Self-Reliance Study Guide

Self-Reliance by Ralph Waldo Emerson

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Introduction

"Self-Reliance," first published in *Essays* (First Series) in 1841, is widely considered to be the definitive statement of Ralph Waldo Emerson's philosophy of individualism and the finest example of his prose. The essay is a fabric woven of many threads, from a journal entry written as early as 1832 to material first delivered in lectures between 1836 and 1839.

Emerson was known for his repeated use of the phrase "trust thyself." "Self-Reliance" is his explanation both systematic and passionate□of what he meant by this and of why he was moved to make it his catch-phrase. Every individual possesses a unique genius, Emerson argues, that can only be revealed when that individual has the courage to trust his or her own thoughts, attitudes, and inclinations against all public disapproval.

According to the conventions of his time, Emerson uses the terms "men" and "mankind" to address all humanity, and the multitude of examples he gives of individuals who exhibited self-reliance and became great are all men. These factors somewhat date Emerson's presentation; the underlying ideas, however, remain powerful and relevant.

Author Biography

Ralph Waldo Emerson, essayist, poet, and philosopher, was born May 25, 1803, in Boston, Massachusetts. He was the son of William Emerson, a wellknown minister, and Ruth Haskins, daughter of a merchant. In 1811, when Emerson was eight, his father died, leaving his mother to rear six children. His aunt, Mary Moody Emerson, was a writer who took an interest in the education of her four nephews. It is likely that she played a large role in Emerson's development as a writer.

Despite the family's poverty after his father's death, Emerson attended Boston Latin School, a private academy. In 1817, at age fourteen, he enrolled, on scholarship, at Harvard College, where he won several prizes for his writing. After graduation in 1821, Emerson worked as a teacher at a school run by his older brother William. In 1825, he enrolled in Harvard Divinity School, and a year later he began a career as a Unitarian minister. Soon, he became chaplain of the Massachusetts Senate.

Emerson married Ellen Tucker, the great love of his life, in 1829. Her death a year and a half later devastated him and took a heavy toll on his religious faith. He resigned his pastorate in 1832, telling his congregation that he no longer believed in celebrating Holy Communion.

After a tour of Europe, Emerson earned a living as a lecturer. In 1835, he married his second wife, Lydia Jackson. They lived in Concord, Massachusetts, and had four children; one died as a boy. In Concord, Emerson became friends with the author Nathaniel Hawthorne and with Henry David Thoreau, fellow transcendentalist and author of *Walden*, who became his student and close friend.

Emerson began to shape his lecture material into essays and books in the early 1840s. These works expound various aspects of Emerson's transcendentalist philosophy. The core of transcendentalism is the idea that truth resides throughout creation and is grasped intuitively, not rationally. From this core belief, Emerson helped fashion American transcendentalism, which particularly stood against materialism, institutionalized religion, and slavery. Emerson's strong belief in the integrity of the individual is summarized in his oft-repeated phrase, "trust thyself," and given full expression in his famous essay "Self-Reliance," published in his *Essays* (First Series) in 1841.

Among Emerson's other well-known works are the pamphlet *Nature*, published in 1836; a second series of *Essays*, published in 1844; and The *Conduct of Life*, published in 1860. He was also a poet; among his lasting poems are "The Concord Hymn,""Ode to Beauty," and "Give All to Love."

Emerson continued to write and lecture until the late 1870s. He was widely known and respected throughout America and the Western world. Emerson died in Concord on April 27, 1882, of pneumonia. He was buried near the grave of Thoreau, who had died twenty years earlier.

Plot Summary

Genius

Emerson begins "Self-Reliance" by defining genius: "To believe your own thought, to believe that what is true for you in your private heart is true for all men□that is genius." Every educated man, he writes, eventually realizes that "envy is ignorance" and that he must be truly himself. God has made each person unique and, by extension, given each person a unique work to do, Emerson holds. To trust one's own thoughts and put them into action is, in a very real sense, to hear and act on the voice of God.

Emerson adds that people must seek solitude to hear their own thoughts, because society, by its nature, coerces men to conform. He goes so far as to call society "a conspiracy against the manhood of every one of its members."

Societal Disapproval and Foolish Consistency

Emerson discusses two factors that discourage people from trusting themselves: societal disapproval and foolish consistency. "For nonconformity the world whips you with its displeasure," he writes. He quickly dismisses public censure as a "trifle."

To the second factor, foolish consistency, Emerson gives more attention. Perhaps the most familiar and oft-quoted declaration in this essay or in all of Emerson's writing appears here: "A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds, adored by little statesmen and philosophers and divines." He reassures readers that what appears to be inconsistency and is judged harshly by others is simply the varied but unified activity of a unique individual. Emerson supports this view with an apt analogy: "The voyage of the best ship is a zigzag line of a hundred tacks." Be true not to what was done yesterday, Emerson urges, but to what is clearly the right course today, and the right destination will be reached.

Self-Worth

Up to this point, Emerson has made a case that individuals have not only a right but also a responsibility to think for themselves and that neither societal disapproval nor concerns about consistency should discourage these. He now writes that individuals who obey the admonition to "trust thyself" should value themselves highly and consider themselves equal to the great men of history. Returning to a point made earlier, Emerson states that when men trust themselves they are actually trusting the divine, which exists in all men and which he calls "the aboriginal Self," "Spontaneity," and "Instinct."

Relation of the Individual to God

Emerson further explores the nature of the relationship between the individual and "the divine spirit." He holds that this relationship is pure and therefore no intermediaries□priest, doctrine, church, scripture, etc.□are needed or helpful. Emerson decries those who "dare not yet hear God himself, unless he speaks the phraseology of . . . David, or Jeremiah, or Paul."

The Highest Truth

Emerson tells readers that he has now come to "the highest truth of the subject": "When good is near you . . . you shall not discern the footprints of any other . . . the way, the thought, the good, shall be wholly strange and new."

Emerson characterizes an individual's experience of the highest truth as a moment of calm during which the soul stands above all passion, above time and space, above even life and death, and experiences pure existence and reality.

Resist Temptation

Here Emerson encourages readers to give up social pretenses such as "lying hospitality and lying affection." Be true to your feelings and opinions in relation to other people, he writes, even the people closest to you; tell them what you really think of them. They may well be hurt at first, he acknowledges, but they will, sooner or later, "have their moment of reason" and learn to be honest themselves. This social honesty is needed, Emerson argues, because pretense has made people weak and afraid of truth, fate, death, and one another.

Effects of Self-Reliance

Emerson writes that increased self-reliance would revolutionize religion, education, and other facets of society. The remainder of the essay is an exploration of four numbered, specific effects of self-reliance, as follows.

First, Emerson writes that self-reliance would radically alter people's religious attitudes and practices. He calls conventional prayer a form of begging, "a disease of the will," and even "vicious." In a society of self-reliant individuals, Emerson says, "prayer that craves a particular commodity" would be replaced by prayer consisting of "the contemplation of the facts of life from the highest point of view." Another valid form of prayer, according to Emerson, is right action.

Emerson builds on this idea by adding, "As men's prayers are a disease of the will, so are their creeds a disease of the intellect." Again, Emerson urges readers to abandon

systems of thought built by others and to fall back on their own unique thoughts and ideas, about the divine as about all else.

Second, Emerson writes that self-reliance would replace the "superstition of traveling." "The soul is no traveler," he says. "The wise man stays at home." Emerson explains that he is not against travel for the sake of pursuing art or study but that too many people travel hoping to find a better culture or society than that in America. The wise course, according to Emerson, is to stay home and devote oneself to making America a place to be admired as much as American tourists admire Italy, England, Greece, and Egypt.

Emerson's third point expands on the second. He charges that Americans' minds are as much "vagabonds" as their bodies and that they look to other countries for inspiration in everything from architecture to opinions, valuing "the Past and the Distant" above the present and the near. Emerson's remedy is that Americans should develop their own culture and arts.

The fourth and final effect of self-reliance that Emerson deals with is the progress of society overall. He holds that people misunderstand the true nature of progress, mistaking advances in science, technology, and material welfare for progress. Every such advance has a cost as great as its benefit, Emerson claims, and does not really benefit individuals or society in meaningful ways. What passes for progress does not make people either better or happier. True progress occurs on an individual, not a societal basis, he writes, and results from looking to self, rather than material things, for fulfillment. Emerson concludes, "Nothing can bring you peace but yourself. Nothing can bring you peace but the triumph of principles."

Paragraphs 1-8

Paragraphs 1-8 Summary

"Ne te quaesiveris extra" is Latin for "do not look outside yourself." This is the first line of Emerson's essay "Self Reliance." It is a summation of the entire essay, the message that a person should look to him/herself for inspiration, judgment and validation of his or her own thoughts and ideas. Emerson expands upon this saying by offering logical proof and examples to demonstrate why he believes it is best to be self-reliant.

In paragraph one, Emerson urges the reader to be bold and unafraid to voice his inner thoughts to the world at large. Emerson cites Moses, Plato and Milton as examples of men who used non-traditional thinking for their time and were unafraid to voice their own original thoughts and ideas. Emerson suggests that it takes practice for a man to become aware of his thinking and to recognize when he has an original thought. The next step after the recognition is to voice the thought. Emerson warns the reader that when he fails to express an original idea, he may later see that idea voiced by another, and then he can no longer claim that idea as his own. According to Emerson, the greatest purpose of art is to demonstrate the necessity of expressing one's own ideas lest one see them expressed by someone else and then have to accept the other person as the source of one's own thoughts.

Emerson states that each person has to produce according to his own ability, without striving to imitate another. Each person is unique in his ability, and each individual creates something only he is capable of producing. The common experiences of humankind have a unique response in each individual. Each person is responsible to strive to his utmost and do his best, no matter what the task. If one slacks off in his labor, no work of genius will result. Emerson counsels the reader to trust himself and to work within the circumstances in which he is been born. Emerson believes that great men accept their highest destiny and lead in the war to end "Chaos" and the "Dark."

Paragraph four praises youth and youths' ability to hold fast to their ideals even in the midst of great opposition. Just because children or young people are not as articulate as older people, it does not mean that they have no power. Emerson warns "seniors," or adults, that youth can make adults become unnecessary.

Emerson believes it is a healthy aspect of human nature that young people are bold to observe and pass judgment on what they observe. Older people, on the other hand, are too concerned about others' opinions to be completely honest and unbiased, especially those adults who have been labeled as wise or thoughtful. Emerson is sorry for the fact that it is only in solitude that many hear their own voice. Once people enter into the world outside themselves, they must sacrifice originality to conformity in order to be accepted members of society. Society dislikes self-reliance.

