

BEFORE YOU READ

FROM **SELF-RELIANCE**

Reading Focus

Rugged Individualism

For Americans in the early years of the country's history, belonging to a bold, young nation was a tremendous source of group pride. Perhaps the greatest source of that pride was the high value the group placed on individual liberty. In 1841, Emerson responded to this creed of individualism in the culture around him and nourished it with his essay "Self-Reliance."

Quickwrite

Write down the associations you make with the word *self-reliance*: definitions, examples, and synonyms. How does self-reliance differ from selfishness or self-centeredness?



Elements of Literature

Figures of Speech

Emerson makes many of his points through a series of **figures of speech** that compare abstract ideas with ordinary things or events, such as "Society is a joint-stock company."

A figure of speech is a word or phrase that describes one thing in terms of another and is not meant to be taken literally.

For more on Figures of Speech, see page 78 and the Handbook of Literary Terms.




Long Island Farmer Husking Corn (1833–1834) by William Sidney Mount. Oil on canvas mounted on panel (20⁷/₈" × 16⁷/₈").

The Museums at Stony Brook, Stony Brook, New York, Gift of Mr. & Mrs. Ward Melville.

from **Self-Reliance**

Ralph Waldo Emerson



There is a time in every man's education when he arrives at the conviction that envy is ignorance; that imitation is suicide; that he must take himself for better, for worse, as his portion; that though the wide universe is full of good, no kernel of nourishing corn can come to him but through his toil bestowed on that plot of ground which is given to him to till. The power which resides in him is new in nature, and none but he knows what that is which he can do, nor does he know until he has tried. Not for nothing one face, one character, one fact makes much impression on him, and another none. This sculpture in the memory is not without preestablished harmony. The eye was placed where one ray should fall, that it might testify of that particular ray. We but half express ourselves, and are ashamed of that divine idea which each of us represents. It may be safely trusted as proportionate and of good issues, so it be faithfully imparted, but God will not have his work made manifest by cowards. A man is relieved and gay when he has put his heart into his work and done his best; but what he has said or done otherwise, shall give him no peace. It is a deliverance which does not deliver. In the attempt his genius deserts him; no muse befriends; no invention, no hope.

Trust thyself: Every heart vibrates to that iron string. Accept the place the divine Providence has found for you; the society of your contemporaries, the connection of events. Great men have always done so and confided themselves childlike to the genius of their age, betraying their perception that the absolutely trustworthy was seated at their heart, working through their hands, predominating in all their being. And we are now men, and must accept in the highest mind the same transcendent destiny; and not minors and invalids in a protected corner, not cowards fleeing before a revolution, but guides, redeemers, and benefactors, obeying the Almighty effort, and advancing on Chaos and the Dark. . . .

These are the voices which we hear in solitude, but they grow faint and inaudible as we enter into the world. 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 lib-

erty and culture of the eater. The virtue in most request is conformity. Self-reliance is its aversion. It loves not realities and creators, but names and customs.

Whoso would be a man must be a non-conformist. He who would gather immortal palms¹ must not be hindered by the name of goodness, but must explore if it be goodness. Nothing is at last sacred but the integrity of your own mind. Absolve you to yourself, and you shall have the suffrage of the world. . . .

A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds, adored by little statesmen and philosophers and divines. With consistency a great soul has simply nothing to do. He may as well concern himself with his shadow on the wall. Speak what you think now in hard words, and tomorrow speak what tomorrow thinks in hard words again, though it contradict everything you said today—"Ah, so you shall be sure to be misunderstood"—Is it so bad then to be misunderstood? Pythagoras was misunderstood, and Socrates, and Jesus, and Luther, and Copernicus, and Galileo, and Newton,² and every pure and wise spirit that ever took flesh. To be great is to be misunderstood. . . .

1. **he who . . . immortal palms:** he who would win fame. In ancient times, palm leaves were carried as a symbol of victory or triumph.

2. **Pythagoras . . . Newton:** people whose contributions to scientific, philosophical, and religious thought were ignored or suppressed during their lifetimes.

WORDS TO OWN

conviction (kən·vik'shən) *n.*: belief.

proportionate (prō·pōr'shən·it) *adj.*: having a correct relationship between parts; balanced.

imparted (im·pärt'əd) *v.*: revealed.

manifest (man'ə·fest') *adj.*: plain; clear.

predominating (prē·dām'ə·nāt'in) *v.* used as *adj.*: having influence.

transcendent (tran·sen'dənt) *adj.*: excelling; surpassing.

benefactors (ben'ə·fak'tərz) *n. pl.*: people who help others.

conspiracy (kən·spir'ə·sē) *n.*: secret plot with a harmful or illegal purpose.

aversion (ə·vər'zhən) *n.*: intense dislike.

integrity (in·teg'rə·tē) *n.*: sound moral principles; honesty.

