

# Self-Reliance



## INTRODUCTION

### BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF RALPH WALDO EMERSON

Ralph Waldo Emerson—an American essayist, lecturer, and philosopher—was born in Boston, Massachusetts, on May 25, 1803. The son of a prominent Unitarian minister, Emerson entered Harvard at 14 and completed his education at Harvard Divinity School. Emerson served as a pastor at Boston’s Second Church from 1829 to 1832 but resigned a year after the death of his first wife and during a period in which he began openly expressing doubts about the church. After traveling for several months in Europe in 1833, Emerson returned to the United States to begin a career as a lecturer. He married his second wife and moved to Concord, Massachusetts, in 1835. 1836 was a pivotal year in Emerson’s life. He helped arrange the first meetings of the Transcendental Club, an intellectual group devoted to renovating American culture and literature, and he published “Nature,” an important essay in which he articulated the key tenets of transcendentalism, a philosophy that prized individuality above all else. In 1837, he gave a lecture, “The American Scholar,” on the need for a uniquely American literature, a theme that persisted in his work over the years. In the years that followed, Emerson began his friendship with Henry David Thoreau, another important transcendentalist and someone who encouraged Emerson to keep the journals that became important sources for his writing. Emerson also helped to establish the transcendentalist journal called *The Dial*, and he published several essay collections that established him as an important American intellectual. Emerson’s health began declining in the late 1860s, and he ended his career as a lecturer in 1879. Emerson died in 1882 in Concord, Massachusetts, of complications of pneumonia.

### HISTORICAL CONTEXT

“Self-Reliance” and transcendentalism in general reflect a movement to reform the Unitarian religious tradition of Emerson’s childhood and early adult life. Like many of the older faiths of early America, Unitarianism was attacked in the early 1800s because it failed to provide an emotionally satisfying experience for its adherents and it didn’t offer relevant guidance on how to function in a US that was undergoing rapid cultural changes and confronting important political issues, including slavery and the rights of women. Emerson’s work also reflects the influence of Romanticism, a nineteenth century literary movement that celebrated the importance of the individual, imagination, and irrationality.

### RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Emerson’s “Nature,” published in 1836, offered one of the earliest formulations of the ideas later developed fully in “Self-Reliance.” Emerson’s influence is also reflected in the work of other members of the Transcendentalist Club. Henry David Thoreau, arguably the most famous of Emerson’s peers, wrote *Walden Pond, or Life in the Woods*, (often called just [Walden](#)) in 1854. In the work, he recounts how his retreat into nature and solitude allowed him to become a more self-reliant individual and thus enabled him to live out the abstract notions expressed in Emerson’s essay. Margaret Fuller, a woman whose association with the Transcendentalist Club went against the grain of nineteenth century intellectual subordination of women, published “The Great Lawsuit. Man versus Men. Woman versus Women” in 1845 in *The Dial*, the journal of the Transcendentalist Club. Her work offered a feminist critique of women’s roles and was grounded in important transcendentalist ideas about individualism.

### KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** “Self-Reliance”
- **When Written:** 1832 to 1841
- **Where Written:** Concord and Boston, Massachusetts
- **When Published:** 1841
- **Literary Period:** American Transcendentalism, American Romanticism
- **Genre:** Essay, philosophical text
- **Antagonist:** Conformity
- **Point of View:** Multiple points of view, including first-person, second-person, and third-person

### EXTRA CREDIT

**Baby Genius.** At 14, Emerson was the youngest member of his class at Harvard.

**The Sage of Concord.** Emerson’s outsize influence on nineteenth century American thought and culture made his hometown of Concord, Massachusetts (which was already the site of an important American Revolution battle and home to many important writers) even more famous. He was known as “the Sage of Concord,” and his home there is a National Historic Landmark.



## PLOT SUMMARY

Emerson opens his essay with three epigraphs that preview the theme of self-reliance in the essay. He then begins the essay by

reflecting on how often an individual has some great insight, only to dismiss it because it came from their own imagination. According to Emerson, we should prize these flashes of individual insight even more than those of famous writers and philosophers; it is the mature thinker who eventually realizes that originality of thought, rather than imitation of what everyone else believes, is the way to greatness.

Emerson then argues that the most important realization any individual can have is that they should trust themselves above all others. Babies, children, and even animals are intuitively aware of this fact, according to Emerson, and so are worthy of imitation. Emerson sees self-reliance as a characteristic of boys, too, with their independent attitudes, lack of respect for authority, and willingness to pass judgment on everything they encounter.

Emerson then shifts to a discussion of the relationship between the individual and society by noting that when we are alone, we can be like babies or children, but when we get out into the world, that little voice inside that carries our truth slips away. Emerson argues that people must embrace nonconformity to recover their self-reliance, even if doing so requires the individual to reject what most people believe is goodness. Emerson believes that there is a better kind of virtue than the opinions of respected people or demands for charity for the needy. This goodness comes from the individual's own intuition, and not what is visible to society.

Besides, states Emerson, living according to the world's notion of goodness seems easy, and living according to one's own notions of goodness is easy in solitude, but it takes a truly brave person to live out one's own notions of goodness in the face of pressure from society. Although it might seem easier to just go along with the demands of society, it is harder because it scatters one's force. Aware that being a nonconformist is easier argued than lived, Emerson warns that the individual should be prepared for disapproval from people high and low once he or she finally refuses to conform to society's dictates. It will be easy to brush off the polite disapproval of cultivated people, but the loud and rough disapproval of common people, the mob, will require all of the individual's inner resources to face down.

The other thing Emerson sees as a roadblock to the would-be nonconformist is the world's obsession with consistency. Really though, he argues, why should you be bound at all by your past actions or fear contradicting yourself? Emerson notes that society has made inconsistency into a devil, and the result is small-mindedness. He uses historical and religious examples to point out that every great person we have ever known refused to be bound by the past. If you want to be great, he says, embrace being misunderstood just like them. Emerson argues that the individual should have faith that inconsistency is an appearance only, since every action always reflects an underlying harmony that is rooted in one's own individuality. So

long as the individual is true to themselves, their actions will be authentic and good.

Given his arguments in the first part of the essay, Emerson hopes by now that everyone realizes how ridiculous conformity is and the negative impact it is having on American culture. He describes American culture of the day as one of mediocrity that can only be overcome with the recognition that in each individual is a little bit of the universe, of God, and that wherever the individual lives authentically, God is to be found. Emerson believes people tap into that truth, into justice, and into wisdom by sitting still and letting the underlying reality that grounds us and all creation speak through us in the form of intuition. Everything else—time, space, even the past—appears as something apart from the underlying reality only because of our habits of thinking. Emerson counsels that people can escape that way of thinking by living in the present like plants do, and, like everything in **nature**, expressing one's self against all comers.

Emerson laments that his society has lost all sense of what it means to be self-reliant individuals. He describes his historical moment as a weak one that has birthed no great people, and city boys seeking professions quit as soon as they are confronted with an initial failure. Emerson admires the country boy who tries thing after thing, not at all concerned about any failure or conforming to society; these are the kinds of people Emerson believes will make America's history. If the individual wants to achieve true virtue, Emerson argues, they must go to war against anything that oppresses their sense of individuality, even if people accuse them of gross immorality as a result. Taking care to meet their idea of their duties to loved ones or even to themselves will vindicate them and maybe even bring people around to their way of seeing. Ultimately, Emerson believes that living in this state of war against society is actually true virtue.