Emerson believes that one must be a nonconformist in order to be a man. There is no idea that should be considered too accepted to be questioned. However society labels something, each individual must make up his own mind as to whether or not the label is accurate. Emerson cites an example from his own life when as a young person, an elder suggests Emerson quote church doctrine to a friend who asks Emerson a question. Emerson replies that he does not see any reason to fall back upon tradition when he chooses to live out of his own personal convictions. The elder then asks how Emerson knows if Emerson's impulses come from God or Satan. Emerson replies that his beliefs do not seem of Satan, but if they are, then so be it. He will still live by what he personally believes. Right is determined by one's own nature. The only wrong is to go against what is one's own nature. Emerson does not believe it is his responsibility to "rescue" most people, by giving money to drunks or churches or other social and or charitable organizations.

Emerson believes that most men are virtuous as a way of feeling less guilty. He thinks it better to live a less virtuous life if it is more sincere. Rather than being concerned about repentance, Emerson would rather just live his life as it unfolds. He does not believe a man's actions are necessarily a good indication of his character. Emerson is confident of his own worth and does not need any other person to tell Emerson he is worthwhile.

Paragraphs 1-8 Analysis

This essay is written in the 1830s, when the male pronoun is inclusive of either men or women. In keeping with the language of the essay's historical period, this study guide will use the male pronoun in similar fashion.

The phrase "self-reliance" in this essay has a very specific meaning, that is, to trust one's own judgment and ideas, rather than looking outside oneself to others for wisdom. If a person is self-reliant, he is not concerned with what other people think of him. The tone of this essay, so far, seems mildly condescending and even a bit cynical. The patronizing tone comes from the fact that Emerson is wholly confident in his own ability to judge a matter for himself and then to decide upon a course of action.

Emerson's cynicism is evident when he frequently mentions the belief that most men worry overly much about what others think of them and therefore base their actions upon what kind of an impression they will make to others. Emerson's essays are written for an educated minority, so his belief that society should allow each individual to follow his own inner voice is perhaps not as radical considering his audience at the time.

Paragraphs 9-18

Paragraphs 9-18 Summary

Emerson points out that it is easier to live as one wishes while alone and as others wish while among them, but he says that the most difficult task is to live as one wishes while among others. Living the way others think one should wastes the energy one needs to accomplish one's own purpose. In staying focused on one's own goals, one reinforces those goals. If one belongs to a particular group or believes a particular doctrine, and someone wishes to argue with one, then he already knows what arguments one is likely to offer. This weakens the case. When a man chooses to join a particular community or sect, it makes it difficult to trust his ideas because the man is merely repeating the "party line." Likewise, when a man is surrounded by others of the community, he must smile and pretend to agree with the official beliefs of that community.

A nonconformist is often chastised by others. Emerson says it is uncomfortable, but not dangerous, to be chastised by educated men. However, when a mob becomes riled up against someone who does not conform to the mob's ideas, it takes a very strong person to not be frightened and thus give in to mob rule.

The other fear which discourages trusting one's own thoughts is one's past history. A person might be afraid to appear inconsistent if he acts differently today than he did yesterday. The solution for this fear of inconsistency is to live each day in the present and not think of the past. There is nothing wrong with speaking something with a strong conviction yesterday and speaking something contradictory about the same thing today. Emerson says it is not bad to be misunderstood. He lists some names of great men who have been misunderstood.

Emerson does not believe a man can violate his nature. He encourages the reader to record his thoughts today without regard to what he may have written yesterday or will write tomorrow. Emerson believes the consistency will be in the man's character, not his words. A man's virtue or vice is not evident by his actions but by his entire being.

Emerson believes that a man's tendency towards good or bad is consistent. He offers the example of a ship, which, though it may tack in a different direction a thousand times, ultimately ends up where it is going. He states that the "force of character is cumulative." In other words, good actions reinforce the tendency to more good actions, and the reverse is also true. Emerson suggests that honor is consistent and that it is not dependent on anything a man thinks, but rather has the weight of thousands of years of being. Whether the honorable person is old or young, the agreement of what is honorable is consistent.

Emerson supports doing away with conformity and consistency. He urges the reader to protest the conventions of the time and rouse others from their contentment with what is. A man who is true to himself is the center of things. The commonplace man will act

according to what others think. He does not stand out as his own person. A true man acts out of his own convictions, and what he attempts to accomplish may take generations to come to fruition. Emerson cites such examples as Caesar who was the founder of the Roman Empire, which was not at the height of its glory for decades after Caesar's death, or Christ and the development of Christianity. Emerson notes that all of history is the result of just a few earnest persons.

Emerson calls upon each man to know his own worth. When a man who feels he has no talent looks upon the creations of others, he may feel inferior. Emerson rebuts this idea, saying that it is how each individual man judges the work of anyone else that makes that work worthwhile. The power to hold an individual judgment about anything is what makes a man noble.

Paragraphs 9-18 Analysis

Emerson is obviously not a "joiner." He believes that when someone belongs to any type of group, the person is unduly influenced to become a part of the group mentality. Emerson seems to have faith in himself and others to be able to come to moral decisions and behavior through the process of their own thinking. This may seem somewhat idealistic in our modern culture.

The idea that a man cannot violate his nature may be a little difficult to understand, but essentially Emerson believes that a person who is honest will usually make decisions that are honest. If someone tends to be cautious, he will usually make choices that err on the side of caution, even if he is occasionally daring. Therefore, over the course of the cautious person's lifetime, the majority of the man's choices and actions will be cautious ones. Every choice a person makes that is similar in nature to previous choices tends to reinforce that quality in the person. For example, if someone has experienced being overpaid when given change at a store four different times, and he chooses to return the overpayment all four of those times, then it is very likely he will do so if a fifth such situation arises. If, on the other hand, he chooses to keep the overpayment those four times, he will most likely keep the overpayment the fifth time it occurs.

When Emerson says that most of history is the result of just a few persons, he means that all the great movements in history have usually had their beginnings through the unique ideas of one person. These great movements have, in a sense, caused the rest of history. For example, the ideas of Jesus Christ led to a movement called Christianity. Christianity is the catalyst for numerous other world events, including the Crusades and many of the ongoing wars of the present age. If one were to list all the events, both great and insignificant, which are directly or indirectly a result of this religious movement, it would be readily apparent how Jesus Christ's original thinking produced an incredible amount of our world's history from the time of his birth to the present.

Paragraphs 19-27

Paragraphs 19-27 Summary

Emerson believes all men are equal in the sense that each person is subject to the same forces of life. He asserts that an unknown man who makes a good choice is as important as a famous man who also makes a good choice is. When a "private" man acts on his own, original views, he will stand out more than a mediocre king. Emerson believes that the respect which a king, noble or wealthy man is accorded is due any man. He believes the freedom which powerful men have to be their own persons should be granted to all men.

Paragraph twenty-one is a rather complicated, philosophical commentary upon the source of original thought. Emerson asks the question, what sparks originality? He says that this question leads one back to the essence of life, which he names "Spontaneity or Instinct" (capitalized by Emerson). He further denotes this primary wisdom as Intuition. The force which gives rise to Intuition is a place of oneness of creation. Emerson believes that every man is part of this essential force, and that it is this flow which triggers perception in man. Emerson believes that perceptions are to be honored. He distinguishes perception from voluntary thinking. Perception comes out of the universal mind. According to Emerson, man should have faith in his perceptions. He chides men who contradict or argue with someone else's perception because Emerson views perception as inspiration from the god consciousness.

The next paragraph continues with some thoughts about perception/revelation. Emerson believes that revelation or divine wisdom exists only in the present, and, as such, replaces all thought that came before it. He believes that a present revelation/perception absorbs any past perception related to the present one. Therefore, if someone claims to have received a revelation of the truth and uses old vocabulary or phrases to express the new, do not believe that person. Thus, based upon this logic, history is merely a parable of being and becoming. It is not a guide for the present moment.

Emerson perceives man as being timid and afraid to say "I think," or "I am." Rather, man depends upon the thinking of other men who seem wiser. Emerson offers the analogy that a rose does not think of former roses or better ones that have existed, but the rose exists solely in the now. Unlike the rose, man lives in the past, present and future. Man laments the past and attempts to know the future. Emerson believes that man will not be happy unless he lives in the present, as if there is no past or future.

Emerson believes man is like a child in that a child listens to his mother or grandmother or tutor and repeats by rote what he, the child, hears. Emerson is sorrowful that men look to others, such as David, Jeremiah or Paul, who have written about God, rather than listening directly to God for themselves. Emerson states that "if we life truly, we will see truly," and that man who lives with God shall be blessed.

Emerson now expresses what he thinks as the highest truth on the subject of intuition/perception. Emerson states that the soul, when elevated above its baser passion, is able to perceive that Truth and Right (capitalized by Emerson) spring from the universal mind and that all things go well. This fact that all things go well has always been true and always will be so, across both space and time.

Emerson states that the soul "*becomes*," and because of this, neither the past, riches nor achievements are of any importance. Emerson asks then, why does he speak of self-reliance when he believes the soul becomes? He says that one should not speak of reliance, but rather of "that which relies." Everything that exists dissolves into the "One," which for Emerson is another word for God. Emerson believes that self-existence is an attribute of God or the Supreme Cause, another name Emerson uses for God. As a natural progression of this idea, Emerson says that everything that exists only does so if it can help itself. Emerson cites several examples, one of which is a bent tree that of its own recovers from a strong wind and becomes upright again.

Paragraphs 19-27 Analysis

Emerson strongly believes that all men are equal and that which distinguishes one person from another is whether or not a person follows his own inner voice, which is connected to the universal mind. Emerson is a transcendentalist, meaning he believes that everything that exists is part of a universal consciousness and that every individual has equal access to the wisdom and knowledge of this universal consciousness. The connection between transcendentalism and self-reliance is that Emerson believes that because each individual person has access to the universal life force and all its knowledge, then each person should find his own truth through that connection. When one seeks his own truth, he is being self-reliant and not dependent upon any other philosophy, doctrine or teaching to guide him.

When Emerson writes that the "soul becomes," he means that the soul is not static, that is, it is in a constant state of change, of becoming, which is an eternal process. What the soul was yesterday is no longer relevant to what it is becoming in the present. This is why the past is not important. It is only the ever-present now which matters. When Emerson speaks of "that which relies," he is suggesting that all creation, including man, relies upon the universal consciousness for their existence and sustenance.