LITERATURE AND SOCIETY

Onward to Utopia

For thousands of years people have tried to create utopias—communities that reflect a particular philosophy of how to live. The word *utopia*, based on a Greek word meaning both “no place” and “good place,” originated during the Renaissance. From Pythagoras and Plato in ancient Greece to Thomas More in sixteenth-century England to the commune experiments of the 1960s, men and women have experimented with utopian communities.

Emerson was in the thick of 1830s utopian reform. The utopian group that met in each other's homes starting in 1836 became known as “The Transcendental Club” and included a wide range of members and beliefs. Besides Emerson, there was George Ripley, founder of Brook Farm in Massachusetts, a self-governing experimental community that survived for six years and was home briefly to Nathaniel Hawthorne. There was Bronson Alcott, a radical educator who co-founded the community Fruitlands and was the father of Louisa May Alcott (author of *Little Women*). And there was Margaret Fuller, an influential feminist and critic, who edited the Transcendentalist publication *The Dial*.

Why did utopian communities flourish in the United States during the mid-nineteenth century? For one thing, it was a time of great uncertainty and change as citizens struggled with slavery, the oppression of women, the genocide of American Indians, and the dehumanizing effects of industrialization. Rebellious against the status quo, utopian communities tried to create prosperous and harmonious environments. Many were religious communities founded on ideals of nonviolence and communal ownership, and some were transplants from Europe: The Shaker communities, founded by Ann Lee, got their start in England about 1772. In many utopian communities, African Americans and women could find more equality than in society at large. In fact, many utopian societies were founded by women.

Community members often had to abide by rules that were, to put it mildly, extreme. At Fruitlands, the short-lived vegetarian community established by Bronson Alcott, residents were permitted to eat only vegetables that grew up toward heaven—no root vegetables such as carrots and potatoes were allowed! They also did not take milk from cows or wool from sheep, nor would they use animals to pull plows.

Most utopian ventures failed within a few years; as the Transcendentalists of Brook Farm discovered, innovative thinkers aren't necessarily willing or successful farmers. But several utopian communities did endure for decades, and some—the Shakers, the Oneida Community, and the Amana Church Society—not only still exist but also are widely known for products they produce, from furniture to flatware. In all, more than 100,000 Americans participated in utopian communities in the nineteenth century, hoping to enjoy healthy, productive, and harmonious lives.

Imagination

*A personal response to
Ralph Waldo Emerson's essay,
"Self-Reliance"*

Imagine a flower growing in a garden. Create the surroundings—perhaps a brook or a tree, possibly a butterfly nearby. Picture the tranquility of the scene. Now color the sky and the grasses.

What color will your flower be? Red?

White? Yellow? Did you choose that color because it was that

of a flower you had seen somewhere in nature or in a painting? Did you color

your flower according to accepted values—a

red rose, a yellow daffodil, a white lily—laid

down years ago by other artists or nature

itself? Now close your eyes for a moment and

visualize a brilliant purple rose in your garden. What

do you think? Is that flower wrong? Many people would

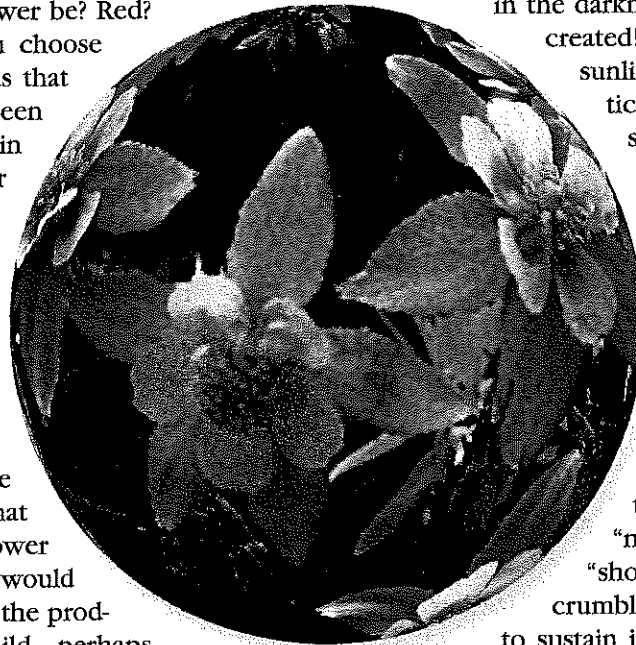
think a purple rose silly, the product of an ignorant child, perhaps.