Emerson closes his essay by applying the abstract concept of self-reliance to specifics. He believes that self-reliance can revolutionize every part of society if we let it: We should quit praying for something outside of ourselves to save us and instead act. We should quit subordinating our experiences to religions and philosophies and instead listen to our intuition. Emerson argues that Americans especially should stop traveling abroad to become cultured and instead create their own arts, literature, and culture using the materials we find right here at home. Emerson believes that progress is beside the point: we should quit pushing for it because it only saps our strength; society does not progress in a straight line. Emerson argues that people should stop locating their identities in property and instead understand that the most valuable part of a man is inside of him. Self-reliance can even be applied to politics: Emerson argues that we should quit governing ourselves by political parties and instead have each man govern himself by intuition. Emerson concludes by noting that self-

reliance is the true path to peace.



## CHARACTERS

### MAJOR CHARACTERS

**Ralph Waldo Emerson** – The author. Emerson’s voice in this essay is a confident one that makes controversial and provocative statements designed to move the reader to listen to his or her own voice and ignore societal pressures. Emerson’s perspective in the essay is rooted in transcendentalist thought, especially in his emphasis on the importance of the individual, reliance on intuition, the underlying unity of everything, and the appreciation of **nature**.

### MINOR CHARACTERS

**The Individual** – The audience for Emerson’s essay. “The individual” refers to ordinary Americans whose intuition is constantly assaulted by self-doubt and societal pressures. Emerson exhorts the individual to reject these pressures and to achieve greatness by becoming self-reliant and trusting in intuition.

**Society** – The enemy of self-reliance. Society pressures individuals to conform to social norms that oppress them. To Emerson, society is worthy of scorn.

## TERMS

**Abolition** American political movement in support of ending the institution of slavery in the US.

**Antinomianism** The belief that grace from God releases Christians from the obligation of following moral laws.

**Epigraph** A short quotation or saying placed before the start of a work, often in order to preview an important theme or subject in the work.

**Doric** Ancient Greek architectural style characterized by thick, strong columns and clean lines.

**Gothic** Medieval European architectural style characterized by large scale and ornate details, hence its association with buildings like castles and cathedrals.

**Monachism** The retreat of religious people, such as monks or nuns, from secular life and into secluded communities devoted to worship and spiritual acts.

**Relief society** Nineteenth century charitable organizations, usually funded through donations and supported with volunteer labor, designed to provide relief to the poor and ill.

**Swedenborgism** Eighteenth century religious belief founded on the ideas of Emmanuel Swedenborg, a Swiss theologian who believed that Jesus Christ appeared to him in visions and who believed that a new, reform-minded church would be founded

to replace the contemporary Christian church.

**Whigs** Nineteenth century American political party that opposed the presidency of Andrew Jackson.



## THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.



### TRANSCENDENTALISM

Ralph Waldo Emerson is one of the central figures associated with the American philosophical and literary movement known as transcendentalism.

Transcendentalism thrived during the late 1830s to the 1840s in the US and originated with a group of thinkers in New England that included Emerson. The transcendentalists believed that the US needed reformation in its religion, arts, higher education, and culture. Emerson’s “Self-Reliance” is one of the most important statements of transcendentalist beliefs and how they apply to everyday life.

In Emerson’s transcendentalism, the individual is the supreme source of truth because the universe (or “Oversoul”) is inside each individual, and each individual is a part of the universe, just as nature is. Emerson further argues that there is an underlying unity to everything, including the individual, and that seeing the parts of the universe as separate from the individual is nothing more than a bad habit. That is why Emerson sees “children, babes, and brutes” as being “pretty oracles nature yields”—he means that they are not yet in the habit of seeing themselves as separate from everything around them.

Emerson therefore believes that the search for truth should always start with contemplation of the individual self and **nature**. He posits that when the individual engages in self-contemplation, they come to understand that the individual isn’t separate from all parts of the universe but is instead “one with them, and proceeds obviously from the same source whence their life and being also proceed.” Emerson also argues that because all of creation is simply a reflection of an underlying truth, contemplating the individual is a very good shortcut to understanding the truth of existence. He believes that if each individual can just pay close enough attention to themselves and ignore the noise of other individuals and the senses, they will eventually understand that “we lie in the lap of immense intelligence, which makes us receivers of its truth and organs of its activity. When we discern justice, when we discern truth, we do nothing of ourselves, but allow a passage to its beams.”

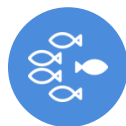
Emerson's definition of the self-reflection needed to find this truth is very specific. He is careful to make clear that self-reflection is not merely intellectual, in the sense that it applies only to the individual reflecting on their own personal thoughts. While he certainly does believe that the individual should reflect on thoughts and ideas, Emerson explicitly makes clear that self-reflection also involves simply listening to one's instincts. In other words, he sees the individual's intuition as also containing the individual's truth. In fact, as Emerson puts it, intuition is the "primary wisdom... whilst all later teachings are tuitions." Ultimately, Emerson's guidelines for the practice of self-reflection can be summed up in his famous saying: "Trust thyself: every heart vibrates to that iron string." He insists that the individual can only find truth within themselves — their whole self, in their conscious thoughts and deeper intuitions — and that only by "trusting thyself" can they access that truth. This idea is the foundation of Emerson's concept of self-reliance.

This philosophy was a radical departure for the time, and in conflict with traditional thought and society. In fact, Emerson specifically argues against the prevailing beliefs by stating that truth *cannot* be found in either the conventional morality of mass culture or in institutions, such as the church or government, because they discourage the individual from contemplating the self. Emerson argues that, instead, the individual can only find the truth by paying attention to their own mind and intuition. To Emerson, then, it is solitude, rather than the company of others, that is most conducive to the discovery of the truth. Being able to hear one's inner voice, despite the influence of society, is what makes a person great.

But Emerson is under no illusion that hearing one's inner voice is easy. When Emerson states that "A man should learn to detect and watch that gleam of light which flashes across his mind from within, more than the lustre of the firmament of bards and sages," he is pointing out two related but distinct things. First, he is stating that the individual's own insights and intuitions are more valuable and contain more truth than any of the received wisdom from society, and second, he is acknowledging that each individual has to learn this for himself. In other words, Emerson is admitting that such trust in oneself takes effort and is attained only through practice.

He also argues that the institutions and thinkers that most people assume serve as sources of truth are not *truly* such sources; upon examination, Emerson says, important religious and ethical moments in history are always the result of specific individuals. He claims that "[a]n institution is the lengthened shadow of one man; as, the Reformation, of Luther; Quakerism, of Fox; Methodism, of Wesley; Abolition, of Clarkson. Scipio, Milton called 'the height of Rome'; and all history resolves itself very easily into the biography of a few stout and earnest persons." The individual's influence underlies what eventually became the institution.