Paragraph 28-End of Essay

Paragraph 28-End of Essay Summary

In paragraph twenty-eight, Emerson urges all who believe in self-reliance and the universal mind to live their lives quietly at home, instead of going out and preaching their ideas to the world. He uses the analogy that when someone comes into his house, he could bid them remove their shoes because it is holy ground. Emerson finds it sad that instead of each man drawing from the "internal ocean," he looks to others to beg a mere cup from their pitcher. Emerson encourages men to spend much time in solitude and to use that solitude towards spiritual growth. Emerson warns the reader to resist the temptation to become continually involved in other people's lives.

Emerson urges the reader to live honestly among his family, friends and acquaintances. He believes that dishonesty, even for the reason of being congenial or not hurting someone's feelings, serves no purpose and is harmful to a man's soul. Emerson advises the reader to obey no law but the eternal law. He tells the reader to be himself and to make no pretenses about his likes, dislikes or beliefs. Emerson advocates not spending large amounts of time with those who believe differently or have different interests from oneself. He believes to do so is to lose one's own freedom and power. Emerson acknowledges that his honesty may offend many people, but he says that ultimately, he trusts that others will someday dip into their own "internal ocean" and understand why Emerson is not willing to be dishonest.

Emerson realizes that many people may think that his call to reject popular standards in favor of one's own standards will result in justifying unacceptable behavior, saying that a man is his own law. Emerson argues that his personal code is very strict, and he asks that if anyone thinks otherwise, he should try living for even one day the way Emerson lives. Emerson asserts that one has to be almost godlike to choose to renounce other people's expectations and trust in one's own self.

Emerson believes that society has created a mass of fearful people - afraid of truth, success, each other and death. He further states that most people lead mediocre lives and put forth minimal effort towards excellence. Emerson urges the readers to embrace fate, and it will make them strong. Emerson applauds the man who is not afraid to live life to its fullest, no matter what setbacks he suffers. He criticizes the man who unsuccessfully attempts something and then complains the rest of his life. He applauds the former and encourages the latter to dip into the internal ocean and find the inner resources to try again and again, however many times it takes to become successful. Emerson believes that through self-trust, men find strength and power. There needs to be greater self-reliance in all aspects of human life.

Emerson discusses prayer, saying that prayer to a being outside oneself for help is superstitious. Prayer should be the contemplation of life from the highest point of view. Prayer is a channel for God to pronounce all things good. Prayer should not be a means

to bring about a personal goal. Emerson sees that as a false prayer. Emerson believes that when a person is at one with God, he does not need to ask for help, but rather, everything he does is prayer.

Regrets are also false prayers according to Emerson. Someone who is discontent is not being self-reliant. The best approach to a grumbling man is truth, which is like electric shocks that force the man back to reason. Emerson believes that the man who is able to help himself is loved by both the gods and other men.

Emerson sees that prayers for help indicate a weak will, and he says that belief in creeds or doctrines indicates weak intellect. Emerson acknowledges that the study of any creed or system of thought can temporarily enlighten a man, but he states that this study should merely be a means of opening the mind to the greater mind of the universe. The greatest danger of creeds and doctrines is that they limit how far any man can expand his mind. They wall in the universe. Emerson is optimistic that if a man is honest and does well, the light of God will eventually break through the prison walls that doctrine has erected.

Emerson now discusses traveling and under what circumstances he believes travel is acceptable. Emerson believes that the wise person stays home, but if one wants to travel for the purpose of art or study or charity, then that is acceptable. However, traveling to escape depression or unhappiness is useless, because the cause of the unhappiness is within the self, which one always brings along. According to Emerson, travel, which was very popular during Emerson's time, is a symptom of a deeper intellectual disease. This disease is characterized by the driving urge to imitate foreign cultures in particular. This imitation is found in all aspects of life in America: writing, architecture, art, music and other fields. Emerson again, as he has throughout the essay, urges the reader to be his own person and never imitate. He reminds the reader that every great man is unique. If a man follows what is his purpose in this life, he, too, will produce something as grand as any other great man has produced.

Emerson believes that society never advances. It moves forward, then backward, then forward undergoing continuous changes, but it shows no true improvement. Emerson writes that society has made much material gain, but that gain has weakened the white/modern man. Emerson compares the white man to an aboriginal New Zealander and finds the white man's skills lacking. For example, Emerson is sorrowful that the white man no longer walks, because he has coaches. He has a watch, but he cannot tell the time by looking at the sun. The almanac tells him the weather, but he is unable to judge the weather from viewing the sky. Emerson believes the material goods of the modern world have sapped the energy from the white man.

Emerson believes it sad that man measures the worth of each other by what each man has and not what each man is. It is when a man rejects outside support and stands alone that he can be strong and prevail. As Emerson says, "Is not a man better than a town?" The man who knows that power comes from within works miracles. Finally, rather than rely upon the whims of fortune, Emerson says to live by the laws of Cause

and Effect. The man who lives in the Will of God banishes chance and is free of fear. Nothing can bring a man peace but the man himself.

Paragraph 28-End of Essay Analysis

The main point that this section, and truly the entire essay, makes is that man is part of a universal consciousness that many might call God. As such, he can "dip" into the abundance of that consciousness for all his needs. The tendency to rely upon money, friends, family or any other outward help is unwise. Emerson believes that if one chooses to stay "in the flow" of God's abundance, all is well and will always be well. The person who stays in this flow will suffer no harm, lack or need. As Emerson states in the very first line of the essay, "Ne te quaesiveris extra." Do not look outside yourself. The greatest resource is the god-force that a person can tap by looking within.

Characters

John Adams

Emerson refers to "great days and victories behind" that "shed a united light," which in turn "throws . . . America into Adams's eye." Emerson may be referring to John Adams (1735-1826), a revolutionary with a combative style who became the second president of the United States.

John Quincy Adams

John Quincy Adams (1767-1848) was the son of John Adams who became the sixth president of the United States. John Quincy Adams was a friend of Emerson's father and later an outspoken critic of Emerson's transcendentalism.

Samuel Adams

Samuel Adams (1722-1803) was a leader of the American Revolution who later served in Congress.

Gustavus Adolphus

Emerson asks, "Why all this deference to . . . Gustavus?" He may be referring to Gustavus Adolphus (1594-1632), a king of Sweden who reclaimed territory held by Denmark, Russia, and Poland.

Alfred

Emerson asks, "Why all this deference to . . . Alfred?" He is referring to Alfred the Great (849-899), a Saxon king who kept the Danes from overrunning southwest England. Known for promoting literacy, Alfred valued learning.

Ali ibn-abu-Talib

Emerson quotes Ali (circa 600-661), the sonin-law of the Islamic prophet Muhammad and his acknowledged successor. Ali's sayings had been published in English in 1832.

Anaxagoras

A Greek philosopher of nature, Anaxagoras (circa 500-428 B.C.) discovered that solar eclipses were caused by the moon obscuring the sun. He attributed growth and development of organisms to power of mind. Emerson says that he was a great man.

Anthony

Emerson declares, "An institution is the lengthened shadow of one man" and lists the hermit Anthony (circa 250-350) as the founder of Monachism, or Christian monasticism. He inherited wealth but renounced it to live a life of Christian asceticism and celibacy. Anthony drew many monks to his hermitages and was later canonized.

Francis Bacon

Recognized by Emerson as an original genius who could have no master, Francis Bacon (1561-1626) was a philosopher and statesman whose inductive method of reasoning influenced scientific investigation.

Jeremy Bentham

Listed as one of those with a "mind of uncommon activity and power," Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832) was an English economist, philosopher, and theoretical jurist. With John Stuart Mill, he advocated utilitarianism, the belief that right actions lead to happiness.

Vitus Behring

Emerson gives Vitus Behring as an example of one who accomplished much with simple equipment. A navigator from Denmark, Behring (also spelled Bering; 1680-1741) explored the Siberian coast. The Bering Sea and Bering Strait are named after him.

Chatham

See William Pitt

Thomas Clarkson

Thomas Clarkson (1760-1846) was the founder of abolitionism. Clarkson formed the British Society for the Abolition of the Slave Trade in 1787 with Granville Sharp and worked unstintingly for an end to slavery in Britain. Slavery was abolished in the British Empire in 1833.

Nicolaus Copernicus

Listed among the number of great men who have been misunderstood, Nicolaus Copernicus (1473-1543) was a Polish astronomer. His theory that the sun, not the Earth, was the center of the solar system was considered heretical at the time.

David

David, the second king of Israel according to the Old Testament, is said to have authored a number of the psalms in the Old Testament book of the same name. Emerson writes that many intelligent people dare not believe that they can hear the voice of God unless it is mediated through the words of men such as David.

Diogenes

The Greek philosopher who founded the school of thought called cynicism, Diogenes (died circa 320 B.C.) was a nonconformist. He espoused a simple life and was known for roaming the streets of Athens in search of an honest man. Emerson says that he was a great man.

Charles Fourier

Listed as one of those with a "mind of uncommon activity and power," Charles Fourier (1772-1837) was a French social theorist who believed that society could be organized into cooperatives.

George Fox

George Fox (1624-1691) was the founder of Quakerism. Fox was a preacher and missionary who founded the Society of Friends (later called Quakers) in England in 1647.

Sir John Franklin

Emerson mentions British Arctic explorer Sir John Franklin (1786-1847) as having the most advanced equipment of the time, in contrast to the equipment available to earlier explorers Henry Hudson and Vitus Behring. Perhaps giving credibility to Emerson's argument that better equipment does not necessarily lead to greater accomplishments, Franklin died in the Victoria Strait while trying to discover the Northwest Passage.

Galileo Galilei

Listed among the number of great men who have been misunderstood, Italian astronomer, philosopher, and mathematician Galileo (1564-1642) supported the theories of Copernicus and advocated the application of mathematics to understanding nature. For this, he was tried in the Inquisition and forced to retire.

Henry Hudson

Emerson gives Henry Hudson as an example of one who accomplished much with simple equipment. An English navigator, Hudson (died circa 1611) explored the North American coast. The Hudson River is named after him.

James Hutton

Listed as one of those with a "mind of uncommon activity and power," James Hutton (1726-1797) was a Scottish chemist, geologist, and naturalist who originated the principle of uniformitarianism, which explains geological processes over time.

