

# Ralph waldo emerson, transcendentalism

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Romanticism was a movement of American literature that swept the country throughout the 19th century. Within Romanticism, was the Transcendentalist Era, which began in the early 1800s (Gura 4). Transcendentalism is difficult to define, but its core ideas are embodied in the works of Ralph Waldo Emerson. Emerson is not only known as one of the most influential transcendental writers, but as the unofficial leader of the group of transcendentalists and the first to really create and express the ideas that this group of people shared (“ Transcendentalism” 19).

Simplicity, non-conformity and individuality over reasoning are only some of the ideas that make up Transcendentalism (“ Ralph Waldo Emerson” 239). These fundamental beliefs of transcendentalism are evident in Emerson’s works, specifically “ Self-Reliance,” and “ Nature. ” Emerson is a strong advocate for never changing one’s self for anyone else and always avoiding the temptation of conformity. As the title clearly states, “ Self-Reliance” is one of Emerson’s essays that proposes the idea that one should rely on one’s self to gain knowledge and should not conform to the likeness of others (Koster 38).

In February of 1833, Emerson began writing about many of these thoughts and ideas in his journal. In 1841, “ Self-Reliance” was written and published based off of the topics written about in his journal, but was revised several times as Emerson expanded on this idea of relying on one’s self and being one’s own person (Koster 37). Within “ Self-Reliance,” Emerson introduces the idea that “ there is time in every man's education when he arrives at the conviction that envy is ignorance and that imitation is suicide” (“ Self Reliance” 267).

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This clearly portrays transcendentalism, as it states that once a person changes their personality, he is essentially losing himself and everything that makes him who he is. Emerson also suggests that even taking on the opinions of others, contradicts a person's own thoughts and his abilities to speak anything true to just himself (" Self-Reliance by Ralph Waldo Emerson" 317). Aside from conformity, Emerson also mentions that " envy is ignorance," which continues to display transcendental ideas by stating that one should not be jealous of what others have.

Emerson believes that would be wasting valuable time wanting what one does not have, instead of appreciating the simple things that one has already obtained (" Self Reliance" 276). Jealousy also does not allow time for one to strive to acquire other goals, if an individual is constantly wishing for things she does not have. Emerson further conveys transcendental ideas in " Self-Reliance" with the belief that a person must remain an individual to make an impact on the world and the lives around him (" Self-Reliance by Ralph Waldo Emerson" 317).

This idea is depicted in the quote, " to be great is to be misunderstood" (Emerson, " Self Reliance" 274). To support this quote, Emerson listed a variety of successful people of the past including Pythagorus, Socrates and Newton. He explains that they were all misunderstood at the time, but they chose to remain true to what they believed in and are now some of the most influential and inspiring people one can think of (" Self Reliance" 274). The final major aspect of transcendentalism within " Self-Reliance" is the concept of trusting one's self.

Although it is important to also trust others, “ by trusting the self, man is but confiding himself to the all-embracing, benevolent universal being or the over-soul” (Koster 38). meaning that by trusting one’s self, one is essentially putting all her trust in this divine spirit, that cannot be physically seen, but can be understood and guide one through the challenges of individual life (Koster 38). In order to achieve all that one strives to accomplish, one must trust herself because “ nothing can bring you peace but yourself [and]. . . the triumph of principles” (Emerson, “ Self Reliance” 292).

According to Emerson, “ nature, in the common sense, refers to essences unchanged by man,” but he did not stop there with his analysis of nature and its effect on man and society (“ Nature” 182). Within the essay “ Nature,” Emerson clearly depicts transcendental beliefs concerning the way he believes people should embrace nature. Transcendentalists strongly believe in the concept of inspiration by nature, meaning that spending time in nature will inspire one to achieve new goals (“ Ralph Waldo Emerson” 239). Emerson mentions that “ in the woods is perpetual youth,” which describes the effect nature has on a person (“ Nature” 184).

He feels that when one spends time in nature, she feel as if she is eternally younger. Emerson believes this is true because once a person becomes an adult they are tired and weakened by all that is surrounding them and the commitments that must always be kept, but when one is only surrounded by nature, faith and reason can be restored (“ Nature” 184). Emerson also mentions, though, that “ the power to produce this delight does not reside in nature, but in man,” meaning although nature is capable of making one feel

things that seem impossible, the drive behind making this happen, is still essentially one's self (" Nature" 185).

Within this essay, Emerson also enforces the point that nature is the center of human existence, which is another concept accepted by transcendentalists. He displays this idea in the first chapter of " Nature," by discussing everything that nature offers to those willing to accept it. The key idea, though, is that one must be open to understanding nature in order to obtain its benefits. Emerson portrays this idea by stating that " all natural objects make a kindred impression, when the mind is open to their influence," further demonstrating the transcendental idea that nature influences human existence (" Nature" 183).

Not only does Emerson believe that nature is always available to influence one's self, but he always believes that nature is in existence solely to aid a person in their life journey. This idea is described in the second chapter of " Nature" when Emerson states that " all the parts [of nature] incessantly work into each other's hand for the profit of man (" Nature" 186). This idea clearly relates to transcendental ideas, as transcendentalists firmly believed that one can be inspired by nature and that nature is essential to human life (" Ralph Waldo Emerson" 239).

One final concept, depicted in " Nature," that is understood by transcendentalists is the idea that God and divinity can be found in nature. Within the first chapter of " Nature," Emerson states that he is " part or particle of God" when he is in the woods (" Nature" 184). In other words, Emerson feels that when he experiences nature alone, nothing else is

important. He believes all other aspects of human existence seem foreign, but a person is able to feel that they have become one with God, to the point that they are a part of Him (“ Nature” 185).

Ralph Waldo Emerson not only wrote about the concepts he believed in, but also led a life that followed each and every one of these beliefs. He began his life as a teacher, followed by a pastor at his church, but was not satisfied with either of these career choices. He then began writing and speaking in front of crowds about the things he felt strongly about (“ An Emerson Chronology” xvii). Emerson was not afraid to stand out from the crowd and always stayed true to himself, as he spoke out against slavery and supported the Emancipation Proclamation (“ An Emerson Chronology” xix).

He fully embraced his idea that one should trust himself and remain an individual. Emerson certainly spent enough time embracing the opportunities that nature made available to him, all ideas which he spoke about in his writing. Many people of his time did not agree with or fully comprehend the things he believed in, but this was essentially his goal because “ to be great is to be misunderstood” (“ Self Reliance” 274).