

Ralph waldo emerson: self- reliance

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In 1841, transcendentalist writer Ralph Waldo Emerson published a collection of essays titled *Essays*; one of these essays—and perhaps Emerson’s most famous and widely recognized essay—titled *Self-Reliance*, has become the centerpiece of American nineteenth-century transcendentalist literature. In *Self-Reliance*, Emerson proffers his life philosophy: people need not envy or emulate others as models of perfection; instead, they should embrace their own individuality and strive to express their own ideas and creativity, and they should avoid conforming to society and popular culture; rather, they should never be afraid to live up to their own ideals and opinions for fear of criticism and stigmatization. The complex metaphorical statements Ralph Waldo Emerson made in *Self-Reliance* must be analyzed to help develop a greater depth of understanding of their meaning.

Also, Emerson’s philosophic individualistic approach life and the constituents of his philosophy can still be applied in today’s society. Ralph Waldo Emerson, the son of William and Ruth Emerson, was born in the city of Boston, Massachusetts, on May 25th, 1803 (Richardson). He attended the Boston Latin School, followed by his collegiate education at Harvard University (from which he graduated in 1821), and then proceeded to attend Harvard’s School of Divinity and graduated as a licensed minister in 1826 (“Ralph Waldo Emerson Biography”). In 1829, three years after receiving his minister’s license, Emerson was ordained to the Unitarian Church. He remained a minister until 1831—the year his first wife, Ellen Tucker, died of tuberculosis (Ralph Waldo Emerson Biography).

Throughout the 1830s, the grief that Emerson experienced, because of the death of his wife, drove him to deliver many lectures on spirituality and

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ethical living (Ralph Waldo Emerson Biography). In the next decade, he experienced a surge in productivity and recognition after publishing several of his lectures in an essay format—one being Self-Reliance in 1844. In this era—considered the most productive of Emerson’s life—he surged to the forefront of American transcendentalism; today, he is still considered to be the greatest transcendentalist in American history. “ Transcendentalism is an American literary, political, and philosophical movement of the early nineteenth century...” (Goodman). It was a movement centered around the “ unthinking of society” and was led by several prominent philosophical writers and scholars: Henry David Thoreau, Margaret Fuller, Amos Bronson Alcott, Frederic Henry Hedge, Theodore Parker, and, of course, Ralph Waldo Emerson (Goodman). Transcendentalists sought to find, as Emerson said, an “ original relation to the universe” and many felt that the best way to seek this relation was through nature; this is exemplified by Henry David Thoreau’s social experiment in his novel, Walden (Emerson).

Transcendentalists also celebrated the self; they believed that each person is an individual; therefore, each is different from every other individual on Earth. The essay Self-Reliance contains several famous quotes which are frequently alluded to and are widely recognized. An example of one of these famous quotes is “ 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” (Emerson 364). This quote contains several complex metaphors; the first one, referring to the heart’s vibration, is a connection between the soul and truth.

Emerson is basically saying that the realization of truth and trust is a tactile thing, and you will feel and know it in your heart when you come across it; your heart will “vibrate” like the string of an instrument when strummed. In the next sentence, Emerson encourages readers to accept the place, time, and connections God (“the divine providence”) has set forth for them, as they are all part of his plan, and they are not merely random occurrences. Emerson’s belief in life acceptance still applies in today’s society. When you feel adrift and addled by the events of your life, trust that there is a significance intertwined with each event, as it is all part of God’s plan. Another famous quote contained within Self-Reliance—which speaks to Emerson’s central theme of the individual—is “What I must do is all that concerns me, not what the people think” (Emerson 365). This quote speaks to the theory of the individual.

It epitomizes Emerson’s belief that as an individual, one should only be concerned with his/her own actions, beliefs, opinions, and ideals, and should not be concerned with other people’s possible judgments and/or criticism. This quote can apply to anyone who shies away from expressing oneself in one’s own way for fear of judgment and ostracization. Ralph Waldo Emerson believed in the strength of a man’s character as well as the ability to pursue one’s own beliefs regardless of societal influence; his quote from Self-Reliance—“Whoso would be a man, must be a nonconformist” (Emerson 364). This quote essentially connotes that a person who is strong of mind and character (based on the symbolic use of the word “man”) must not conform to current societal ideals and values; instead, he/she should seek and appreciate change in societal operation to make life

better and more efficient. Also, this quote implies that weak men simply follow the crowd and absorb its beliefs, opinions, and ideals, rather than formulating their own. Perhaps the most widely recognized and frequently alluded of Emerson's statements in *Self-Reliance*, as well as his writing career in its entirety, is the quote, "A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds, adored by little statesmen and philosophers and divines" (Emerson 366).

In this statement, Emerson is voicing his stand on the "foolish consistency" or a refusal to stray from the known, found adorning the lives of many, especially those of political figures and members of the clergy. Emerson believes that these uncreative people are plagued by a consistency which cuts off their flow of creativity and progression. Without variation in daily life, as well as from societal norms, there is little room for new thoughts, ideas, methods, and advancements. Emerson also applies his "foolish consistency" philosophy to people who are reluctant to change their minds. He points out that politicians and clergymen rarely stray from what they know and are familiar with; without any differentiable difference in the lifestyles and actions of politicians and clergymen, there is little advancement and progression from generation to generation.

Emerson's philosophy of consistency urges us to distance ourselves from society and to never be afraid to act upon opportunities that have the potential to take us out of our elements—for without them, we will never experience personal progression and creativity. Ralph Waldo Emerson quickly ascended to the forefront of mid-nineteenth century transcendentalists, and for good reason. His philosophies—chiefly concerning <https://assignbuster.com/ralph-waldo-emerson-self-reliance/>

the core value of the individual—and teachings still influence the lifestyle of many people in post-Emerson world history. Through the use of complex metaphors and consummate figurative language, Emerson has encouraged us to pose ourselves the question—are we living true to ourselves, void of societal dogma, through a positively inconsistent life that reaches our full individual potential regarding creativity and progression? I am an individual. Are you? Work Cited Emerson, Ralph Waldo, Ralph Waldo Emerson (The Oxford Authors), ed.

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16 Mar. 2013. .