Jeremiah

Jeremiah was a fiery prophet of the Old Testament whose activities are recorded in the book of the same name. Emerson writes that many intelligent people dare not believe that they can hear the voice of God unless it is mediated through the words of men such as Jeremiah.

Antoine Laurent Lavoisier

Listed as one of those with a "mind of uncommon activity and power," Antoine Laurent Lavoisier (1743-1794) was a French scientist who developed the theory of combustion. He is often credited with founding modern chemistry.

John Locke

Listed as one of those with a "mind of uncommon activity and power," John Locke (1632-1704) was an English philosopher of the Enlightenment, a movement that advocated reason as a path to understanding God and the universe. Locke developed a systematic theory of knowledge, and his ideas influenced the U.S. Constitution.

Martin Luther

Listed among the number of great men who have been misunderstood, Martin Luther (1483-1546) was a German monk and scholar who questioned the theology, practices, and authority of the Catholic Church. Luther's teachings resulted in the founding of Protestant Christianity, which had far-reaching effects not only on Western Christianity but also on economic, political, and social thought.

John Milton

Mentioned as having "set at naught books and traditions," John Milton (1608-1674) is regarded as one of the greatest English poets. He is well known for his epic poem *Paradise Lost*. Energetic in his defense of civil and religious rights, Milton promoted ideas that conflicted with the Puritan beliefs of his time.

Sir Isaac Newton

Listed among the number of great men who have been misunderstood, Isaac Newton (1642-1727) explained infinitesimal calculus and the law of gravity. He also laid the groundwork for modern optics with his discovery that white light is made of colored components.

Sir William Edward Parry

Emerson mentions British Arctic explorer Sir William Parry (1790-1855) as having the most advanced equipment of the time, in contrast to the equipment available to earlier explorers Henry Hudson and Vitus Behring. Parry reached farther north than any explorer before him.

Paul

Paul the Apostle was one of Jesus' followers and a leader of the early Christian church. His New Testament writings have had a lasting impact on Christianity throughout the centuries. Emerson writes that many intelligent people dare not believe that they can hear the voice of God unless it is mediated through the words of men such as Paul.

Phocion

One of Emerson's "great men," Phocion (circa 402-318 B.C.) was an Athenian general and statesman, a follower of Plato, and known for his integrity.

William Pitt

William Pitt, the Earl of Chatham (1708-1778), was an English statesman who spoke in Parliament in support of American independence. Emerson refers to the "thunder" in Pitt's voice; he was considered the greatest orator of his age.

Plato

Another man who "set at naught books and traditions," Plato (circa 427-348 B.C.) is recognized as one of the greatest Western philosophers of all time. Advocating reason, he encouraged his followers to define their own lives rather than allow others to define them. For this he was labeled a bad influence by those in power.

Plutarch

An author and biographer, Plutarch (circa 46-120) wrote of heroic feats by Greek and Roman soldiers. Emerson notes that "greater men than Plutarch's heroes" cannot be molded by modern knowledge.

Pythagoras

Possibly the first pure mathematician, the Greek Pythagoras (circa 569-475 B.C.) is among Emerson's "misunderstood." The son of a merchant, Pythagoras founded a school in Samos that is still called the Semicircle of Pythagoras in modern Italy. He also founded a philosophical and religious school in Croton, now Crotone, Italy. Both men and women were accepted as his followers.

Scanderberg

Emerson asks, "Why all this deference to . . . Scanderberg?" He is referring to George Castriota (circa 1403-1468), an Albanian patriot with the moniker Scanderbeg, who led his soldiers against the Turks.

Scipio

Scipio Africanus the Elder (237-183 B.C.), the greatest Roman general before Julius Caesar, was victorious in the famous Battle of Zama against Hannibal. Emerson notes that Milton called him "the height of Rome" in *Paradise Lost*.

Socrates

Another of Emerson's "misunderstood" men, Socrates (469-399 B.C.) was Plato's mentor. Although Socrates did not write his beliefs because he felt they were constantly evolving, his "The Apology," as recorded by Plato, advocates finding true knowledge even in the face of sweeping opposition.Because of his insistence on pointing out the lack in morality in his society, Socrates was put on trial. Given the choice to stop teaching or die, Socrates drank a fatal dose of hemlock.

Thor

Emerson urges the readers to "wake Thor and Woden, courage and constancy." Thor is the Norse god of war, also known as "the Thunderer."

Gustavus Vasa

Emerson asks, "Why all this deference to . . . Gustavus?" He may be referring to Gustavus Vasa (1496-1560), a king of Sweden who proclaimed Christianity in his country.

John Wesley

Emerson declares, "An institution is the lengthened shadow of one man" and lists John Wesley (1703-1791) as the founder of the Methodist denomination of Protestant Christianity. An English clergyman and evangelist, Wesley promoted the doctrine of salvation by faith in Christ alone (apart from deeds).

Woden

Emerson urges readers to "wake Thor and Woden, courage and constancy." Woden, also known as Odin, is the Teutonic god of war and patron of those who have died in battle.

Zoroaster

Emerson quotes the *Avesta,* the holy book of Zoroastrianism, a religion founded by the Persian Zoroaster (circa 628-551 B.C.).

Themes

Individualism

"Self-Reliance" is widely considered Emerson's definitive statement of his philosophy of individualism. This philosophy esteems individuals above all□societies, nations, religions, and other institutions and systems of thought.

Emerson repeatedly calls on individuals to value their own thoughts, opinions, and experiences above those presented to them by other individuals, society, and religion. This radical individualism springs from Emerson's belief that each individual is not just unique but *divinely* unique; i.e., each individual is a unique expression of God's creativity and will. Further, since Emerson's God is purposeful, He molded each individual to serve a particular purpose, to do a certain work that only he or she is equipped to carry out.

This direct link between divinity and the individual provides assurance that the individual will, when rightly exercised, can never produce evil. Individual will, in Emerson's philosophy, is not selfish but divine.

In this context, an individual who fails to be self-reliant□who does not attend to and act upon his or her own thoughts and ideas□is out of step with God's purpose. Such a person, in Emerson's view, cannot be productive, fulfilled, or happy.

On the other hand, a person who is self-reliant can be assured that he or she is carrying out the divine purpose of life. This is true even of those who flout the rules and conventions of society and religion and suffer disapproval as a result. In fact,Emerson points out, those men who are now considered the greatest of all fall into this category. He gives as examples Pythagoras, Socrates, Jesus, Martin Luther, Copernicus, Galileo, and Isaac Newton.

Nonconformity

Clearly, Emerson's philosophy of individualism leads directly to nonconformity. Most individuals will find that their private opinions and ideas are in agreement with those of others on some points. For example, most people agree that murder and theft are wrong. On those points, nearly everyone can be a conformist. A commitment to live according to one's own ideas about every matter, however, will certainly make every individual a nonconformist on some issues. In Emerson's words, "Whoso would be a man must be a nonconformist."

Originality versus Imitation

The positive side of nonconformity is originality. Self-reliance is not a matter merely of not believing what others believe and doing what others do but, just as importantly, a matter of believing and doing what one is uniquely suited to believe and do. Emerson expects the self-reliant to substitute originality for imitation in every sphere of life.

Speaking specifically of architecture, Emerson explains that originality will yield a product that is superior (i.e., more suited to the needs of the maker) to one made by imitation:

If the American artist will study with hope and love the precise thing to be done by him, considering the climate, the soil, the length of the day, the wants of the people. . . he will create a house in which all these will find themselves fitted, and taste and sentiment will be satisfied also.

"Insist on yourself," Emerson concludes."Never imitate."

Past, Present, and Future

Emerson counsels the self-reliant to keep their focus on the present. "Man postpones or remembers," he complains. "He does not live in the present, but with reverted eye laments the past, or, heedless of the riches that surround him, stands on tiptoe to foresee the future." One who lingers in the past wastes one's life in regret; one who looks to the future misses today's duties and pleasures.

It is Emerson's preference for the present over the past that leads him to call consistency foolish.That a certain belief or course of action was correct, useful, or best in the past does not guarantee that it remains so in the present. Conversely, to leave behind a belief or a way of doing things does not mean that it was not useful at the time or that one was wrong to have pursued it.

To demonstrate the unity and effectiveness of an apparently inconsistent course through life, Emerson uses a sailing journey as a metaphor: "The voyage of the best ship is a zigzag line of a hundred tacks."

The knowledge that one is following the true path to the right destination, despite apparent inconsistencies, gives the self-reliant individual confidence to ignore the taunts of others who deride him or her for changing course.

Cause and Effect versus Fortune

Cause and effect, which Emerson calls "the chancellors of God," are, he argues, the very opposites of fortune, or chance. By self-reliance, man is able to overcome the unpredictable turning of the wheel of fortune. Understanding the principle of cause and

effect, the self-reliant individual applies his will wisely to bring about desired effects. To put it another way, through the wisdom of self-reliance, people become masters of their own fates. Just as God is said to have created order out of chaos, so too can men.

Style

Rational Argument

The essay is, above all, a carefully constructed rational argument with the goal of persuading readers to adopt the ideas Emerson promotes. The author uses logic, reasons, facts, and examples to support his position. One example of his use of facts is his reference to two pairs of British explorers to support his argument that advances in technology do not necessarily lead to greater accomplishments. Emerson writes that Henry Hudson and Vitus Behring, who lived in the centuries preceding Emerson's time, achieved great success with equipment much less sophisticated than that used by Sir William Parry and Sir John Franklin, who were famous in Emerson's day. Emerson's contrast here is especially interesting because history bore him out.While Hudson and Behring's names appear prominently on today's maps to attest to their discoveries, Parry and Franklin are less well-known. In addition, Franklin died six years after the publication of "Self-Reliance" in a failed attempt to find the much sought-after Northwest Passage.

Emerson organizes his ideas so that they lead readers step by step to the conclusion he wishes them to reach. He begins by defining genius. He then explains why he believes that every human being possesses it and goes on to explain how and why this genius is to be expressed□the expression of that inborn genius is the essence of self-reliance.

Emotional Appeal

Emerson's tight rational argument in "Self-Reliance" is complemented by energetic and passionate language that appeals to readers' emotions.Among the more effective techniques here is the use of images from nature: "My book should smell of pines and resound with the hum of insects" and, "before a leaf-bud has burst, its whole life acts; in the full-blown flower there is no more; in the leafless root there is no less." Railing against men's inappropriate feelings of timidity, Emerson accuses them of being "ashamed before the blade of grass or the blowing rose."