They would tell you that roses can't possibly be purple—everybody knows that! And yet, who

can say that an idea is wrong? A purple rose. Think: If the world accepted only "normal" visions,

nothing new would ever be created. No one would dare stray from the "luster of the firmaments

laid down by bards and sages." There would be no imagination, no fantasy, no chimerical creatures.



Imagine a great arch, soaring into the heavens—a "firmament," if you will, of "bards and sages." People of long ago built this arch, strengthening it with their ideas, extending the graceful curve until it once again touched the ground. They cherished their arch and nurtured it with fancy and imagination. The keystone proclaimed

in scripted letters: "Imagine! From a gleam in the darkness can a new world be

created!" The arch shone in the sunlight, ethereal and majestic.

Then, the imagination stopped—people condemned fanciful inventions and the people

who imagined them. People closed their

minds, determined to preserve the old way of thinking as the

only correct way. Relinquishing their creativity, they discarded

their visions in favor of "normality," the way things

"should be." Slowly, the arch crumbled. With no imagination

to sustain its graceful form, it grew weaker and weaker, eventually vanishing

altogether. As it faded into people's memories, their universe, too, shrank quietly, until they

realized that they had nothing left; every object had its "normal" shape, size, and color.

And so they sit, clutching their red roses, amidst the remains of their

imagination.

—Shelby Pearl, James Madison High School, Vienna, Virginia

MAKING MEANINGS

from Nature

First Thoughts

1. Look back over your Reader's Log entries, and discuss passages that struck you. Do you think it's possible for people today to achieve the kind of mystical relationship with nature that Emerson describes? Why or why not?

Reviewing the Text

What three or four sentences from the essay do you think express Emerson's most crucial points? Rewrite each sentence in your own words.

Shaping Interpretations

2. How would our attitude toward the stars change if they appeared only once every thousand years? What point is Emerson making about nature with this attention-getting example?
3. What do you think Emerson means by a "poetical sense" of looking at nature? What **images** illustrate the distinction between nature used for practical benefits and nature viewed in this poetic way?
4. Emerson's **image** of a "transparent eyeball" in the fourth paragraph is one of the most famous passages in all of his works. How is this image a description of a visionary experience of God?
5. Describe the relation presented, starting in the fourth paragraph, between people, nature, and God. According to Emerson, is God to be found only in nature, only in people, or in some elements they share?

Connecting with the Text

6. "To speak truly," Emerson says, "few adult persons can see nature." Emerson sees children as having the advantage over adults when it comes to having a direct experience of nature. Do you agree with Emerson? What do people seem to lose as they grow older?

from Self-Reliance

First Thoughts

1. Re-read the associations you made with self-reliance in your Reader's Log. How does your definition compare with Emerson's reflections?

Reviewing the Text

- a. According to the second paragraph, what is the destiny of every human being?
- b. What is the opposite of self-reliance?

Shaping Interpretations

2. What do you think Emerson means by "that divine idea which each of us represents" (paragraph 1)?
3. What does Emerson think of people who call for consistency in thought and action and who fear being misunderstood?

Connecting with the Text

4. Do you think there's too little, too much, or just the right amount of emphasis on individualism in our society today? What might Emerson have thought about our focus on the individual?
5. If this essay were to be delivered as a political address during a presidential campaign today, how do you think people would respond?

LANGUAGE AND STYLE

Emerson's Figures of Speech

In "Self-Reliance," Emerson makes many of his points through a series of **figures of speech**—comparisons between two things that are basically unlike each other.

1. What does Emerson compare with these ordinary things and events: planting corn, an iron string, a joint-stock company, a shadow on the wall? Interpret each figure of speech.
2. Explain what Emerson means by the famous **metaphor** that opens the final paragraph. What exactly does he mean by the following terms: a "hobgoblin," a "little mind," a "foolish consistency"? What do you think Emerson would consider a "wise" consistency?

CHOICES: Building Your Portfolio

Writer's Notebook

1. Collecting Ideas for a Controversial Issue

Brainstorm a list of controversial issues that people debate and disagree about. Write down as many topics as you can possibly think of—don't censor yourself. Keep your notes; you may use them later in the Writer's Workshop on page 331.