Emerson goes a step further by arguing that the institutions themselves and society as a whole can in fact serve as *impediments* to finding truth. Society actively *reduces* the likelihood of an individual accessing their own internal truth. As he puts it: intuition and insight "are the voices which we hear in solitude, but they grow faint and inaudible as we enter into the world." Society, in Emerson's transcendentalist view, is a force that the individual must escape in order to gain access to truth.



## NONCONFORMITY, MORALITY, AND INDIVIDUAL GREATNESS

In keeping with his transcendentalist beliefs, Emerson was skeptical of forces that pushed the individual to conform to society. Emerson's rejection of society (including any of its established institutions) as a source of truth and morality fit into a broader historical moment occurring in America at the time when Emerson was writing (in the 1830s and 1840s). The Second Great Awakening, a religious revival movement, rejected many of the faiths settlers had brought with them from Europe and instead focused on spirituality as an emotional experience found in personal communion with a higher power, what Emerson would have seen as the Oversoul. Other Americans embraced reform movements against slavery or utopian ideals that sought truth outside the regular confines of society, for example.

Those who rejected conventional morality were frequently met with harsh criticism by more conservative forces in society. In an America in which such criticism could make the difference between having a livelihood or not, and in which the local church was the central site for organizing society, nonconformity was a brave but hard choice. Emerson's "Self-Reliance" is an exhortation to Americans to refuse to conform despite the cost and a guide for those who wonder what can take the place of traditional morality.

Emerson's rejection of conformity stems from his idea that society is the source of immorality because it undercuts the independence of the individual. Society is characterized by "the smooth mediocrity and squalid contentment of the times" and it is the job of the individual to "hurl in the face of custom, and trade, and office, the fact which is the upshot of all history, that there is a great responsible Thinker and Actor working wherever a man works." He argues that the greatest act of morality is therefore to be a nonconformist. While Emerson saw most of society as viewing morality in traditional, Christian terms that focus on acts of faith as expressions of goodness, he believes it is more moral to live by the light of one's own conscience.

He even goes so far as to reject conventional charity that is motivated by conformity—that is, charity that is motivated by a desire to appear like a "good person" to the rest of society"—as being "a wicked Dollar which by and by I shall have the

manhood to withhold.” Emerson’s use of the word “manhood” to describe his refusal to be dominated by social convention is typical. Emerson often uses the nineteenth-century language of manliness to encourage his readers to reject the constraints of society. According to Emerson, a true, self-reliant man—one who is independent in his opinions—is the equal of any other person regardless of birth and is worthy of respect simply because of his character. This definition stands in contrast to the conventional ideal of the time of the “gentleman”—a man who was respected by society because of his social standing, his education, his good birth, his good reputation, and his ability to demonstrate conventional good manners. Emerson claims that “Whoso would be a man must be a nonconformist” because merely conforming to societal dictates hampers the ability of a person to be independent. According to this logic, attempting to blend into society by honoring its constraints leads the individual away from the ability to listen to his own intuition, and thus “[s]ociety everywhere is in conspiracy against the manhood of every one of its members.”

Emerson understands that this conspiracy makes the resolution to be a nonconformist difficult because of societal pressures. Nevertheless, he believes that to achieve true independence and greatness, the individual must learn not to fear the disapproval of society. Emerson admits that regardless of his actions, the individual will always be judged by society. However, he argues that fear of such judgement should not be taken into account since, as he puts it, “What I must do is all that concerns me, not what the people think.... It is easy in the world to live after the world's opinion; it is easy in solitude to live after our own; but the great man is he who in the midst of the crowd keeps with perfect sweetness the independence of solitude.” Furthermore, Emerson claims that trying to conform to societal expectations wastes one’s energy and genius because “it scatters your force.” He also argues that the individual must not be afraid even “when the ignorant and the poor are aroused, when the unintelligent brute force that lies at the bottom of society is made to growl and mow.” Being willing to offend the sensibilities of the common person on the street is, in Emerson’s mind, the mark of greatness. Considering that the common man was seen as the hero of American culture at this point, Emerson’s call to ignore him is actually a call to go against the grain of much of American culture of the day.



### ANTI-ENLIGHTENMENT IDEAS AND AMERICAN CULTURE

Emerson wrote “Self-Reliance” in 1841. The United States had won the Revolutionary War only 65 years earlier, and the Constitution had existed for just 52 years. In other words, the United States was still a very young nation, and Emerson shared with many other American writers and thinkers a preoccupation with finding and creating a uniquely American culture, one that was not so dependent upon Europe.

Most thinkers of the earlier years of the United States had been influenced by the European Enlightenment, a period of history that roughly covers the eighteenth and early nineteenth century. Enlightenment thinkers believed that reason was the most important guide for human actions and that society, through the application of reason, would improve and follow a steady path of progress. They further believed that the past, particularly the classical society of the Greeks and Romans, could serve as a model for both society and the arts.

Emerson, however, rejects the pure practice of Enlightenment ideals by the individual. Whimsy and inconsistency, which run counter to the Enlightenment ideals of reason and order, are virtues that Emerson believes can help the individual to become a more self-reliant thinker. In fact, when Emerson states that “[a] foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds, adored by little statesmen and philosophers and divines,” he is pointing out that holding ourselves up to such standards of rationality can actually interfere with the ability to be a great thinker. In advancing spontaneity and inconsistency as positive traits, Emerson (and transcendentalism more generally) was embracing the tenets of Romanticism, a nineteenth-century literary and cultural movement that placed greater emphasis on spontaneity, irregularity, and emotion than the Enlightenment movement that preceded it.

Emerson also rejects the Enlightenment view of history and progress. Enlightenment thinkers had a deep belief in the inevitability of progress if humanity would only rely on rationality. Emerson rejects this idea, insisting instead that the very idea of “progress” is false and damaging. At one point in “Self-Reliance,” Emerson states that “[S]ociety never advances.” In making this comment, Emerson isn’t saying that things don’t *change*. Rather, he is implying that the changes we see in society are not necessarily improvements. He is saying that even as things change, they do not *progress* according to the Enlightenment model. What we typically call progress is not, to Emerson, progress at all. He compares “the well-clad, reading, writing, thinking American, with ... the naked New Zealander, whose property is a club, a spear, a mat, and an undivided twentieth of a shed to sleep under!” and claims that the New Zealander is the healthier of the two. Emerson believes that a person who might typically be called “primitive” has, precisely because they are not surrounded by the “society” and “progress” of modern life, a deeper connection with the things that are truly important: **nature** and their own individual selves.

Emerson’s hostility to Enlightenment ideals also seems to emerge from a belief that American genius will only grow once the culture rejects the impulse to imitate Europe as a source of inspiration and instead focuses on materials and inspiration that are closer at hand. Just as Emerson believed that in “trusting thyself” a person could gain self-reliance, he believed that if American writers and artists would “trust” America and

focus on elements that are specific to an American geography, they could achieve self-reliance in the artistic realm as well. According to Emerson, “[I]f the American artist will study with hope and love the precise thing to be done by him, considering the climate, the soil, the length of the day, the wants of the people, the habit and form of the government, he will create a house in which all these will find themselves fitted, and taste and sentiment will be satisfied also.” Emerson’s argument for American genius was typical of the day. While the prevailing wisdom (in both America and Europe) just after the turn of the century was that American culture and arts were provincial, many American writers and artists of this period sought to transform what was unique about the United States into sources for a truly American culture.