References to Persons and Literature

"Self-Reliance" is studded with a multitude of references to famous men and well-known literature. The men mentioned□from ancients to contemporaries of Emerson, from seagoing explorers to philosophers and poets, from the Islamic leader Ali to the founder of Zoroastrianism□are, for the most part, held up as examples of self-reliance and of the greatness it brings. A few of these references are vague enough to leave some question as to exactly which individual Emerson had in mind. The name Adams is mentioned in a context in which it could refer to John, John Quincy, or Samuel. Similarly, Emerson's Gustavus could be Gustavus Adolphus or Gustavus Vasa, both kings of Sweden.

Literary references serve to illustrate or strengthen Emerson's ideas, though some may be obscure to modern readers. To convey that people are unable to forget ideas to which they have pledged themselves in the past, Emerson writes, "There is no Lethe for this." Lethe, in Greek mythology, is a river of forgetfulness.

There are several biblical references. True to Emerson's belief in subjecting all teaching to individual interpretation, he delights in wrenching these out of context and turning the conventional interpretations upside down. For example, declaring that he will express his true thoughts even if doing so should offend those closest to him, Emerson writes, "I shun father and mother and wife and brother when my genius calls me." This is a reference to Matthew 10:37, in which Jesus says, "He who loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me. And he who loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me." Emerson simply replaces Jesus' "me" with "my genius," a substitution that some readers of his time undoubtedly found heretical.

Similarly, the very next sentence is, "I would write on the lintels of the door-post, *Whim*." This reference is to Exodus 12, in which God tells the Israelites to smear the blood of a sacrificed lamb on their door posts and that this sign will protect them from the coming plague. Emerson conveys that he relies on himself, on his divinely given genius, to protect him from the plagues of life.

Figurative Language

Emerson makes more use of figurative language and literary devices than many essayists. He is particularly fond of using various forms of comparison simile, metaphor, and analogy□to add color to a work whose primary purpose is to persuade.One passage contains several examples:

Men do what is called a good action . . . much as they would pay a fine in expiation of daily nonappearance on parade. Their works are done as an apology or extenuation of their living in the world□as invalids and the insane pay a high board. Their virtues are penances.

The essay also contains some striking examples of personification: "Malice and vanity wear the coat of philanthropy," and, "the centuries are conspirators against the sanity and authority of the soul."

Romanticism

Emerson is considered an American icon of romanticism, a philosophical and literary movement that began in Europe in the early eighteenth century. Emerson's philosophy as expressed in "Self-Reliance" largely overlaps the ideas of romanticism, which include the inherent worth of the individual, the importance of personal freedom from religious and social restrictions, and the divinity of nature. French philosopher and writer Jean-Jacques Rousseau was strongly influential in the development of romanticism in

Europe, as was the German writer Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, whose work the New England transcendentalists read.

Historical Context

New England Transcendentalism

Transcendentalism took root in New England in the mid-1830s in reaction against the rationalism (emphasis on intellectual understanding) of the Unitarian Church. The philosophy centered around the premise that divine truth is present in all created things and that truth is known through intuition, not through the rational mind. From this core proceeded the belief that all of nature, including all humans, is one with God, whom the transcendentalists sometimes called the Over-Soul. In an essay with that title, Emerson defined God as "that great nature in which we rest . . . that Unity within which every man's particular being is contained and made one with all other."

The term transcendental was borrowed from German philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724-1804),who wrote in his well-known work *Critique of Practical Reason*, "I call all knowledge transcendental which is concerned, not with objects, but with our mode of knowing objects so far as this is possible a priori" (meaning, independent of sensory experience). American transcendentalism was thus clearly linked to similar philosophies that existed in Europe, and it also shared important ideas with Eastern philosophies and religions, including Hinduism. The New England transcendentalists read the Bhagavadgita (sometimes called the Hindu Bible), the Upanishads (philosophical writings on the Hindu scriptures), and Confucius. In addition,Emerson in "Self-Reliance" quotes both an Islamic caliph (religious person) and the founder of Zoroastrianism.

The New England transcendentalists did not confine themselves to literary pursuits but also experimented with putting their philosophy into practice. Some, such as Bronson Alcott and Elizabeth Peabody, focused on educational reform.Peabody and Margaret Fuller applied the principles of transcendentalism to the crusade for women's rights. The group created two experimental communities, Fruitlands and Brook Farm.

But it is the writing of Emerson and Henry David Thoreau that has been the most enduring product of American transcendentalism. Thoreau's ideas about nonviolent resistance to oppressors, especially, were important both to Mahatma Gandhi's campaign against the British in India in the early 1900s and to the American civil rights movement of the 1960s.

Abolitionism

During the three decades before the Civil War, the movement to abolish slavery in the United States steadily gained momentum. An abolitionist newspaper, the *Liberator*, began publication in 1831, and the American Anti-Slavery Society was founded in Philadelphia in 1833. By 1838, there were nearly fifteen hundred anti-slavery organizations in the United States, with nearly a quarter of a million members. The Liberty Party was formed in 1840 to make abolition a central issue in national politics.

Emerson and his fellow transcendentalists spoke out against slavery, as did John Greenleaf Whittier and other writers. *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave*, the autobiography of escaped slave Frederick Douglass, was published in 1845 and became an immediate bestseller. Harriet Beecher Stowe's famous anti-slavery novel, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, published serially in 1851-1852, gave a tremendous boost to the abolitionist cause. Both books movingly portray the brutal conditions and dehumanizing effects of slavery as it existed in the American South. In addition, the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, which legislated harsh penalties for escaped slaves who were recaptured, actually strengthened the anti-slavery movement.

Slavery, of course, became a central issue in the Civil War. Abraham Lincoln, of whom the normally apolitical Emerson was a strong supporter, signed the Emancipation Proclamation freeing all slaves in 1863. The proclamation was symbolic, however; enforcement provisions did not back it. Slavery finally ended with the adoption of the Thirteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution in 1865.

Sensibility

During the nineteenth century, the term "sensibility" was used to mean adherence to a set of unwritten but all-encompassing rules that governed acceptable social behavior. A person of sensibility observed others closely to learn how things were done and then acted accordingly, being careful never to step outside the bounds of conventional behavior. The term is preserved in the title of Jane Austen's famous novel, *Sense and Sensibility*, first published in 1811. The story follows the lives of two sisters, one of whom lives a life governed by sensibility and the other of whom flouts sensibility and lives by her passions. In accordance with Austen's belief that sensibility led to personal happiness and social order, her sensible Elinor is shown to be the wiser of the two and is rewarded□after many dramatic trials□with the man of her dreams, while sensual Marianne must reform herself before the author allows her to make a happy marriage.

The idea of sensibility as promoted by Austen and by nineteenth-century society in general is exactly that which Emerson argues against in "Self-Reliance."

Critical Overview

There are two distinct bodies of criticism of Emerson's work: commentary on his writing and commentary on his thinking. As a writer, Emerson has been consistently praised through the years from all quarters. Joel Myerson, in *Concise Dictionary of Literary Biography: 1640-1865, quotes Rene Wellek*, a highly respected historian of literary criticism, as deeming Emerson "the outstanding representative of romantic symbolism in the English-speaking world." Myerson himself adds:

Ralph Waldo Emerson is perhaps the single most influential figure in American literary history. More than any other author of his day, he was responsible for shaping the literary style and vision of the American romantic period, the era when the United States first developed a distinctively national literature worthy of comparison to that of the mother country.

Myerson goes on to cite Emerson's influence on Thoreau, Herman Melville, Walt Whitman, and Emily Dickinson.

Alfred S. Reid, *in Style in the American Renaissance:A Symposium*, writes that he does not admire Emerson as a philosopher but does hold him in high esteem as a writer. He calls Emerson "a skillful shaper of sentences, a composer of expository essays that move and give pleasure. . . . one of the few great craftsmen of the genre." Reid echoes the sentiments of Emerson's contemporary Nathaniel Hawthorne, who is quoted by John C. Gerber in *Reference Guide to American Literature* as having said that he "admired Emerson as a poet of deep beauty and austere tenderness but sought nothing from him as a philosopher."

As consistently as Emerson is praised as a writer, "Self-Reliance" is considered the pinnacle of his efforts. According to Gerber, "In many respects 'Self-Reliance' is the capstone of American romanticism." Reid concurs: "Emerson never again achieved such an artful balance of earnest goodness and pungent oratory. . . . No other essay disentangles the truth from the universal soul as this one, or says it with such eclat."

As a philosopher, Emerson has received more mixed reviews. He was hotly controversial in his own time, especially for this pronouncements against organized religion. Just before the publication of "Self-Reliance," former president John Quincy Adams wrote dismissively of Emerson's philosophy:

A young man named Ralph Waldo Emerson . . . after failing in the everyday vocations of a Unitarian preacher and schoolmaster, starts a new doctrine of transcendentalism,declares all the old revelations superannuated and worn out, and announces the approach of new revelations and prophecies.

With the passage of time, criticism of Emerson's philosophy has become less emotional and more pointed. Joyce W. Warren, *in The American Narcissus*, faults Emerson for holding some extreme and unbalanced positions. She writes,

Despite Emerson's insistence on the grandeur of the self, this philosophy in practice necessarily involves the pettiness that is inherent in any systematic refusal to learn from others. . . . Implicit in Emerson's ideas is the provincialism and narrowness of the self-interested person."

The Cambridge History of English and American Literature, published in the early twentieth century, declares that Emerson's philosophy was weakened by his failure to fully understand and grapple with the nature of evil:

He is above all the poet of religion and philosophy for the young; whereas men, as they grow older, are inclined to turn from him . . . to those sages who have . . . a firm grasp of the darker facts of human nature.

The writer goes on, however, with admirable foresight: "As time passes, the deficiencies of this brief period . . . of which Emerson was the perfect spokesman may well be more and more condoned for its rarity and beauty." And, though the limits and imperfections of Emerson's philosophy are acknowledged, so is his powerful influence on later philosophers and on American culture as a whole. Myerson points out that Emerson's ideas inspired the quintessentially American philosophy called pragmatism, later developed by William James and John Dewey. Reid sums up Emerson's contribution to American culture:

. . . through his essays flow the vital currents of American culture. Here we find that fulsome blend of Puritanism, Enlightenment, and Romantic idealism that historically make up the early American character; here too the democratic idealism, the individualism,the contempt for tradition, and the practical sagacity.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2

Critical Essay #1

Norvell is an independent educational writer who specializes in English and literature. She holds degrees in linguistics and journalism and has done graduate work in theology. In this essay, she discusses three reasons why Emerson's frequent references to famous men weaken his argument in "Self-Reliance."

