

Nonconformity



Essay #4 Trevor White Herman Melville and Henry David Thoreau present their writing pieces as different forms of nonconformity. The essays both represent Ralph Emerson's essay, *Self-Reliance*, but they do so in different ways. In Thoreau's essay, *Solitude*, the narrator has removed himself from society and into solitude in a cabin in the deep woods. The narrator displays nonconformity by not taking on the normal daily routines and an average person in society. The nonconformity exhibited in *Bartleby, the Scrivener* is Bartleby not conforming at the same level of his co-workers in the law office. The law office in *Bartleby's* eyes is stark place that only brings him displeasure. The transcendentalist essay by Ralph Emerson, *Self-Reliance*, is composed of many simple transcendentalist ideas. *Solitude* and *Bartleby, the Scrivener* both represent the simple ideas expressed in *Self-Reliance*, but the essays do so in different manners. All three essays have attributes of transcendentalism, but they display these ideas differently. Henry David Thoreau's *Solitude* is a transcendentalist essay which displays the narrator as a nonconformist toward society. While the rest of society resides as a group in towns or cities, performing similar actions, the narrator of *Solitude* resides and an individual in the deep woods. The common society is composed of families working together. Common duties such as working a job, maintaining a household, attending school, attending social events, and helping others in the community are duties people in a society would fulfill. The narrator does not participate in any of these daily duties. He believes being secluded and alone in nature is a full and rich life. He is a nonconformist in the sense that he does not act as the rest of society. Instead of running to the store for groceries to take care of the family, he sits in the midst of pure nature and self-reflects to gain satisfaction. " Some of

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my pleasantest hours were during long rain storms in the spring or fall, which confined me to my house for the afternoon as well as the forenoon, soothed by their ceaseless roar and pelting;" Along with the narrator's nonconformance to society through love, passion and need for nature, he explains that he finds his own society in nature. The word 'society' pertains a different meaning to the narrator. Society is not all of the living parts of a community according to Solitude. " Yet I experienced sometimes that the most sweet and tender, the most innocent and encouraging society may be found in any natural object." The narrator found society in nature unlike other people. Being alone in nature is the spiritual nourishment for the narrator. Herman Melville's *Bartleby, the Scrivener* exhibits a sad, lonely character, Bartleby, who is a nonconformist to society, and is confined inside brick walls of a law office on the depressing Wall Street in Manhattan. Bartleby seeks pleasure and enjoyment, but it seems impossible for him to achieve happiness being a nonconformist toward his co-workers and boss. He is miserable in the law office unlike all of the others. So much anger and aggression had built up inside of Bartleby that one day when the narrator asked Bartleby to copy some papers, Bartleby had no desire to carry out the task and simply replied " I'd prefer not to," to the narrator's request. Bartleby displays nonconformity by not acting as the co-workers in his office do by following the instructions of the boss (narrator). He chooses to rebel against the system and to not take instructions. Bartleby does not want to continue as a scrivener any longer in the law office. He would rather be alone and secluded, away from all of society who cause his anxiety. Instead he tries to remain secluded in his office, doing thing such as working on Sunday. " Yes, thought I, it is evident enough that Bartleby has been making his home here,

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keeping bachelor's hall all by himself. Immediately then the thought came sweeping across me, what miserable friendlessness and loneliness are here revealed! His poverty is great; but is solitude, how horrible! Think of it. Of a Sunday, Wall-street is deserted as Petra (Ancient city whose ruins are in Jordan, on a slope of Mount Hor)." Bartleby is yet another example of a nonconformist, secluding himself from everybody to be alone, and unfortunately, just as miserable as ever. Clear cut Transcendentalism is ' at its best' in Self-Reliance. Individualism, self-reliance and nonconformity are highly valued in Emerson's essay. Emerson underlines these ideas in his essay, Self-Reliance, which is referenced in both the essays, Solitude and Bartleby, the Scrivener. This transcendentalist idea put forth by Emerson is quite simple. Before he even begins his essay with his own words, Emerson quotes an epilogue. Emerson using this quote before his essay makes it clear that this quote would very well summarize his main belief toward the virtue of self-reliance- man is his own ' everything,' and a man should only rely on himself. " Man is his own star, and the soul that can Render me an honest and a perfect man, Command all light, and influence all faith, Nothing to him falls early or too late. Our acts our angels are, or good or ill, Our fatal shadows that walk by us still." --Epilogue to Beaumont and Fletcher's Honest Man's Fortunes These ideas of reliance in one's self, nonconformity, and individualism represent the basis of ideas in Solitude, but the form nonconformity in Solitude is different from the form presented in Self-Reliance. In Solitude, the narrator shows nonconformity by secluding himself from society. He lives in the deep woods while society resides in towns and cities, together. Nature is his calling, and he enjoys living as an individual. He gains satisfaction from his actions of nonconformity. " This is a delicious

evening, when the whole body is one sense, and imbibes delight through every pore. I go and come with strange liberty in Nature, a part of herself." Thoreau expresses that secluding himself from society is what brings him peace in himself. On the other hand, Melville responds differently to Emerson's essay as well. In *Bartleby, the Scrivener*, Bartleby exhibits nonconformity by being different from his co-workers in his law office. He is anti-social and cold toward the others around him. He simply relies in himself to do his work and carry out daily tasks. Bartleby's rebel attitude makes him a nonconformist in his office. He displays his rebel attitude when he finally stands up to his boss when he is asked to do a task and replies- " I'd prefer not to." Bartleby decides he will no longer act as everyone else in the office does. He decided to take a stand in what he believed in. Emerson would choose to rely on himself and act as an individual whenever he would do something. Bartleby is not letting the narrator affect him in how he is going to handle this task, and by doing this, he is acting as Emerson would. Self-Reliance is a guide for nonconformists by which Solitude and Bartleby, the Scrivener follow. When essays are written with transcendental influences, they will all have nonconformity. Characteristics of transcendentalism are:

- Individualism, self-reliance and nonconformity are highly valued.
- The Transcendentalists fueled the abolitionist movement. They believed in the worth and dignity of every human being including slaves.
- Nature is a source of spiritual nourishment.
- Humankind is at its best in nature. People " transcend" or rise above their " animalistic impulses" by communing with nature.
- A belief in an " oversoul" that resides in all living things and connects us.
- Transcendentalism is a response to industrialization. The majority of these transcendentalist ideas are absent from the common

thought of society. Consequently, less people gain such an enormous amount of satisfaction from nature. Transcendentalism is rare among people, but it is present in all three of these essays. There are many possible forms of nonconformity. These three essays each display a different form though they are quite similar. Transcendentalists have very radical ideas which to some people may be deemed as ridiculous. It may also seem crazy, but once again, transcendentalists are very radical, and are all nonconformists in some shape of form. Sources: 1. " Norton Anthology Volume II"