions. Most men find the bread and wine no aid to devotion, and to some it is a painful impediment. To eat bread is one thing; to love the precepts of Christ and resolve to obey them is quite another."
The Lord's Supper, p. 107

"Nature is an endless combination and repetition of a very few laws. She hums the old well-known air through innumerable variations. Nature is full of a sublime family likeness throughout her works, and delights in startling us with resemblances in the most unexpected quarters."
History, p. 119

"A man should learn to detect and watch that gleam of light which fashes across his mind from within, more than the lustre of the firmament of bards and sages. Yet he dismisses without notice his thought, because it is his. In every work of genius we recognize our own rejected thoughts; they come back to us with a certain alienated

majesty. Great works of art have no more affecting lesson for is than this. They teach us to abide by our spontaneous impression with good-humored inflexibility then most when the whole cry of voices is on the other side."
Self-Reliance, p. 132

"Speak what you think now in hard words and tomorrow speak what tomorrow thinks in hard words again, though it contradict everything you said today. Is it so bad then to be misunderstood? Pythagoras was misunderstood, and Socrates, and Jesus, and Luther, and Copernicus, and Galileo, and Newton and every pure and wise spirit that ever took flesh. To be great is to be misunderstood."
Self-Reliance, p. 138

"Travelling is a fool's paradise. Our first journeys discover to us the indifference of places. At home I dream that at Naples, at Rome, I can be intoxicated with beauty and lose my sadness. I pack my trunk, embrace my friends, embark on the sea and at last wake up in Naples, and ther beside ms is the stern fact, the sad self, unrelenting, identical to that I fled from. I seek the Vatican and the palaces I affect to be intoxicated with sights and suggestions, but I am not intosicated. My giant goes with me wherever I go."
Self-Reliance, p. 151

"Fear is an instructor of great sagacity and the herald of all revolutions. One thing he teaches, that there is rottenness where he appears. He is a carrion crow, and though you see not what he hovers for, there is death somewhere. Fear for ages has boded and mowed and gibbered over government and property. That obscene bird is not there for nothing. He indicates great wrongs which must be revised."
Compensation, p 163

"The good are befriended even by weakness and defect. As no man had ever a point of pride that was not injurious to him, so no man had ever a defect that was not somewhere made useful to him. Our strength grows out of our weakness. The indignation which arms itself with secret forces does not awaken until we are pricked and stung and sorely assailed. A great man is always willing to be little."
Compensation, p. 166

"People represent virtue as a struggle, and take to themselves great airs upon their attainments and the question is everywhere vexed when a noble nature is commended, whether the man is not better who strives with temptation. But there is no merit in the matter. Either God is there of he is not there. We love characters in proportion as they are impulsive and spontaneous. The less a man thinks or knows about his virtues the better we like him."
Spiritual Laws, p. 173

"The real epochs of our life are not set in the visible facts or our choice of a calling, our marriage, our acquisition of an office, and the like but in a silent thought by the wayside as we walk; in a thought which revises our entire manner of life and says 'Thus hast

thou done, but it were better thus.'"
Spiritual Laws, p. 187

"I do then with my friends as I do with my books. I would have them where I can find them, but I seldom use them. Though I prize my friends, I cannot afford to talk with them and study their visions, lest I lose my own."
Friendship, p. 213

"Life wastes itself while we are preparing to live."
Prudence, p. 224

"All men have wandering impulses, fits and starts of generosity. But when you have chosen your part, abide by it and do not weakly try to reconcile yourself with the world. The heroic cannot be the common, nor the common the heroic."
Heroism, p. 233

"There is a certain wisdom of humanity which our ordinary education often labors to silence and obstruct. The mind is one, and the best minds who love truth for its own sake think less of property in truth. They accept it thankfully everywhere, and do not label or stamp it with any man's name for it is theirs long beforehand, and from eternity. The learned and the studious of thought have no monopoly on wisdom."
The Over-Soul, p. 242

"Our life is an apprenticeship to the truth that around every circle another can be drawn; that there is no end in nature, but every end is a beginning; that there is always another dawn risen on mid-noon and under every deep a lower deep opens."
Circles, p. 252

"Art is the need to create; but in its essence, immense and universal, it is impatient of working with lame or tied hands and of making cripples and monsters, such as all pictures and statues are. Nothing less than the creation of man and nature is its end. A man should find in it an outlet for his whole energy."
Art, p. 274

"A beautiful woman is a picture which drives all beholders nobly mad."
Art, p. 281

"The sign and credentials of the poet are that he announces that which no man foretold. He is the true and only doctor; he knows and tells; he is the teller of news for he was present and privy to the appearance which he describes. He is a beholder of ideas and an utterer of the necessary and causal."
The Poet, p. 290

"I take this evanescence and lubricity of all objects, which lets them slip through our fingers when he clutch hardest, to be the most unhandsome part of our condition. Life is a train of moods like a string of beads, and as we pass through them they prove to be many-colored lenses which paint the world their own hue and each shows only what lies

in its focus."
Experience, p. 309

"Character is nature in the highest possible form. It is of no use to ape it or to contend with it. Somewhat is possible of resistance, and of persistence, and of creation, to this power which will foil all emulation."
Character, p. 335

"The gentleman is a man of truth, lord of his own actions, and expressing that lordship in his behavior; not in any manner dependent and servile either on persons or opinions or possessions."
Manners, p. 343

"In our barbarous society the influence of character is in its infancy."
Politics, p. 387

"Is it strange that society should be devoured by a secret melancholy which breaks through all its smiles and its gayety and games?"
New England Reformers, p. 411

"He [Napoleon] was the agitator, the destroyer of prescription, the internal improver, the liberal, the radical, the inventor of means, the ope4ner of doors and markets, the subverter of monopoly and abuse. Of course the rich and aristocratic did not like him."
Napoleon, p. 463

"Art is a jealous mistress and if a man have a genius for painting, poetry, music, architecture or philosophy he makes a bad husband and an ill provider, and should be wise in season and not fetter himself with duties which will embitter his days and spoil him for his proper work."
Conduct of Life, p. 636

Topics for Discussion

How do the values of charity and brotherhood expressed in "Self Reliance" conflict or agree with those expressed in "The Emancipation Proclamation?"

Of all the heroic figures mentioned in these essays—Plato, Lincoln, Napoleon, John Brown, Thoreau, Carlyle—there are no women. Is this chauvinism on Emerson's part of merely a reflection of his times?

English romantic poets such as Wordsworth and Coleridge hold the common man in high esteem. Emerson seems to disdain the common man in favor of "great men." How does this attitude fit within the beliefs of transcendentalism?

Does transcendentalism, with its emphasis on an individual connection to the "oversoul," conflict with the basic tenets of organized Christianity?

Emerson espouses the importance of developing a uniquely American culture independent of Europe, and yet was influenced by English poets and penned a long essay on "English traits." Does he suggest guidelines for developing that American culture?

Does Emerson believe it is possible for a city dweller, with only limited access to nature, can practice transcendentalism?

What is Emerson's view of Henry David Thoreau?

How does Emerson's training and short career as a minister influence the style and substance of his essays?

How would you describe the tone, or emotional atmosphere, of the poem "Goodbye?"

What is Emerson's view of the correct balance between society and solitude?