Frequent references to historical figures and famous contemporaries are a hallmark of Emerson's essays, and the technique is prominent in "Self-Reliance." Emerson mentions scores of well-known men from a wide range of cultures, eras, and disciplines. Most of the men are named as positive examples of the traits Emerson associates with self-reliance. For example, in a single sentence Emerson names Pythagoras, Socrates, Jesus, Luther, Copernicus, Galileo, and Newton as great men who were unaffected by society's disapproval. A few are given as examples of men who, through no fault of their own, are too much revered□men whose recorded thoughts and passed-down ideas are wrongly used by average people. The biblical David, Jeremiah, and Paul fall into this group. A few men, such as Islam's Caliph Ali and Zoroastrianism's founder, are quoted.

No matter how Emerson employs each one, his purpose in doing so is to strengthen his argument for self-reliance. For more than one reason, however, the use of these examples seems less effective than other means might have been. A few references are so vague that even scholars who study Emerson are not sure to whom they refer. Emerson habitually uses last names only. When he writes, "That is it which throws . . . America into Adams's eye," it is impossible to know which Adams he had in mind:Samuel, John, or John Quincy. Not knowing which Adams, the reader also does not know which trait or idea or action Emerson means to spotlight.

This vagueness occurs a few times and is frustrating but not a major stumbling block to understanding Emerson's central argument. But Emerson's name-dropping does cause more serious problems. First, there is a logical inconsistency in using this technique in support of the particular argument Emerson is making in this essay. Second, many of the references become increasingly obscure as time marches on. And third, the fact that all those mentioned are men□and overwhelmingly European or white American men□detracts from Emerson's authority, again increasingly with the passage of time. Each of these three problems will now be considered in greater detail.

The logical inconsistency that is inherent in Emerson's leaning upon one famous shoulder after another is the most serious problem and has nothing to do with cultural changes over time. It is simply that Emerson's core argument that readers should ignore the great men of the past and instead trust themselves should prevent him from using the great men of the past to justify his own thinking. Emerson writes, in essence, that Moses, Plato, and Milton were exemplars of self-reliance and are now regarded as great men; therefore readers should follow in their footsteps. But there is a double contradiction here. First, given that Emerson is preaching "trust thyself," why should he rely on Moses, Plato, and Milton, instead of on himself, to make his point? And second, given that Emerson wants readers to be nonconforming, original individualists, why

should they care to become "great"; i.e., why should they strive to be highly regarded by society or posterity?

An essayist has many different tools available for the building of an argument. Example is only one such tool; Emerson could have limited himself to other tools, such as reasons or facts, and avoided the awkwardness of using examples to support his argument for living life without examples. If he was determined to use examples, Emerson could have used less problematic ones; he might have used himself or, better yet, his readers as examples of the good results of self-reliance. Emerson could have declared that he himself had followed his principle of self-reliance and had thereby become successful and happy. Or, he could have asked readers to recall occasions when they had trusted themselves and had been proven correct. Either of these would have been a valid example in the context of Emerson's argument, and difficult to contest. But instead of taking either of these courses, Emerson made recourse to great men of the past, saying, in effect, that readers should exhibit self-reliance because these men did so and are now considered great. This line of reasoning is directly at odds with many statements throughout the essay.

Emerson writes, "There is a time in every man's education when he arrives at the conviction that . . . imitation is suicide." Yet he urges readers to imitate Moses, Plato, and Milton, at least in the matter of self-reliance. "Don't imitate others," Emerson seems to say, "except when the others are doing what I agree with."

He writes, "Why all this deference to Alfred, and Scanderberg, and Gustavus?" Yet he shows deference to a host of other great men and strongly implies that readers should as well.

"Man is timid and apologetic," Emerson writes. "He does not say, 'I think,' 'I am,' but quotes some saint or sage." And then he himself quotes both saints and sages. As one final example, Emerson writes:

When the good is near you . . . you shall not discern the footprints of any other; you shall not see the face of man; you shall not hear any name; the way, the thought, the good, shall be wholly strange and new. It shall exclude example and experience.

Of course, Emerson's own explanation of "the way" is heavily tracked with footprints and populated with faces, and it rings with a roll call of names. Not content to present his own ideas as being "wholly strange and new," Emerson embeds them in a roster of examples and other men's experiences.

Generations of readers attest that this recurring contradiction does not invalidate Emerson's argument, but it does weaken its force. It calls attention to the extreme nature of Emerson's position. While most readers can agree that some degree of selfreliance is good, close readers can also see that Emerson has set a standard for his readers that he as a writer is not able or willing to meet. While exhorting readers to ignore history and other men and rely only on themselves, Emerson repeatedly relies on history and other men.

The second problem with Emerson's wideranging references to men of the past is that some of these men have receded into obscurity with the passage of time. Many modern readers have no acquaintance with names such as Clarkson, Lavoisier, Hutton, Fourier, and many others mentioned by Emerson. More recent thinkers and doers have built upon their accomplishments and surpassed their fame, and only specialists in their fields know them.Emerson would say that this is exactly as it should be□that the old should continually be supplanted by the new. But this process does make his essay gradually less accessible and powerful. Even a footnote giving a one-sentence biography of the man behind the name doesn't give today's readers a full understanding of the man's importance in his own time or in Emerson's. (A hundred years from now, a footnote explaining, "Michael Jordan was the greatest basketball player of the twentieth century" would not be sufficient to convey his stature in twentieth-century America.) It would require outside research to grasp why Emerson chose these particular men over others.

In Emerson's defense, it is quite possible that he never foresaw that his essay would endure as long as it has. Perhaps he expected that he would be supplanted just as Clarkson, Lavoisier, and company have been.

Finally, Emerson's exclusion of women and his near-exclusion of non-European men among his examples of greatness perhaps makes him less authoritative to modern readers than he might otherwise be. Emerson can be appreciated for including quotations from Islamic and Zoroastrian religious teachers. And it must be acknowledged that Frederick Douglass, who would have made an outstanding example of self-reliance, would not publish his best-selling autobiography until four years after the publication of "Self-Reliance." Emily Dickinson, practically Emerson's neighbor and a stellar example of self-reliance, was only a child in 1841; her poems would not become widely known and appreciated until the following century.

Still, among the New England transcendentalists there were accomplished women writers and activists who undoubtedly had to overcome societal disapproval in the course of their work and who would have made as good examples of self-reliance as some of the men featured. Also, as an abolitionist Emerson must have been aware of courageous black men and women of his time who were engaged in breaking the chains of history in just the way that Emerson celebrates. That Emerson did not think to preserve their names in his essay along with those of Moses, Plato, and Milton is unfortunate. It is also a sign that, as mightily as he roared against conformity and conventions, he himself sometimes failed to break through them.

Source: Candyce Norvell, Critical Essay on "Self-Reliance,"in *Nonfiction Classics for Students*, The Gale Group,2002.

Critical Essay #2

In the following essay excerpt, Packer examines Emerson's prescription for self-reform in "Self-Reliance," including some seeming contradictions between his advocation of self and spirituality.

To learn how to achieve this double abandonment we must turn to the best known of Emerson's essays, "Self-Reliance." If "Circles" was an attempt to discern the general laws governing human behavior, "Self Reliance" is an attempt to formulate a code of conduct for the individual believer, to answer the question: "What shall *I* do to be saved?"

Emerson had always conceived of the principle of self-reliance as an answer to the problem of individual salvation; one of his earliest explorations of the topic, a sermon entitled "Trust Yourself," was preached as a commentary upon Matthew 16:26:"For what is a man profited, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?" In it Emerson had used a passage from an early journal that already contains the essence of the later doctrine:

Every man has his own voice, manner, eloquence, & just as much his own sort of love & grief & imagination & action. Let him scorn to imitate any being, let him scorn to be a secondary man, let him fully trust his own share of God's goodness, that correctly used it will lead him on to perfection which has no type yet in the Universe save only in the Divine Mind.

It was the gospel he had been sent that he might preach, the good news he had been chosen to proclaim. The topic was never far from his thoughts.In 1835, when he was chiding himself for his lack of literary productivity, listing things he felt were peculiarly his own, one of the topics was "the sublimity of Self-reliance." As his thought widened and matured, his conception of the principle grew likewise, until it came to signify everything praiseworthy in the universe. If the "universal grudge"was Emerson's term for the spirit behind every scheme of reform, self-reliance was the name he used to designate the means by which all schemes of reform were to be accomplished. "It is easy to see that a greater self-reliance must work a revolution in all the offices and relations of men," he argues in the essay, "in their religion; in their education; in their pursuits; their modes of living; their association; in their property; in their speculative views." (That Emerson conceived of self-reliance as a *revolutionary* principle is particularly important to remember now, when his attacks on "miscellaneous popular charities" are in danger of making him sound like the most reactionary politicians. The latter should ponder the implications of Emerson's closing remarks□that "the reliance on Property, including the reliance on governments which protect it, is the want of self-reliance" before rushing to claim Emerson as one of their own.) Every subject that had attracted Emerson's attention in the turbulent years just past□the imitativeness of American literature, the "terror of opinion" that made Americans moral cowards, the reliance upon property that engendered that terror, the futility of preaching that teaches the soul to look for help anywhere other than within itself, the necessity of training the soul to conceive of life as

a perpetual process of abandonment—can all be treated under the general rubric of self-reliance. The essay as it stands is a kind of gigantic coda to the work of Emerson's decade of challenge. Some have found its very variousness distracting; Firkins, who concedes the essay's greatness, nevertheless complains that it lacks "tone"; there is in the essay "a singularly mixed effect of anthem, eclogue, sermon, and denunciation." Yet he admits that "no essay of Emerson contains so many phrases that are at the same time barbed and winged."

In fact, the success of those phrases in establishing themselves as proverbial may be the greatest obstacle to the enjoyment of the contemporary reader, who may feel at first as though he is thumbing through a particularly worn copy of *Bartlett's Familiar Quotations*. Yet to the reader willing to look beyond the familiar phrases, attentive to the interplay of Emerson's many voices and to the startling redefinition of familiar terms those voices proclaim, the essay will shortly come to seem as strange and difficult as it really is.