## NATURE

Emerson and other transcendentalists believed that **nature**—rather than society, institutions, or the Church—is the ultimate source of truth about the self, God, and existence. As Emerson put it in another essay he wrote, “The Foregoing generations beheld God and Nature face to face; we—through their eyes. Why should not we also enjoy an original relation to the universe.” In this quote, Emerson is saying that, while previous generations connected directly to God and Nature, the modern generation connects to those things only through the institutional leavings of the previous generation. Emerson advocates not settling for such an indirect connection, and he argues that actually engaging with nature offers *the* means of gaining that direct connection to existence, and, as a consequence, a deeper understanding of the self and self-reliance.

Emerson believes that “the sense of being which in calm hours rises, we know not how, in the soul, is not diverse from things, from space, from light, from time, from man, but one with them, and proceeds obviously from the same source whence their life and being also proceed.” In this passage Emerson makes the case for that unity of things, and describes the way that people can experience those “calm hours” of nature in which they then experience unity.

But Emerson sees nature as a great teacher in a different way as well. He sees nature as providing the ultimate example of what it means to be self-reliant. As Emerson describes it, people should relate to the rest of existence in the way that “blade of grass or the blowing rose” do—there is “no time to them” and they “exist with God to-day,” without dwelling on the past. However, Emerson continues: “man postpones or remembers; he does not live in the present, but with reverted eye laments the past, or, heedless of the riches that surround him, stands on tiptoe to foresee the future.” Further, Emerson states, the individual “cannot be happy and strong until he too lives with nature in the present, above time.”

Emerson’s argument here underlies his view about the

falseness of the concept of “progress,” which involves a measuring against the past and future, rather than an engagement with the present. Emerson argues that God and existence happen solely in the present, and that only in nature can the individual see the present in its “richness.” The self-reliant individual, though, attuned to nature and his (or her) inner self, *is* connected to the present, and therefore to the unity of everything. Emerson sees nature also as offering a more practical model of self-sufficiency. “Power,” he states, “is in nature the essential measure of right. Nature suffers nothing to remain in her kingdoms which cannot help itself.” Nature therefore offers a “demonstration of the self-sufficing, and therefore self-relying soul.”

Emerson, of course, is also interested in *human* nature. But he argues that society—with its pressures to conform and to respect only what society itself teaches rather than what a person actually intrinsically thinks or feels—actually takes people out of their own nature. Emerson then argues that it is possible to find examples of a self-reliant human nature by paying attention to people that are closer to nature. Emerson sees babies and children as perfect examples of human nature in touch with itself. He calls them “pretty oracles nature yields” because they have not yet internalized societal expectations and habits of thoughts that lead them to devalue emotion and their own intuition. Celebrating the wilfulness of children, Emerson playfully remarks that “[i]nfancy conforms to nobody: all conform to it, so that one babe commonly makes four or five out of the adults who prattle and play to it.”

Emerson extends his example to boyhood by remarking that the “nonchalance of boys who are sure of a dinner, and would disdain as much as a lord to do or say aught to conciliate one, is the healthy attitude of human nature.” Like a baby, Emerson says, a boy is “independent, irresponsible, looking out from his corner on such people and facts as pass by, he tries and sentences them on their merits, in the swift, summary way of boys, as good, bad, interesting, silly, eloquent, troublesome. He cumbers himself never about consequences, about interests: he gives an independent, genuine verdict.” Emerson adds that a grown man in the grip of societal expectations, on the other hand is “clapped into jail by his consciousness.”

Emerson’s ideas about the individual, then, are closely connected to his ideas about nature. Emerson’s self-sufficient individual, in fact, is someone who is connected to and displays the same sorts of traits as nature itself. Further, Emerson argues that, despite the pressure to conform to society, *all* people (even the most conformist) still display some measure of self-reliance. As Emerson states, “no man can violate his nature.” In other words, he is saying that while conforming to societal expectations can warp or obscure a person’s natural self-reliance, it can’t eliminate it entirely. And, if people exercise that self-reliance, Emerson believes it will bring them back into their original connection to nature. As puts it, if individuals

acknowledge that underlying nature, all of their actions will be “honest and natural in their hour.”



## SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



## NATURE

Emerson imagines nature as the ultimate form of the underlying reality of everything, including the natural world and human character. This perspective on nature is a direct reflection of the transcendentalist belief that there is an underlying consistency in every part of creation, which implies that observing one part of creation—including the self—should allow the perceiver to come to a better understanding of other parts of creation as well.

Emerson therefore represents nature and humans in contemplation of nature as an important source of knowledge. An individual looking at roses under his window isn't just engaging with the material world, Emerson argues. Instead, looking at the roses and contemplating the relationship between each stage of the flower's life allows the individual to live “above time” and escape an overreliance on the past. The ability of one part of nature to stand in the place of other parts of creation extends even to God. Emerson's statement, “We lie in the lap of immense intelligence, which makes us receivers of its truth and organs of its activity,” references this idea of God as just another expression of transcendent truth.

Emerson also uses nature as a source of analogies to help explain his perspective on human nature. For example, Emerson contrasts the jagged outline of the Andes or Himalayas Mountains seen from close up with the insignificance of those variations when seen “in the curve of the sphere” to support his argument that apparent inconsistencies in human nature are only due to perspective. Emerson's admiration for babies, infants, and boys are all rooted in an understanding of their human natures as ones that are closer to “nature” as whole because they have not yet conformed to societal expectations that come with adulthood, and instead function more on the basis of intuition.



## QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Dover Thrift Editions edition of *Self-Reliance and Other Essays* published in 1993.

### Paragraphs 3-5 Quotes

☝ Trust thyself: every heart vibrates to that iron string.

**Related Characters:** Ralph Waldo Emerson (speaker)

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 20

### Explanation and Analysis

Emerson introduces the idea of self-trust or self-reliance early on as the foundation for the alternative morality he espouses throughout the essay. While conventional morality is based on adhering to societal norms and engaging with traditional religious institutions that also emphasize conformity, Emerson's transcendentalist morality looks to the individual as the source of truth. This is the case because, according to transcendentalist beliefs, each individual is a reflection of the universe at large. The only way to apprehend that connection is by observing and listening to one's own intuitions. That kind of attention to intuition only happens if the individual understands that intuition is more important than what society thinks is moral. Emerson's statement in this quote is therefore an intervention that is designed to get the reader to place more value on themselves and their inner life—their “heart”—than on society.

### Paragraphs 6-9 Quotes

☝ Society everywhere is in conspiracy against the manhood of every one of its members.

**Related Characters:** Ralph Waldo Emerson (speaker), Society

**Related Themes:**



**Page Number:** 21

### Explanation and Analysis

One of Emerson's aims in the essay is to convince the reader to accept that, far from being a source for good, society is a corrupting, limiting force, and nonconformity is the only way to escape its effects. The word “conspiracy” has a negative connotation, while the use of the word “manhood” is designed to get an emotional reaction out of the reader (presumed to be male) by asking them to see societal pressure as a kind of attack on their very humanity (and masculinity). The use of this emotional appeal is therefore designed to get the reader to accept a perspective on morality that would have run counter to the prevailing wisdom of the day.

