

# Emerson and melville: conforming to non-conformity

Experience, Self Reliance



## **Conforming to Non-conformity**

To fully express one's individualism, one must intercept the social norms bestowed upon them and become free. However, is it quite necessary, or possible to do such a thing when, throughout life, it is taught to follow the social norms? An advocate of breaking this traditional thinking is Ralph Waldo Emerson in his essay "Self-Reliance". On the other hand, though, Herman Melville, in his short story, "Bartleby the Scrivener", addresses and gives an example of the outcome of being a non-conformist and how that can "kill you off" in a conformist world. Though different views are demonstrated it is not possible to be a non-conformist without conforming to the norms and vice versa.

Since the ideas and rules of others are yielded by one person and passed along, the credibility of such idea is deemed valid. So, when this concept is viewed differently and contradicts the original, it is usually not allowed to question the concept without being met by peering eyes because of the questioning of one's beliefs. And so, because of this, people tend to not bring about any of their distinct perspective and agree with no questions asked. They follow the same agenda given to them to avoid this type of confrontation. To further this notion, in Emerson's "Self-Reliance" he addresses how, "we but half express ourselves, and are ashamed by that divine idea which each of us represents" (Emerson, 1). This can disclose the impact of not trying to stand out but rather stay within the usual circle and try not to steer out of it. Because of this, people are too afraid of genuinely being themselves in fear of judgment of others. So, when it comes down to

expressing true thoughts and self it is not considered easy because a process of thought editing turns on to avoid and criticism from strangers. Emerson is trying to imply and make people get out of this typical thinking. He encourages others to do such things to better their life instead of constantly worrying what people are thinking and lead the life of a non-conformist.

Although there is some truth that being a non-conformist can grant you new experiences in life, there can also be some grim side to it as well. An example of this can be seen in Melville's short story in which he illustrates and portrays how a nonconformist is seen through a conformist's eyes and how different their perspectives are in regards to their lives lived. He writes, " His late remarkable conduct led me to regard his ways narrowly. I observed that he never went to dinner; indeed, that he never went anywhere" (Melville, 15). This can indicate how the life of non-conformist can be led. This can be an extreme level to the point where one would literally do nothing in their life because of the necessary want to not conform. It can make one question as to whether this is what Emerson wants people to follow. Two separate contrasting people together can demonstrate how the two cannot work. For instance, Emerson discloses a judgment on how and what thoughts are actually or can be spoken. He writes, " There are the voices which we hear in solitude, but they grow faint and inaudible as we enter the world" (Emerson, 3). This describes how, before going out and socializing there is a switch that is turned off that is labeled as one's true thoughts and feelings. Emerson is saying that it is not possible to truly be

accepted in the world by genuinely being oneself. To further support this, in Melvin's short story he describes a moment where the narrator cannot do what he definitely wants to due to fear of hat others might think if found out. He notes, "...and while walking round the block considered what I should do next in this unheard-of perplexity. Turn the man out by an actual thrusting I could not; to drive him away by calling him hard names would not do" (Melville, 31). Melville is exemplifying how challenging it may be to fall out of the usual conformity and actually comply to a thought one wants to follow. The quote implies how the person wants to get out of the situation but knows not how to due to conventional thinking. It also shows the difficulty in trying to be a non-conformist in a situation that is solely conventional can be hard to get out of.

To be able to get through life as either a conformist or non-conformist, it is important to be aware of the situation first. Emerson believes that being a non-conformist is what will bring out excitement in life due to being able to willingly utter out silenced thoughts without suppressing them. He expresses that, " 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" (Emerson, 2). He is stating the freedom and value that comes when being able to do such things as speak your mind. Despite the fact that this is true, it is unimaginable to not conform in some sort of way. Such that, even though it contradicts with the usual beliefs of a non-conformist, it is beneficial to them. Essentially, Melville can support this when he wrote, " I seldom lose my temper, much more seldom indulge in dangerous indignation

at wrongs and outrages” (Melville, 4). This quote, in regards to Emerson’s explains how there are some things that must be preserved inside despite not wanting to. It is unthinkable to not do what is expected in a conformist world for the outcome can be seen as disobedient and end wrongly.

All in all, there seems to be some reasoning leaning towards both Melville and Emerson. Even though Emerson disagrees with this type of thinking, he would not be where he is now had he not followed conventional things to a certain extent. And, in terms of Melville’s perspective, following the norms could mean a life in which an avoidance of certain issues can happen. But, it can also show how boring of a cycle it would be constantly following them.