Critical Writing / Creative Writing

2. Wisdom in a Nutshell

On page 227, you'll find a student response to this statement from another portion of Emerson's "Self-Reliance": "A man should learn to detect and watch that gleam of light which flashes across his mind from within, more than the luster of the firmament of bards and sages." Write your own response in the form of an essay, **fable**, or poem (about one page long) to one of the following statements from Emerson:

- "Envy is ignorance."
- "Trust thyself: Every heart vibrates to that iron string."
- "To be great is to be misunderstood."
- "A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds."

Critical Writing

3. Positively Paradoxical

Emerson was fond of using **paradox**, the linking of seemingly contradictory elements (as in the line from *Romeo and Juliet*: "Parting is such sweet sorrow"). Read the following sentences from *Nature*, and write a brief explanation of the meaning of each paradox. End your explanation with an expression of each statement in your own words.

- "I am not solitary while I read and write, though nobody is with me."
- "But every night come out these envoys of beauty, and light the universe with their admonishing smile."
- "Most persons do not see the sun."
- "Almost I fear to think how glad I am."

Critical Writing

4. A Definitive Definition

"Self-Reliance" is one long definition. But Emerson's definition of self-reliance is fuller, more thought-provoking, more poetic, more personal, and less exact than a dictionary definition. Write a one- or two-paragraph **extended definition** of a human quality that you feel is valuable or important. Like Emerson, you might want to begin with a hook, an attention-grabbing introduction.

Speaking and Listening

5. Sage Sayings

With a small group of classmates, brainstorm a list of modern **aphorisms**: lines from popular songs or political speeches, things you've read, things you've heard in conversation, things you yourself have said or thought—even sayings from bumper stickers or T-shirts. Have one member of the group write down the sayings. As a group, interpret and briefly discuss each entry. What do these sayings tell you about the values of modern society? Compare and contrast them with Emerson's values.

Crossing the Curriculum: Social Studies

6. Inventing Utopia

With one or more partners, make a plan for a community based on the ideals you've found in Emerson. Give the community a name, and decide on a geographical setting for it. What kind of government would the community have? What would be its economic base? What would be the attractions of life in this community? What would the population be? What problems would the community face? Finally, draw a map of your fictional community, and write a description of its goals.

Ralph Waldo Emerson

(1803–1882)

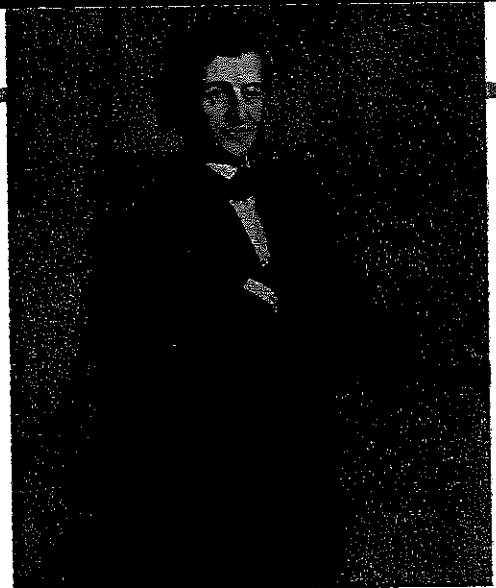
Shortly before the poet Walt Whitman died, he honored a man whose ideas had influenced him profoundly throughout his own long and controversial career. “America in the future,” he wrote, “in her long train of poets and writers, while knowing more vehement and luxurious ones, will, I think, acknowledge nothing nearer [than] this man, the actual beginner of the whole procession.”

“This man” was Ralph Waldo Emerson. Emerson expressed, better than anyone before him, the advantages of a young land—its freedom from the old, corrupt, and dying thought and customs of Europe; its access to higher laws directly through nature rather than indirectly through books and the teachings of the past; its energy; and its opportunity to reform the world.

Emerson was one of those rare writers who appealed both to intellectuals and to the general public. His influence on the popular mind—thanks to the thousands of lectures he gave throughout the United States—was strong. Although Emerson had something of a reputation for being hard to understand, his lectures were usually quite accessible. “I had heard of him as full of transcendentalisms, myths, and oracular gibberish,” Herman Melville wrote a friend after hearing Emerson lecture. “To my surprise, I found him quite intelligible.” Melville added wryly, “To say truth, they told me that that night he was unusually plain.”

Despite his great influence, it is difficult even to classify what kind of writer Emerson was. *Essayist* is too limited, and *philosopher* is too broad. The best term, perhaps, is *poet*—a poet whose best work was not always in verse.

“I am born a poet,” Emerson wrote to his fiancée, Lydia Jackson, in 1835, “of a low class without doubt, yet a poet. That is my nature and vocation. My singing, be sure, is very ‘husky,’ and is for the most part in prose. Still am I a poet in the sense of a perceiver and dear lover of the harmonies that are in the soul and in matter. . . .”