☞ Whoso would be a man must be a nonconformist.

**Related Characters:** Ralph Waldo Emerson (speaker), The Individual

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 21


### Explanation and Analysis

This quote, which comes almost immediately after Emerson's accusation that society is "in conspiracy against the manhood" of the individual, offers a countermeasure against society—nonconformity. Since Emerson believes that the individual, rather than society, serves as the foundation for morality, nonconformity offers the best chance for that individual to recover their ability to live a life guided by intuition rather than the conventional morality that society supports. Emerson's support for nonconformity in this passage reflects his transcendentalist belief in the primacy of the individual. The use of the word "man" may well be literal, but it can also be read as another use of a persuasive emotional appeal in the midst of a discussion of abstract ideas about self-reliance.

## Paragraphs 10-11 Quotes

☞ What I must do is all that concerns me, not what the people think. This rule, equally arduous in actual and in intellectual life, may serve for the whole distinction between greatness and meanness.

**Related Characters:** Ralph Waldo Emerson (speaker)

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 23

### Explanation and Analysis

This quote is from a passage in which Emerson acknowledges the difficulty of living according to the nonconformist morality in which he believes. Part of his aim in the essay is to convince the reader that regardless of how difficult nonconformity is, there is a payoff, and that payoff is greatness (rather than "meanness," or smallness and weakness). Another important aim of the essay is to define what moral self-reliance means. This quote serves as a reminder that consistent nonconformist morality at its roots is about valuing one's own beliefs over those of others, even if living out this principle in all aspects of life can be difficult in practice.

☞ For nonconformity the world whips you with its displeasure.

**Related Characters:** Ralph Waldo Emerson (speaker)

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 24

### Explanation and Analysis

Emerson explains in this section his belief that self-reliance can be achieved if the individual is willing to forgo the approval of society. He first of all wants to prepare the reader for that disapproval. Second, he wants to offer the individual a more positive interpretation of what societal disapproval really means for a nonconformist. One key element of feeling certain in one's nonconformity is coming to a better understanding of how to take the inevitable disapproval of society at large. His point in this quote is that the disapproval of people with conformist morality is nothing to fear, since it is in some ways a measure of the individual's successful rejection of that morality.

## Paragraphs 12-16 Quotes

☞ A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds, adored by little statesmen and philosophers and divines. With consistency a great soul has simply nothing to do.

**Related Characters:** Ralph Waldo Emerson (speaker), The Individual

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 24

### Explanation and Analysis



One of the counterarguments against a morality rooted in the individual is that the individual is so variable that what may be moral one day will be immoral the next because of personal whims. Emerson rejects this argument first of all by pointing out that there is no special virtue in consistency. Consistency as a measure of morality comes out of a privileging of rationality and order, two characteristics that Emerson did not value because he embraced some of the Anti-Enlightenment ideals of the period. His rejection of consistency as an important value also comes out of his transcendentalist belief that there is an underlying coherence in the actions and thoughts of the individual who is in touch with their intuition. This kind of "consistency" is then organic to the individual's soul, rather than falsely imposed from the outside by society.



## Paragraphs 21-24 Quotes

☞ We denote this primary wisdom as Intuition, whilst all later teachings are tuitions.

**Related Characters:** Ralph Waldo Emerson (speaker)

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 27

### Explanation and Analysis

As a transcendentalist, Emerson argues that the individual's self-contemplation is the first and best means of uncovering the ultimate truths. The reason why the individual is so central to his system of morality is that intuition provides the individual with a direct line to the universe or Oversoul (God). Emerson sees intuition as the "primary" wisdom because it is the lens through which the individual can understand all other kinds of experiences, including sensory perception, and because (as long as the individual does not allow the expectations of society to interfere with those intuitions) following those intuitions can serve as much more effective guide to how the individual should conduct themselves than societal expectations.

☞ We lie in the lap of immense intelligence, which makes us receivers of its truth and organs of its activity.

**Related Characters:** Ralph Waldo Emerson (speaker)

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 27


### Explanation and Analysis

In this quote, Emerson provides context for why the intuition is an adequate guide to morality. The "immense intelligence" that he refers to here is the entirety of the universe—the "Oversoul," or God. Transcendentalism holds that each part of the universe reflects every other part of the universe, from the individual on up. Becoming "receivers of its truth and organs of its activity" then requires acknowledging the transcendentalist belief that all things reflect and include the underlying truth of existence. Emerson's highlighting of this connection is an effort to provide reassurance to the would-be nonconformist that there is a stable foundation to the morality Emerson espouses, as long as the individual is willing to do the work of accepting intuitions as sacred messages from the universe.

## Paragraphs 35-50 Quotes

☞ Beauty, convenience, grandeur of thought and quaint expression are as near to us as to any, and if the American artist will study with hope and love the precise thing to be done by him, considering the climate, the soil, the length of the day, the wants of the people, the habit and form of the government, he will create a house in which all these will find themselves fitted, and taste and sentiment will be satisfied also.

**Related Characters:** Ralph Waldo Emerson (speaker), Society, The Individual

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 35

### Explanation and Analysis

Although Emerson mostly addresses the issue of self-reliance on the level of the individual, the essay is also a wake-up call to American society as a whole. Like many intellectuals of this historical period, Emerson was concerned about the seeming inability of America to establish a unique cultural identity that was distinct from Europe, especially Great Britain, from which the U.S. had been independent for less than a hundred years. This quote reflects the reformist impulse behind his writing and his belief that self-reliance could exercise a healthy influence in the arts. In this particular quote, he points out that staying home—and truly contemplating American materials and geography—could provide the basis for a specifically American aesthetic and culture.

☞ Society never advances.

**Related Characters:** Ralph Waldo Emerson (speaker), Society

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 36

### Explanation and Analysis

Emerson's belief in the need for reform in American society is made clear by the numbered list of the applications of self-reliance to institutions in which this quote appears. Nevertheless, his desire for reform should not be confused with the Enlightenment belief that society was on an inevitable march of progress. Emerson's belief that "[s]ociety never advances" is rooted in his rejection of what normally counts as "progress" according to the

Enlightenment perspective. From Emerson's perspective, the usual signs of progress, like technological advancements, have a negative impact on the individual's

access to intuition, as well as to spaces and experiences (especially of nature) that are friendlier to accessing one's intuition.



## SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

## PARAGRAPHS 1-2

Emerson includes three epigraphs, one that translates as “Do not seek for things outside of yourself,” another from a poem by Beaumont and Fletcher that emphasizes that a person’s fate is not determined by the stars, and a third that praises the “power and speed” of a child raised in the wilds of **nature**.

