

# An essay on self-reliance

Business



Throughout the centuries, love, a simple four letter word, has captivated man and changed history.

For instance, the love for Helen of Troy lead to the Trojan War, the love between Mark Antony and Cleopatra contributed to the commencement of the final war for the Roman Republic, and more recently, the love Ralph Waldo Emerson had for his wife after her untimely death lead him to question his religious faith and embrace transcendent philosophy. There is no question that love has had indomitable forces on man, just as Emerson has had on American Literature and anyone who reads his famous works such as “ Self-Reliance.” In the beginning of the 19th century, Emerson had questioned his faith in religion and began sharing his transcendentalist beliefs of success by capturing inner potential and the truth in nature rather than the truth many seek from religion, superficial objects, and ideologies. Ultimately portrayed in “ Self-Reliance,” Emerson’s purpose is to reflect on commonalities amongst men in society and goes further to explain how people should strive towards nonconformity and introspection as a means of beholding the highest potential of self. He illustrates this through the ideals of transcendentalism such as inner potential, intuition and knowledge beyond external influences, as well as the principle model of life manifested in nature. “ Self-Reliance” is a call to action for the reader to impede people from looking outward for ideas and genius because introspection is the key to unlocking inner potential.

The society that encases man is a society that is constantly looking to others for inspiration and reassurance for solutions. Society has silently been bred on the notion that the status quo is the law of the land and one must follow

what the others do; however, one perplexing paradox to this situation is that the greatest, most influential, renowned and honored people of all time were those of who questioned the status quo and marched to the beat of a different drum. Controversially, society stands in awe of one man who thinks for himself and tries to think as he does making for “An institution [that] is the lengthened shadow of one man; as, Monachism, of the Hermit Antony; the Reformation, of Luther; Quakerism, of Fox... history resolves itself very easily into the biography of a few stout and earnest persons” (22). With this fact in mind that the world is built and rebuilt when someone becomes a true individual and the individualism becomes the new status quo, Emerson encourages the reader to “[Use their] own gift [to be able to] present every moment with the cumulative force of a whole life’s cultivation” (24) because no one can do anyone else’s specific talent (gift) better than the original and that has been seen in the most famous individuals. To go further with his claim, he writes that greatness is not learned, it comes from within since “... the adopted talent of another [has] only an extemporaneous, half possession” (24) of that talent on the apprentice, and capturing their own gift, not attempting to learn another is just what the Greats did. For example, Emerson poses rhetorical questions such as: “Where is the master who could have taught Shakspeare? Where is the master who could have instructed Franklin, or Washington, or Bacon, or Newton?” (24) to emphasize that the leaders and innovators throughout history were one of a kind and no one could have taught them since “That which each can do best, none but his Maker can teach...” (24) accentuating that natural given talent encompasses each individual as the master of the gift, giving the world different dimensions.

Ralph Waldo Emerson writes his piece fueled by these transcendentalist beliefs that there is another realm of knowledge that transcends what can be seen, heard or read and that all knowledge comes from within to remind the public that the only way one can change the world and fully capture their highest potential is to be original and follow these philosophies especially since originality and genius is not something that can be learned, but only expressed naturally. Emerson not only harnesses the idea of individuality with success by exemplifying the history of remarkable individuals, but also engages in the discussion of another transcendentalist philosophy of reaching inner peace, truth and happiness through individualism and natural example. “ Self-Reliance” oozes with the demand to end conformity, even in the simplest way of custom. Uniquely, Emerson explains that he “...[does] not wish to please [his guest]; [he] wish[es] [his guest] shall please [him]” (22) and that it is necessary to “ reprimand the smooth mediocrity and squalid contentment of the times, and hurl in the face of custom...” (22) which goes along with his criticism of conformity to social norms which is expressed as: “... the forced smile which we put on in company where we do not feel at ease in answer to conversation which does not interest us...” (20). To summarize, Emerson is shining a light on all of the unconsciously-done social protocol that people endure because that is simply what is expected of them; furthermore, stresses these commonalities to make the reader feel as though they are frequently overdone and unnecessary conformities in their simplest forms.

The message he is trying to convey is that custom and external influences are things that are accepted, but must be challenged by being an individual

to set personal standards and achieve a life that is simple, truthful and more positive. Although Emerson expands upon societal conformity, he also develops how, alternatively, truth and an example of how to live is found in nature. Man spends most of his life contemplating how to please society and how he should live his life in comparison to others, but to encompass the natural potential and happiness that he could achieve, he must look to the nature, and more specifically in this case, how “...roses under [his] widow make no reference to the former roses or to better ones; they are for what they are; they exist with God to-day” (23). This comparison is one of the focal points of transcendentalism because of the reference to nature as a model for how man should live. Here he explains that the flowers, nature, is simple and lives as an individual that does not concerned with other flowers and simply lives amongst the population.

Altogether, it is expressed that people should not strictly adhere to the societal norms, but look only to nature for an example of how man should live. In summary, Ralph Waldo Emerson’s “ Self-Reliance” touches upon the reality of society and conformity, but writes how conformity must end and how to better the individual by capturing inner potential by recognizing the uniqueness of man and the gifts that are given to each naturally. The purpose of his work is to express a different way of looking at the individual and encourage the reader to embrace individualism and the fact that everything in nature strives to achieve its maximum potential and that can set an example for man of how to live rather than social rules of following the status quo. Emerson’s works, especially “ Self-Reliance,” will always be known as great American Literature and famous for reflecting

transcendentalist philosophies such as individualism, internal knowledge, and reverence for nature.