Ralph Waldo Emerson (c. 1867) by William Henry Furness, Jr. (1828–1867). Oil on canvas (45 $\frac{3}{4}$ × 36 $\frac{3}{16}$).

The Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Philadelphia.
Gift of Horace Howard Furness (1899-8).

The Burden of Expectation

Emerson was born in Boston in 1803 to a family that was cultured but poor. When he was only eight years old, his father, a Unitarian minister, died of tuberculosis. His mother, left with six growing children to care for, opened a boardinghouse.

The father's place in the lives of the Emerson children was taken by their aunt. Mary Moody Emerson was a strict Calvinist who emphasized self-sacrifice and whose enormous energy drove the Emerson boys to achievement. “She had the misfortune,” Emerson later wrote, “of spinning with a greater velocity than any of the other tops.”

Every step of Emerson's life had been laid out for him from an early age. He was to go to Harvard and become a minister like his father and the seven generations of Emersons before him. Emerson uncomfortably obeyed. His life was a series of attempts to establish his own identity against this background of expectation.

Young Rebel

Emerson entered Harvard at fourteen. He was an indifferent student, although he read widely in philosophy and theology. Upon graduation, Emerson took a job at a school run by his uncle and prepared himself, with many doubts, for the Unitarian ministry. In 1829, at the age of

twenty-five, he accepted a post at Boston's Second Church; that same year, he married Ellen Tucker, a beautiful but fragile seventeen-year-old already in the early stages of tuberculosis. Seventeen months later, Ellen died.

Emerson's grief coincided with a growing disbelief in some of the central doctrines of his religion. In June 1832, he shocked his congregation by resigning the ministry and setting off on an extended tour of Europe. There he met and conversed with the Romantic poets William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, as well as other influential writers.

Emerson's New Pulpit

Returning to the United States in late 1833, Emerson settled in Concord, Massachusetts, and soon married Lydia Jackson. He began to supplement his meager income by giving lectures and found in that occupation "a new pulpit," as he once wrote. Emerson's view was distinctively American in that he denied the importance of the past: "Let us unfetter ourselves of our historical associations and find a pure standard in the idea of man."

The last phrase points to Emerson's focus on humanity. Individual men and women were part of this "idea of man" in the same way that individual souls were part of a larger entity, which Emerson later called the "Over-Soul." The idea of nature also corresponded to the idea of man—both were part of a universal whole in which people could see their souls reflected.

Over the years, Emerson's influence grew. In 1837, he excited the student audience at Harvard with the lecture now known as "The American Scholar." In the speech, Emerson demanded that American scholars free themselves from the shackles of the past. "Our day of dependence," he declared, "our long apprenticeship to the learning of other lands, draws to a close."

A year later, Emerson was invited back to Harvard to speak to a group of divinity students. His speech, "The Divinity School Address," called for a rejection of institutional religion in favor of a personal relation with God. Religious truth, Emerson said, was "an intuition.

It cannot be received at second hand." The lecture so outraged Harvard authorities (who heard in it a denial of the divinity of Christ) that three decades passed before Emerson was allowed to speak there again.

Twilight of an Idol

With the author's growing fame, Concord increasingly became a destination for truth-seeking young people who looked to Emerson as their guru. The young responded to Emerson's predictions that they were on the verge of a new age; intellectuals responded to his philosophical ideas about the relations among humanity, nature, and God; and society as a whole responded to his optimism.

That optimism was dealt a severe blow in 1842 when Emerson's son Waldo died of scarlet fever at the age of five. By nature a rather reserved man, Emerson had found in Waldo someone to whom he could show his love spontaneously. At the child's death, he shrank into an emotional shell from which he never emerged. "How can I hope for a friend," he wrote in his journal, "who have never been one?"

In later years, Emerson suffered from a severe loss of memory and had difficulty recalling the most ordinary words. This affliction resulted in his increasing public silence, and when he did appear in public, he read from notes. Near the end of his life, agreeing to such a performance, he remarked, "A queer occasion it will be—a lecturer who has no idea of what he is lecturing about, and an audience who don't know what he *can* mean."

In the autumn of 1881, Walt Whitman paid Emerson a visit of respect and was asked to dinner. Whitman wrote that Emerson "though a listener and apparently an alert one, remained silent through the whole talk and discussion. A lady friend [Louisa May Alcott] quietly took a seat next to him, to give special attention. A good color in his face, eyes clear, with the well-known expression of sweetness, and the old clear-peering aspect quite the same." Six months later, Emerson was dead.