Emerson opens the essay by mentioning that he read a poem and found himself stirred by its unconventionality. He notes that truly original art frequently has that impact, and that the feelings such a work stirs are more important than the thoughts it contains. To place one’s thoughts out in the world because one believes they reveal something universal is what makes an individual a genius, Emerson says, but he believes that most ordinary people never speak such thoughts out loud, which is a shame. Emerson thinks people should learn to pay attention to intuitions when they arise, and should voice them, because they are worth even more than the pronouncements of a famous writer or philosopher. What a shame it is, he says, to have a moment of intuition without sharing it, only to hear the same thought expressed by another person.

Emerson believes that every individual has a moment in their life when they recognize that envy is poisonous, a lack of originality is destructive, and that it is important to accept oneself. He argues that each person has to do their own work to discover themselves and the goodness that is in the world. Every person is unique by the design of the universe, and God will never reward insight to the person who is not brave enough to embrace what makes him unique.

*Emerson previews important themes of his essay in each epigraph. Epigraph one encourages self-reliance, the central trait of the new morality he espouses in the essay. Epigraph two celebrates individuality rather than fate as the main influence on a person’s life. Epigraph three encourages the reader to raise their children in nature, an exhortation that reflects the transcendentalist belief that having a relationship with nature is one path to a connection with God.*



*Emerson’s first move in the essay is to convince the reader that respecting intuition as a source of knowledge can yield greater enlightenment than looking to other sources outside of the individual. He does so by making several provocative claims: individual perceptions of art or literature are more important than the actual works that occasion them, and ordinary intuitions are more important than those of respected sources of knowledge. These two claims reflect the respect that transcendentalists have for the individual and Emerson’s rejection of conventionality.*



*Emerson’s next move is to identify a problem by representing “every man”—his ideal American reader who feels stifled by societal expectations but is not quite sure how to find the answers to how he should live. Emerson is already on the attack against the dangers of conformity, a topic that he addresses in even greater length in subsequent passages.*



## PARAGRAPHS 3-5

“Trust thyself,” Emerson tells the reader. The most important realization any individual can have, in fact, is that they should trust themselves above all others. Every person, says Emerson, has some role to play in the design of the universe, and it is important to understand that place as well as one’s place in the spirit of the age. The people we call great are the ones who have most effectively had that recognition, so people should not remain afraid to make whatever their individual contribution is if they are to participate in whatever great plan God has for the universe.

Emerson believes that the universe has placed before us perfect examples of the best way to approach the world and ourselves. Babies, children, and even animals are intuitively aware of their emotions, uninhibited by what someone else may think of them, and so they are the perfect example of what it means to be a self-reliant individual.

Emerson claims that boys, too, with their independent attitudes, lack of respect for authority, and willingness to pass judgment on everything they encounter, are examples of this complete trust in the self.

*The simple aphorism “Trust thyself” contrasts with the relatively complex sentences before and after it, emphasizing the importance of self-trust or self-reliance to authentic morality. Emerson then continues his practice of celebrating conventional examples of morality for unconventional reasons. He is also linking individual action to an underlying truth in the universe.*



*One of Emerson’s goals in the essay is to help average people understand how to live out the transcendentalist ideal of confident individuality. The use of babies, children, and animals as examples is effective because it demonstrates to the reader that these traits are common and even ubiquitous, which means that self-reliance is within reach for most people.*



*Emerson present boys as more examples of nonconformity in everyday life. While babies’ nonconformity comes out of a lack of self-consciousness, Emerson sees boys’ nonconformity as a willful choice taken despite a growing awareness of societal expectation.*



## PARAGRAPHS 6-9

Emerson believes that when we are alone, we can be like the babies and the boys he just described and pay attention to our inner voices. Emerson states, “Society everywhere is in conspiracy against the manhood of every one of its members.” When we get into society, however, society exerts its pressure on us, most specifically by asking us to be virtuous. Emerson compares society to a “joint-stock” company in which the price of investment is one’s manhood or independence. That price is usually what society sees as virtue, and what society most recognizes as virtue is conformity. Self-reliance, however, is the opposite of conformity, and Emerson sees most of society’s virtues as mere custom and deference to respected people.

According to Emerson, “Whoso would be a man must be a conformist.” Any individual who wants to be truly themselves must therefore be a nonconformist and question for themselves whether what society calls goodness is good after all. The only thing that is truly good is the “integrity of your own mind,” says Emerson, and the sooner a person realizes that, the sooner they will be free.

*Emerson uses emotional appeals and an extended metaphor to support his argument for nonconformist morality. The sympathetic tone he takes underscores his admission that nonconformity is hard, while the comparison to the “joint-stock” company taps into trends in nineteenth-century American society that rejected sources of conventional morality like the church. This analysis of the conflict between society’s demands and the individual marks a general theme of Emersonian thought—which influenced Nietzsche, who then influenced Freud, as a similar analysis is evidenced in in Freud’s work [Civilization and Its Discontents](#).*



*Emerson’s unconventional morality focuses on what the individual is able to uncover by contemplation of the self, one of the major pathways to the truth that was celebrated by transcendentalists.*



Emerson expresses disappointment that the individual conforms to conventional morality even when it contradicts what the individual intuitively knows to be the most moral course of action. Because of this tendency, people whose behavior should be questioned are not, as long as they espouse conventional morality. It would be better, Emerson believes, for people to take care of those for whom they genuinely care than to engage in charity because that is what conventional morality says we must do. Sometimes he himself conforms to societal expectations of goodness, he admits, but he knows that such conformity is evil because it does not arise from his own sense of right and wrong.

Emerson observes that conventional morality is effectively a toll that an individual pays to belong to society. For his part, Emerson would much rather do right by his own conscience, even if doing so means he incurs the disapproval of society. Ultimately, he tries to live for what his mind tells him is right, not what looks pleasing to society at large.

## PARAGRAPHS 10-11

Emerson states, “What I must do is all that concerns me, not what the people think,” meaning that he is not concerned with the appearance of goodness—he only cares about what he believes to be right. Living by such a rule is difficult, however, because there will always be someone who thinks it’s their job to tell you right from wrong. Emerson observes that living according to conventional morality is easy when you live in the world, and living according to your own sense of morality is easy when you live in solitude, but it takes an independent spirit for a person to live by his own conscience within society. The struggle to do so, he believes, is worth the effort.

Emerson’s primary objection to living one’s life on the basis of conventional morality is that it obscures who the individual really is as a person. Furthermore, a person who has embraced conventional morality is completely predictable and false to themselves in every way.

“For nonconformity, the world whips you with displeasure,” Emerson writes, and so it would be to the thinking person’s advantage to consider what expressions of disapproval really mean. It could mean nothing, after all, since conventional people’s displeasure changes like the wind. Displeasure from cultivated people is actually quite easy to deal with, because it is genteel but dealing with the displeasure of the “lowest” of people or the mob can be hard, because it is expressed loudly and ferociously.