It begins with a restatement of themes made familiar by *The American Scholar*: the self-reliant man who has the courage to make his own spontaneous impressions into universal symbols (as Wordsworth had done) will find himself triumphing over the tyranny of time. "Speak your latent conviction and it shall be the universal sense; for the inmost in due time becomes the outmost,—and our first thought is rendered back to us by the trumpets of the Last Judgment." Hence Emerson's First Commandment: "Trust thyself: every heart vibrates to that iron string." What Emerson means by selftrust is given to us, as usual, not by definition but by analogy: it is something like the pure selfcenteredness of infancy, something again like the "nonchalance of boys who are sure of a dinner." It is action without self-consciousness, action without concern for (or even awareness of) consequences—the sort of thing Blake had in mind when he praised Jesus as one who "acted from impulse, not from rules."

Unfortunately, this kind of self-trust is nearly impossible for a grown man to achieve; a grown man is "clapped into jail by his consciousness. As soon as he has once acted or spoken with eclat"—and Emerson is surely thinking here of his own experience after the Divinity School *Address*—"he is a committed person, watched by the sympathy or the hatred of hundreds whose affections must now enter into his account. There is no Lethe for this." The point is not that the man is incapable of telling the truth after once speaking with éclat; merely that he can never recapture that purer kind of innocence that consists in being *unaware* of the consequences. An orator who could somehow manage to free himself from this jail of self-consciousness, and "having observed, observe again from the same unaffected, unbiassed, unbribable, unaffrighted innocence," would make himself formidable; his opinions "would sink like darts into the ear of men, and put them in fear."

That Emerson is describing not himself but his possible hero, the figure he will later call the Central Man, is apparent from his use of the conditional mood; his own journals were there to remind him how far he was from his own ideal. One is inclined to suspect that his private chagrin is partly responsible for the uncharacteristic bitterness of the attack he now launches on the chief obstacle to self-trust. "Society everywhere is in

conspiracy against the manhood of every one of its members. Society is a joint-stock company in which the members agree for the better securing of his bread to each shareholder, to surrender the liberty and culture of the eater." Hence Emerson's Second Commandment:"Whoso would be a man must be a nonconformist."

What follows this assertion is a violent and disturbing paragraph that seems to have been designed to contain something to offend everyone.Emerson begins by advocating, like Yeats, the casting out of all remorse. Later on in the essay he will define "prayer" as "the soliloquy of a beholding and jubilant soul"; he here advances the same startling conception of penitence: "Absolve you to yourself, and you shall have the suffrage of the world." From these sublime heights of self-reliance he grandly condescends to answer the objections of the "valued adviser" who used to importune him with the "dear old doctrines of the church. On my saying, What have I to do with the sacredness of traditions, if I live wholly from within? my friend suggested□'But these impulses may be from below,not from above.' I replied, 'They do not seem to me to be such; but if I am the Devil's child, I will live then from the Devil.'"

The logic of this answer is like the logic of Blake's famous Proverb of Hell: "Sooner murder an infant in its cradle than nurse unacted desires."Emerson is not advocating diabolism any more than Blake is advocating infanticide; the hyperbole is a way of suggesting the real ugliness of the alternative in Emerson's case, maintaining a dead church, contributing to a dead Bible-society, worshipping a dead God. The word that needs stressing in Emerson's reply is not "Devil" but the verb "live": it is better to live from the Devil than die with the church. "For to him that is joined to all the living there is hope," as Ecclesiastes puts it in a verse Emerson might have cited here, "for a living dog is better than a dead lion."

Harriet Martineau had been impressed with the remarkable good-humor Americans displayed, their kindness and courtesy toward one another. She did not connect this quality, which she admired, with the want of moral independence she deplored, but Emerson did. "In this our talking America we are ruined by our good nature and listening on all sides." "Check this lying hospitality and lying affection." Self-reliance is impossible without honesty, and honesty sometimes entails a willingness to be rude. Emerson cannot yet claim that he has this willingness; "every decent and well-spoken individual affects and sways" him more than is right.But he indulges in a fantasy of rudeness, imagines himself being able to speak the "rude truth" first to a proselytizing Abolitionist, then to members of his own family. "I shun father and mother and wife and brother, when my genius calls me. I would write on the lintels of the door-post, *Whim*. I hope it is somewhat better than whim at last, but we cannot spend the day in explanation." The sentences are discreetly blasphemous: they allude both to Jesus' command to leave father and mother for his sake, and to God's directive to the children of Israel to mark with blood the lintel of the doorway, that the Angel of Death might pass over their houses and spare their firstborn. Emerson's redeemer is his genius (a theme he will develop with more explicitness later in the essay); his saving sign is a confession of irresponsibility and even triviality, designed to make the serious men□the controversialists, the paragraph writers□pass over his house as something beneath

contempt. It resembles a similar passage in "Circles" in its blend of irony and affected innocence:

But lest I should mislead any when I have my own head, and obey my whims, let me remind the reader that I am only an experimenter. Do not set the least value on what I do, or the least discredit on what I do not, as if I pretended to settle anything as true or false.I unsettle all things. No facts are to me sacred; none are profane; I simply experiment, an endless seeker, with no Past at my back.

Whim is only a provisional term; we hope that it will be replaced by something better than whim at last (what we hope it will be is the force he will later call Spontaneity or Instinct□though these terms are hardly more likely to recommend him to the orthodox) but we cannot spend the day in explanation, for the same reason that the children of Israel could not tarry to leaven their bread when Pharaoh finally agreed to let them go. As Cavell says, Emerson, in writing *Whim* upon the lintels, is "taking upon himself the mark of God, and of departure. . . This departure, such setting out is, in our poverty, what hope consists in, all there is to hope for; it is the abandoning of despair, which is otherwise our condition."

But leaving the dead institutions of society behind is only half the task of departure. Our own past acts, as "Circles" points out, are governed by the same law of ossification visible in history as a whole. And leaving behind our own past insights may be even harder than rejecting the counsels of society, for we naturally possess a greater affection for our own past thoughts. Then, too, there is the fear that inconsistency will expose us to ridicule, that hardest of all crosses to bear. Emerson gave evidence early that he was not to be scared from self-trust by the hobgoblin of foolish consistency; the editor of his sermons tells of an incident in which Emerson interrupted his delivery of a sermon to say quietly to the congregation: "The sentence which I have just read I do not now believe," and then went on to the next page.

Such determination to prefer truth to his past apprehension of truth also governs the choice of the example Emerson now inserts into "Self Reliance" to illustrate what he means by having the courage to risk self-contradiction. He had always objected strongly to any Theism that described God as a Person. "I deny Personality to God because it is too little not too much," he wrote in his journal. "Life, personal life is faint & cold to the energy of God." This denial of personality to God was one of the things his auditors had found most offensive about the Divinity School *Address*. The sermon his former colleague at the Second Church, Henry Ware, Jr., had preached in objection to Transcendentalist ideas in September 1838 was called "The Personality of the Deity"; it regarded attempts to reduce God to an abstract set of laws or moral relations as "essentially vicious." The *Christian Examiner* reviewed Emerson's address and Ware's sermon together, greatly to the detriment of the former.

Emerson's doctrine of Divine Impersonality had angered a whole community; the *Address* had helped end his career as a supply preacher in Unitarian pulpits, and for all he knew at the time, it might have ended his career as a lecturer. Yet now, in "Self-Reliance," he warns himself against making an idol of his own theology: "In your

metaphysics you have denied personality to the Deity; yet when the devout motions of the soul come, yield to them heart and life, though they should clothe God with shape and color. Leave your theory, as Joseph his coat in the hand of the harlot, and flee." It is only after describing how these menaces to self-trust or abandonment are to be overcome that Emerson will consider the question posed by the trusted adviser whose earlier warnings he had scorned. "The magnetism which all original action exerts is explained when we inquire the reason of self-trust. Who is the Trustee? What is the aboriginal Self on which a universal reliance may be grounded?"

The answer he gives, though, concerns not persons but powers: a "deep force" he calls by the triple name of Spontaneity, Instinct, and Intuition. "Gladly I would solve if I could this problem of a Vocabulary," Emerson groaned after the Divinity School *Address*; he knew very well that his effort to topple "the idolatry of nouns & verbs" in which the Deity had been so long addressed would not be easy. It is easy to object to the terms Emerson chooses, particularly easy for those readers to whom the *instinctual* suggests something bestial, the *spontaneous* something irresponsible, and the *intuitive* something irrational. But the risk of being misunderstood is one Emerson will have to run (anyway, "to be great is to be misunderstood") if he expects to find words in any vocabulary that will suggest a *force* felt by the individual as proceeding from within, yet somehow connected to the larger forces of nature, forces that are prior to reflection, selfconsciousness, and the sallies of the will, prior even to that primary fall into division that created him as a separate being. "For the sense of being which in calm hours rises, we know not how, in the soul, is not diverse from things, from space, from light, from time, from man, but one with them, and proceeds obviously from the same source whence their life and being also proceed." To explain what he means by this Emerson offers this quiet prose summary of the Orphic chants of *Nature:* "We first share the life by which things exist, and afterwards see them as appearances in nature, and forget that we have shared their cause." What defines us as individuals is that act of forgetting; hence the paradox that intuition is a better pipeline to truth than conscious reflection. "When we discern justice, when we discern truth, we do nothing of ourselves, but allow a passage to its beams. If we ask whence this comes, if we seek to pry into the soul that causes, all philosophy is at fault. Its presence or absence is all we can affirm."

But here, at the heart of the essay, the reader is likely to be troubled by a contradiction. Emerson began by urging us to insist on ourselves, to express what is absolutely peculiar to us as individuals; he now makes it a defining characteristic of the state of true vision that in it "we do nothing of ourselves" but merely "allow a passage to its beams." This is evidently a paradox; it is one that is as central to Emerson's faith as the Incarnation was to traditional Christianity. Indeed, it is a resemblance Emerson acknowledges later on in the essay with his unobtrusive little epigram: "a man is the word made flesh." *Any* man is the word made flesh, the incarnation of the universal in the particular. "It seems to be true," Emerson had written in that early journal passage concerning self-trust, "that the more exclusively idiosyncratic a man is, the more general & infinite he is, which though it may not be a very intelligible expression means I hope something intelligible. In listening more intently to our own reason, we are not becoming in the ordinary sense more selfish, but are departing more from what is small, & falling back on truth itself & God."

