

Reflections:

A Student Response Journal for...

Transcendentalism:
Essential Essays of Emerson and Thoreau

by Ralph Waldo Emerson & Henry David Thoreau

written by Kathleen Carr

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Pre-Reading

1. Each of us has a preference in the type of literary genre we enjoy. Some of us might devour poetry and struggle with the novel, others may look forward to nonfiction but have little patience with fiction. What is your preference and why?

Write a letter to a friend explaining your preference and telling whether you are or are not looking forward to reading a series of essays.

2. Societies throughout history have established formal or informal “coming-of-age” standards for each new generation. For example, some American Indian tribes sent each adolescent male into the wilderness with very limited resources. During the several weeks he was required to spend alone, the young man had not only to survive physically, but also, upon return to his tribe, to show evidence of spiritual growth. This was sometimes called a “vision quest”.

In the societies of today, a benchmark of adulthood seems to be self-reliance. The Transcendentalists also stressed the importance of self-reliance in the development of human potential. Emerson writes an entire essay on this topic. Write an editorial for the local newspaper informing the readership about what it means to be self-reliant.

3. One important tenant of Transcendentalism is that every living thing contain a piece of the same creative force known as the “oversoul”. Because of this, man is closely connected to nature, and by using his imagination to observe nature, man can gain intuition to understand himself and human nature more deeply. Many of Emerson’s essays were developed from the daily journal entries about scenes he observed in nature and the truths those led him to intuit about life. One poet, for example, watched a lone goose flying as night fell, imagined that an unseen power was guiding the bird to where it needed to be, and then developed this into an insight for his own life: The same power that guided the waterfowl would guide the poet himself through life.

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Write a journal entry about noticing something in nature that led you to an insight about yourself or about human nature.

4. Emerson, like his fellow Transcendentalists, believed that ultimate truth, goodness, beauty, and knowledge lie deep within each of us, and we have only to develop our intuition to reach inside and find those things. This assumes that at the core of human nature is good. However, other writers of the same period, like Herman Melville and Nathaniel Hawthorne, contended that human nature had been stained by original sin, and at its core is an evil that the Transcendentalists overlooked. This has developed into the age-old debate as to whether mankind is basically good and is corrupted by society or basically corrupt and needs society to inhibit those evil tendencies.

Choose one or the other of these views and write a short persuasive speech to convince your classmates of your point-of-view. You could certainly use examples from current events, history, or fiction to support your argument.

Self-Reliance

5. The first six paragraphs of Ralph Waldo Emerson's "Self Reliance" give us his explanation of what makes a man a genius. Make a list of the things Emerson uses as qualifications for, or definitions of, genius. Then, decide on a present day person whom, according to current standards, our society regards as a genius. Make a list of this person's qualifications for the title. Some qualifications may be the same as Emerson's, but others may be quite different.

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6. Emerson says, in the second paragraph of “Self-Reliance,” that “envy is ignorance, that imitation is suicide.” However, interestingly enough, in life and in careers, young professionals are encouraged to respond to mentors or role models as a means of personal and professional growth.

Your friend, who is strong Emersonian individualist has dropped you an e-mail complaining that the mentoring program in an otherwise wonderful new job is stifling his or her creativity. He or she quotes Emerson to support the desire for more freedom in creativity. Write an e-mail response in which you explain to your friend the difference between imitating and being mentored.

7. Emerson strongly establishes the value of individualism and stresses the importance of solitude for a person’s growth as an individual. How much does society today value solitude? Write a dialogue between two sets of parents. One set believes the best way to raise their children is to schedule organized social, athletic, and academic activities that fill the childrens days, teaching them to socialize and compete and not allowing them to waste time, daydream, or become bored. The other set believes that the best way to raise children is to limit their organized activities, allowing time for them to be alone to daydream, invent, or find a way out of boredom.

Construct a dialogue between these two sets of parents. Develop it in such a way that the approach with which you agree becomes apparent.

8. Emerson’s work is filled with aphorisms memorable little statements packed with big meaning. An example of an aphorism is “Society everywhere is in a conspiracy against the manhood of every one of its members.”
9. In the essay, Ralph Waldo Emerson makes a statement that Henry David Thoreau will later explore in his works. This comment is that “no law can be sacred except that of our own nature.” Emerson goes on to say that any opposition to this integrity of self should be treated as “titular and ephemeral.” Do you agree with Ralph Waldo Emerson’s assertion or do you think that it would create dangerous problems in our society?

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Express your opinion in the lyrics of a song set to the tune of one of your favorite songs. Your opinion should not be directly stated. For example, don't be as direct as "I agree that I should do whatever is in my nature to do", rather, make your opinion apparent through the use of figurative language and symbolism.

10. An often-heard expression is that "charity begins at home." The problems of how to fund charities and, furthermore, how to disperse the funding have faced most societies since time began. Ralph Waldo Emerson cautions against losing the personal touch when making charitable donations. He contends that it may be easier, although not better, to feel compassion for people in far-off places and give money to organized charities that will address people's needs than it is to feel compassion for the homeless person sleeping on your doorstep and offer direct help.

As a very wealthy person with no relatives, but with a keen interest in philanthropy, write a detailed will that explains how your money and possessions will be dispersed after your death and what you hope is accomplished by each gift.

11. Early on, the text of "Self-Reliance" turns to the very real human dilemma issue of how easily our personal truths can be overcome when we are in the company of others. After discussing his views about how people conform to their personal ideals and how they do not, Ralph Waldo Emerson tells the reader what makes a person truly great in this regard.

In a free write in a journal, explain Ralph Waldo Emerson's view of greatness, and then write a first person narrative about a time you were either "great" or did not quite measure up to that standard.

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12. This essay on self-reliance is deeply focused on the negative effects of conformity on an individual. Over and over again, he makes the point that the essence of individuality is following the truths that lie deep within and not allowing society to compromise those truths. Clearly, he feels that the effects of society are largely, if not totally, negative on the individual. But can society have positive effects on an individual?

Make a list of all the ways society pressures you to conform. Consider that “society” includes friends, family, school, athletics, religion, and all other interactions. When you have completed what should be a rather long list, label each of the entries either N, for being negative to the individual, or P, for being positive on the individual. Then write a short article for a teen magazine that explains to teens how to use conformity to their advantage.

13. The pressure to conform can present problems to an individual, and Ralph Waldo Emerson is justified in devoting so much of his essay on self-reliance to this topic. Today, advertisers often use propaganda in attempts to persuade consumers to purchase goods or services. Propaganda techniques work by appealing to what some feel is an innate human need to conform.

As the employee of a large advertising agency, write an ad for a product or service using one or a combination of propaganda techniques. You may have to look up “propaganda techniques” on the Internet or in a library.

14. “Stay the course.” That’s a phrase that often has a positive connotation. Consistency is a quality that society today seems to hold in high esteem. However, Ralph Waldo Emerson holds that “consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds” and may even be foolish. He seems to think that changing one’s mind is a sign of growth and not a negative in one’s character.

As an advice columnist, put Emerson’s views about consistency into your own words in a letter of advice to parents who are worried because their college-age son is always changing his mind: about classes, politics, careers, spiritual beliefs, and goals in life. They wonder if he will “ever grow up and decide what is right for himself.”