*The tone in this passage is both sympathetic and provocative. By representing himself as a person who sometimes bows to societal pressure to be conventionally moral, Emerson appeals to ordinary people who may be fearful of the uncompromising attitude espoused by Emerson through most of the essay. The provocation in this section is in Emerson’s attacks on beliefs—abolition and the need for charity—that would have been held as almost unassailable in his social circle. The point of his unusual perspective on what is moral is to force the reader to step back and think more carefully about institutions and society as sources of morality.*



*Emerson’s use of “I” here and his example of his own behavior again shows his sympathetic, personal approach to the reader, while also highlighting his belief in the individual, as opposed to society, as the source of morality.*



*Emerson demonstrates his pragmatism by admitting that nonconformity is hard because almost the whole of society is built around conformity and certain concessions from the individual. That admission and the praise he heaps on the individual who refuses to conform while living in society serve as encouragement to the reader contemplating such a difficult path.*



*Emerson’s arguments in this section focus on the individual as the basis of morality, and the importance of living out one’s individuality authentically even in the face of societal pressure.*



*While Emerson generally celebrates the common man and the individual in this essay, this passage makes clear his view that the individual in the aggregate—“the mob”—is not a force for good in American society. This passage also continues Emerson’s discussion of what makes nonconformist morality so difficult.*



## PARAGRAPHS 12-16

Emerson says the other thing that prevents trust in oneself is the mistaken idea that consistency is a virtue. People judge who we are by our past acts and words, Emerson says, and so we are afraid to go against them today. Why drag around this “corpse of your memory,” Emerson asks, when really there is nothing to be lost by contradicting it? The individual who would be self-reliant should instead simply live in the present. Such consistency is “the hobgoblin of little minds,” and every individual should freely contradict themselves without fear of the possibility of being misunderstood. Doing so would put a person in the company of all the famous and good people in Western culture—whom Emerson goes on to list.

With regards to consistency, Emerson reminds the reader that human **nature** has its own internal consistency, so it truly is impossible for a person to do something against their own nature, as long as that person is honest with themselves. The self-reliant individual has as much consistency as any part of the natural world, a point Emerson makes with several metaphors that compare human nature to mountain ranges, pines, and a swallow. “The Andes or Himmaleh” mountains look jagged if observed from close up, for example, but look more uniform if one observes them from a distance. He also compares human nature with the zigzagging course of a ship that, seen on the large scale, sticks to a path that brings it to its final destination. Persistence in living according to one’s own conscience will always bring a person to the right course of action, and the impact of such actions is cumulative, a truth that is readily illustrated, Emerson believes, in the lives of people admired in the past for greatness.

## PARAGRAPH 17-20

Emerson’s wish for his age is that people will finally come to understand how ridiculous consistency and conformity are. Conformity to society should therefore be actively opposed, and Emerson hopes that the individual will “reprimand the smooth mediocrity and squalid contentment of the times, and hurl in the face of custom, and trade, and office, the fact which is the upshot of all history, that there is a great responsible Thinker and Actor working wherever a man works” —that is, the Oversoul or God. In fact, Emerson believes that a clear-eyed examination of the people cited as the sources of morality—Jesus, for example—will reveal that they were simply individuals who lived with perfect trust in themselves.

*Emerson is attacking the Enlightenment ideals of reason and order as the basis of individual and societal standards and is instead embracing Romantic ideals by celebrating inconsistency and comparing memory to a “corpse.” His long list of historical figures who are celebrated for their inconsistency rather than their adherence to institutions also provides encouragement and inspiration for individuals who want to reject conventional morality.*



*Contemplation of nature is an important practice for transcendentalists and Romantics, so Emerson’s many uses of examples drawn from the natural world are designed to point to nature as a source of truth and inspiration for how to relate to the universe. Emerson also uses another metaphor—the immediate course of a ship when observed in light of its overall journey—to strengthen support for his argument that inconsistency is sometimes merely a matter of perception. The references to nature and the concrete idea of a ship’s path make Emerson’s argument more comprehensible and less abstract.*



*Emerson’s essay is primarily directed toward the individual, but the discussion in this section makes it clear that embracing a more individualistic, nonconformist morality also has the potential to have a large-scale impact on society. Emerson also makes explicit references to transcendentalist beliefs with regards to the individual, God, and the universe, namely that all three are connected by a transcendent truth. Contemplating the individual is therefore one of the important ways the individual can find truth.*



Given that the people commonly revered by society were just individuals with complete self-trust, Emerson says, modern individuals should take heart that their intuitions and self-trust are equal to anyone else's. An ordinary person might think that there is nothing in them that "corresponds to the force which built a tower or sculptured a marble god," or might feel that "a palace, a statue, or a costly book have an alien or forbidding air." But a more self-reliant attitude would help the individual to understand that their own human perceptions are more important than the physical art or architecture they perceive: these objects are "suits for his notice, petitioners to his faculties" and not anything to feel overawed by.

*Emerson's argument here is that individual perceptions are on par with or even more important than the actual works or texts that inspire those perceptions. His inversion of the usual hierarchy of sources of truth reflects both his belief in nonconformity and his total trust in the individual as a source of truth. These concrete descriptions of how to look at high art or architecture also provide examples for the reader of how to live in the world as a self-reliant person.*



## PARAGRAPHS 21-24

Emerson believes that there is something that draws us to people who live with self-trust. What is the basis of that self-trust, he asks, which draws our admiration in the same way a star would? According to Emerson, "We denote this primary wisdom as Intuition, whilst all later teachings are tuitions." The ultimate source of self-trust and "the essence of genius" is intuition, and all other beliefs and teachings are built upon that foundation.

*Individual intuition, along with nature, is the centerpiece of the transcendentalist approach to finding truth. Emerson uses the metaphor of the star to drive home both of these points.*



We can recognize intuition in moments of self-reflection, Emerson says—"calm hours" that reveal the underlying unity of everything. The soul, space, light, and time are unified because they are all from the same source. We forget this merely from force of habit, but in truth "[w]e lie in the lap of immense intelligence, which makes us receivers of its truth and organs of its activity." If we observe the universe at work, especially in **nature**, we will become wise. Everything in existence can serve as a source of truth, and our ability to perceive justice and truth are really just the universe expressing reality through us. Emerson distinguishes these perceptions from intellectual notions of our experiences by noting that perceptions are involuntary and spontaneous (and thus worthy of our trust), while intellectual notions are the result of an individual's conscious choice (and thus less likely to be worthy of our complete trust).

*The highly abstract language in this section is used to represent the transcendentalist perspective on the relationship between God and the individual, which is sometimes mediated by nature. That abstraction is balanced by the simplicity of what he advocates: contemplation of the self or contemplation of nature. Emerson's distinction between perception of experiences and intellectual notions of experience is also another example of his prioritizing intuition over other sources of knowledge, including reason itself.*



Emerson believes that the ability to tap into the underlying unity of existence—God, in this case—through perception means that people should never allow anything to get in the way of that perception. Therefore, anyone who insists that the individual should turn to conventional means of understanding the divine—"means, temples, text, teachers"—should be dismissed out of hand. All these things of the past are meaningless when it comes to the soul perceiving.

*Emerson makes an explicit attack on societally sanctioned sources of truth, further emphasizing the importance of nonconformity to becoming truly moral. That attack is specifically grounded in the transcendentalist perspective on the individual as the source of truth and Emerson's trust in intuition over institutionalized religion.*



Rather than timidly looking to the past, individuals would be better off looking to **nature** to understand how to move through the world, Emerson posits. He observes that the blade of grass, the rose bud, the leaf bud, and the root are all complete without reference to others of their kind, and they live always in the present. People, on the other hand, continually look to the past or the future instead of living in the moment and perceiving the universe all around them. The individual will never achieve happiness unless they also live only in the present and reject the notion of time. This approach should be completely obvious, but conventional morality leads people to instead turn to some authority outside of themselves, such as the apostles who wrote the Christian scriptures. Emerson looks forward to a time when this weakness will subside.