Here Quentin Anderson (with whom, for once, I find myself in complete agreement) makes an important distinction. It is true that Emerson believes in the existence of a realm of spiritual laws that serves as a base for independent moral vision. "But what the early radical Emerson was excited about was not the existence of the base, but the discovery of the primacy of the individual, who can alone realize the claims of spirit." And he concludes:"There is something inclusive that justifies his activity□this is a statement which quickly leads us away from Emerson: *only the activity uniquely mine can manifest the inclusive*□this is a statement which leads us toward an understanding of him."

Emerson, in other words, is less interested in inquiring into the nature of that Aboriginal Self on whom we can rely than in the nature of the procedures the individual must follow in order to open himself, if only momentarily, to that *power* he regarded as the essence of divinity. When he was only nineteen he wrote in his journal that "the idea of *power* seems to have been every where at the bottom of theology"; in another place he noted that power enters "somewhat more intimately into our idea of God than any other attribute." Power is "a great flood which encircles the universe and is poured out in unnumbered channels to feed the fountains of life and the wants of Creation, but every where runs back again and is swallowed up in its eternal source. That Source is God."

In the highest moments, when we are for a moment the channel through which absolute power is .owing, the petty dialectic of self and society, self and past acts of the self, fades away into insignifi-cance; until Emerson can turn on his own vocabulary with withering contempt. "Why then do we prate of self-reliance? Inasmuch as the soul is present, there will be power not confident but agent. To talk of reliance is a poor external way of speaking." The term "self-reliance" implies dualism, disunion, a poor frightened individual attempting to rely *on* that Aboriginal Self presumed to be within. If this were really the new religion Emerson had come to preach, it would be no better than the one it replaced. In fact, it would remind us of nothing so much as the ruinous narcissism of Blake's Albion, who loses the Divine Vision when he turns his eyes toward his "Self" or Shadow and makes that his God:

Then Man ascended mourning into the splendors of
his palace
Above him rose a Shadow from his wearied intellect
Of living gold, pure, perfect, holy: in white linen pure
he hover'd
A sweet entrancing self delusion . . .

When the soul is really present, Emerson insists, all *sense* of dualism ceases; one does not feel like a little self worshipping or trusting or relying on a bigger Self, but like a power open to that "great flood which encircles the universe." Self-reliance is not an attitude or a virtue; it is a way of acting, and can only be manifested through action. "Speak rather of that which relies, because it works and is." The distinction is made clearer in the section of the essay concerning the application of self-reliance to prayer: Emerson commends "the prayer of the farmer kneeling in his field to weed it, the prayer

of the rower kneeling with the stroke of his oar," but lashes out at the kind of prayer that "looks abroad and asks for some foreign addition to come through some foreign virtue" not only because such prayer for a private end seems to him "meanness and theft" but because it "supposes dualism and not unity in nature and consciousness." True prayer knows no such dualism, even in its contemplative phase. Then it is merely "the soliloquy of a beholding and jubilant soul. It is the spirit of God pronouncing his works good."

In a pair of terse epigrams Emerson condenses the wisdom he has acquired in the turbulent years just passed. "Life only avails, not the having lived," is one; it is an admonition not to look for power in the sepulchers of past literature or past religion or past forms of social organization. "Power ceases in the instant of repose" is the second; it warns us that the divinity within us can only be manifested during those brief moments in which the soul, overcoming the deadliness of the past (including its own past), manages to shoot the gulf, dart to a new aim□manages to do this despite its knowledge that the new aim will someday be as deadly as the old. "This one fact the world hates, that the soul *becomes*;for, that forever degrades the past, turns all riches to poverty, all reputation to a shame, shoves Jesus and Judas equally aside."

The really formidable difficulty of this enterprise suggests why Emerson felt it necessary to invoke Instinct and Intuition as the only forces that can still put us in contact with our own divinity. The conscious intellect, the intellect alone, could draw only one lesson from Emerson's myth of ossification: that all action is the vanity of vanities. Successful creation is a momentary circumventing of that conscious intellect, which will reassert itself soon enough; the real danger for Americans was not that a surrender to Instinct would plunge them into a maelstrom of uncontrollable passions but that even the wildest impulses can scarcely overcome for a moment the national tendencies to caution, imitativeness, and dissimulation. Hence Emerson's insistence upon the necessity of "surprise," as in the closing paragraph of "Circles"□"The one thing which we seek with insatiable desire, is to forget ourselves, to be surprised out of our propriety, to lose our sempiternal memory, and to do something without knowing how or why; in short, to draw a new circle"□or in the poem "Merlin":

"Pass in, pass in," the angels say
"In to the upper doors,
Nor count compartments of the floors,
But mount to paradise
By the stairway of surprise."

The man who has perfected the art of abandonment has acquired the only kind of affluence that Fate cannot menace. He has acquired "living property, which does not wait the beck of rulers, or mobs, or revolutions, or fire, or storm, or bankruptcies, but perpetually renews itself wherever the man breathes."

Source: B. L. Packer, "Portable Property," in *Emerson's Fall: A New Interpretation of the Major Essays*, The Continuum Publishing Company, 1982, pp. 137-47.

Topics for Further Study

Emerson mentions many accomplished men in "Self-Reliance." List five to ten people who have lived since Emerson's time who are examples of high achievement. Do some research, and then for each person write a sentence or two about some way in which that person exhibited self-reliance.

Emerson's central premise is that all individuals have the potential to be great, if only they would trust themselves. Do you agree or disagree?Write a persuasive essay that states and argues for your position. Use examples, as Emerson did.

Emerson was a strong supporter of President Abraham Lincoln. Given what you know about Emerson and Lincoln, why do you think this was so? Write your answer in the form of a list of possible reasons, and compare your answers with those of your classmates.

Emerson was a poet as well as an essayist. Write a poem of at least sixteen lines that expresses the main ideas set forth in "Self-Reliance." Your poem may be in any form and style you choose. Feel free to borrow language and examples from Emerson, to use your own, or to make use of both.

According to Emerson, people owe one another "mutual reverence." Explain what you think he means by this. Explain whether you agree that mutual reverence is called for and why you agree or disagree.

Compare and Contrast

Mid-1800s: Transcendentalism, which borrows some elements of Eastern philosophies and religions, takes hold in Massachusetts and influences many American intellectuals and writers.

Today: Yoga is increasingly popular throughout the United States. Yoga, the Sanskrit word for "union," is a philosophy that was first systematized by the Indian sage Patanjali. The various schools of yoga taught today have some things in common with transcendentalism, such as the beliefs that each individual soul is directly linked to God and that truth is everywhere present in creation and can be experienced intuitively, rather than rationally. While millions of Americans practice only one element of yoga-its regimen of physical postures and exercises-a growing number are adopting the broader philosophy and its more mystical practices, such as meditation.

Mid-1800s: As the Industrial Revolution brings more efficient production of goods-which, in turn, makes goods more abundant and more affordable-Emerson cautions that progress and happiness are not to be found through materialism but by living simply and seeking peace within.

Today: An informal ABC News poll finds that nearly one-third of Americans spend more than they earn. This accords with statistics that show that, in 2000 and 2001, the monthly savings rate is often negative, meaning that in some months Americans collectively are spending more than they are earning and not saving any money at all.

Mid-1800s: The economy of the American South is based on slave labor, and Americans are deeply divided over whether slavery is morally acceptable. Anti-slavery literature mailed to the South is routinely burned or otherwise destroyed.In the North, abolitionists are sometimes physically attacked. In 1837, abolitionist editor Elijah P. Lovejoy is murdered for his opposition to slavery. Only after a massively destructive Civil War is slavery finally abolished.

Today: Virtually no person in America would argue that slavery is acceptable. Since the Civil War, black Americans have fought for and won equal rights under the law in all arenas, from voting to property ownership.

What Do I Read Next?

Essays: First and Second Series (1990), edited by Douglas Crase, combines all of the essays that Emerson originally published in two separate volumes in 1841 and 1844.

"The Concord Hymn" and Other Poems (1996) is a collection of Emerson's most wellknown poems.

Walden (1854), by Emerson's friend and student Henry David Thoreau, is the world-famous autobiographical record of Thoreau's time spent living in solitude in the woods near Walden Pond,Concord, Massachusetts. *Walden* has become an enduringly popular literary expression of American transcendentalism, individualism, and naturalism.

Little Women (1868) is a classic novel based on the childhood of its author, Louisa May Alcott, the daughter of Emerson's friend and fellow transcendentalist Bronson Alcott. The book tells the story of the March family, following daughters Meg, Jo, Beth, and Amy from childhood to adulthood. The Marches are transcendentalists who value self-reliance, individualism, compassion, and education above material and social achievement.

Emerson called *Leaves of Grass* (1855), poetry by Walt Whitman, "the most extraordinary piece of wit and wisdom that American has yet produced." It is now considered one of the most important works of poetry in the English language.

Further Study

Cole, Phyllis, *Mary Moody Emerson and the Origins of Transcendentalism: A Family History*, Oxford University Press, 1998.

Mary Moody Emerson, an aunt of Ralph Waldo Emerson, was a writer herself and ne of the early adherents of American transcendentalism. This work examines Emerson's influences on her nephew.

Porte, Joel, and Saundra Morris, eds., *The Cambridge Companion to Ralph Waldo Emerson*, Cambridge University Press, 1999.

Intended to provide a critical introduction to Emerson's work, *The Cambridge Companion to Ralph Waldo Emerson* includes new interpretations of Emerson's work. In addition to commissioned essays, the work includes a comprehensive chronology and bibliography.

Richardson, Robert D., Jr., *Emerson: The Mind on Fire*, University of California Press, 1995.

This biography gives a historical perspective on Emerson and his work. It provides inspiring details on Emerson's thoughts and on the societal and political forces shaping the United States in the 1800s.

Versluis, Arthur, *American Transcendentalism and Asian Religions*, Oxford University Press on Demand, 1997.

Part of the Oxford University Press Religion in America series, this book covers the beginning of Transcendentalist Orientalism in Europe and the complete history of American Transcendentalism to the twentieth century, with a focus on how Asian religions and cultures have influenced transcendentalism in the West.

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Nonfiction Classics for Students (NCfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, NCfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on

□classic□ novels frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of NCfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of NCfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in NCfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by NCfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

NCfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Nonfiction Classics for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the NCfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the NCfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Nonfiction Classics for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Nonfiction Classics for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from NCfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Nonfiction Classics for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from NCfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Nonfiction Classics for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of NCfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Nonfiction Classics for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of NCfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Nonfiction Classics for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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