*Emerson puts imagery of nature to various uses in order to illustrate important aspects of self-reliance. His first use of natural imagery, the rose, is an example of how humans should live without worrying about the past. He also presents a flower in each of its stages of development as still being a flower in order to support the idea that the past should not be the central force that determines how an individual understands morality.*



## PARAGRAPHS 25-28

Emerson then explains the central point of the preceding discussion. He explains that his articulation of self-reliance is really only an approximation of the intuition from which it arose. Each person is ultimately responsible for discovering what morality is for themselves. The moment when each individual discovers their own sense of morality will be one of transcendence, “above passion,” beyond time, and more expansive than the “[v]ast spaces of **nature**.”

*In this section, Emerson repeats his argument (and uses more references to nature) that the individual is the source of truth, again articulating this central belief associated with transcendentalism.*



Emerson claims that society hates that moment of transcendence because it upsets traditional hierarchies and conventional notions of morality. This ultimate form of self-reliance, “eminent virtue,” is extremely powerful and it allows individuals or groups of individuals who possess it to overrule the arbitrary powers that currently dominate society. Emerson respects even ordinary experiences—“Hardship, husbandry, hunting, whaling, war, eloquence, personal weight”—because they are a little closer to that notion of virtue than conventional morality, and he sees the same “principle of conservation and growth” at work in **nature**. Everything in nature, in fact, reflects self-reliance. Emerson believes that with an understanding of the supreme importance of self-reliance as virtue, the individual can confidently dismiss conventional morality, engage with God by staying at home rather than looking elsewhere, and live a life of simplicity that is worth much more than traditional notions of what is good.

*Part of Emerson’s purpose in writing this essay was to empower ordinary people to trust in themselves and their intuitions as truth. In support of that argument, Emerson highlights a number of ordinary activities, some of them mundane ones like hunting or taking care of one’s home/farm, to highlight the idea that anyone can live a moral life and can do so without relying on society. Emerson’s reference to these ordinary activities and the ability to find truth by staying at home would have been especially appealing to people of his time, since in some instances people were scattered across the Western frontier or miles away from formal churches.*





## PARAGRAPHS 29-32

Emerson laments that despite the good that could come from a self-reliant morality, society is still mostly influenced by conformity as morality. He believes that given the culture of his age, spiritual solitude (if not actual solitude, given all the demands of day-to-day life) probably still provides the best chance of the individual achieving self-reliance. If the individual cannot maintain that state, then at a minimum, Emerson believes they can still call out falseness wherever they see it, even if that means hurting or disappointing those who are closest to them; the obviousness of the individual's virtue will eventually bring others around.

The self-reliant individual will also experience blow-back from society as a whole, which will accuse the individual of embracing a complete lack of all morals. Emerson responds to this possible accusation by pointing out that the self-reliant individual can absolve themselves of guilt by making sure they have met responsibilities to those closest to them, or, if those responsibilities do not accord with that individual's notions of morality, by dismissing such concerns out of hand. This sounds easy, but it is not, says Emerson, since it "demands something god-like" to face down the mandates of conventional morality and society.

## PARAGRAPHS 33-34

Just looking at the weakness of society, Emerson says, should make the need for an unconventional morality clear. Emerson sees his age as one that is governed by fear, one that has produced no truly great people, and one that sorely lacks the ordinary people needed to reform what he sees as a broken American society. Everything commonly labeled as American, Emerson claims, is in fact merely borrowed from other cultures, and that which is not is in a poor state.

One can see this weakness of young men from American cities—Emerson calls them "city dolls"—who quit when confronted with any failure or setback in their pursuit of respected professions. Emerson instead admires "the sturdy lad from Vermont or New Hampshire" who tries his hand at all of the ordinary pursuits, and, grounded in a sense of self-trust and rugged individualism, rejects conventional sources of authority—it is he who builds the nation. Emerson believes such men to be worthy of our admiration, since they are the ones making history.

*Emerson emphasizes the more concrete and practical side of his approach to morality by acknowledging that for most people, solitude and the time for self-contemplation are luxuries. This acknowledgment would have appealed to the striving but very busy Americans he discusses in more detail at the end of the essay.*



*Emerson supports his case for the practicality of his brand of self-reliant morality by offering reasonable solutions for dealing with the pressures most people are likely to encounter if they embrace his nonconformist perspective. Anticipating objections and admitting that they may be partially true are argumentative tactics that are designed to disarm the skeptical reader.*



*Supporting his argument even further, Emerson returns to the implications of nonconformist morality for society. A common complaint of most cultural elites of the day was that the U.S. lacked its own culture. By blaming conformity for this lack of originality, Emerson taps into reformist and nationalistic impulses that were rising in the U.S. during this period.*



*Emerson sets up a contrast between the ineffectual "city boy" and the successful young man whose individualism allows him to accomplish great things. Such a comparison is designed to appeal to Emerson's audience, made up in part of New Englanders and of a U.S. that was largely rural and still struggling with the rise of urban areas. Further, this stereotypical binary is still evidenced in the American mythos even today, showing Emerson's lasting influence on his country's culture.*



## PARAGRAPHS 35-50

Emerson then moves to offer specific applications of self-reliance on a societal scale. He believes that self-reliance as a way of life can be applied to many elements of contemporary society, which is desperately in need of reform. American religion, which emphasizes appeals to something outside of the self for assistance, could instead become something that makes people more capable. A greater trust in the individual would end the hold outdated religions and philosophies have on morality.

Emerson also argues that self-reliance could have an impact on American culture as a whole. Rather than traveling abroad to become cultured in the traditional sense, Americans should turn towards home and use what they find there to create their own culture. Americans should also as a nation reject the idea that society is somehow supposed to progress across time. A more self-reliant nation would understand that traditional notions of progress are misreadings of the stops and starts that are common across all human history. Society does not ever really progress—what we normally call progress, like technology, really just weakens us.

Emerson also believes that the mania for basing our identities on what we own must stop, and people should instead understand that the truly valuable part of any person is their individuality. Finally, the growth of political parties and regional identities should also cease. People should instead simply govern themselves by individual intuition. In the final analysis, Emerson says, all that is good is rooted in the self-reliance of the individual.

*One of the challenges of living out Emerson's philosophy is its abstraction. In this section, Emerson systematically imagines how self-reliance could reform every aspect of American society. These practical applications address major societal issues of the day, especially the concerns that gave birth to the Second Great Awakening.*



*Another significant concern that Emerson addresses in this section is the anxiety that many Americans had about the continuing influence of Europe, especially England, on American culture. Emerson's insistence on the U.S. as a legitimate source of culture is based in part on his own perspective of nature as a source of truth. One of the criticisms of the U.S. by Europeans was that it was too rural and provincial to make any claims on civilization and culture. Emerson undercuts this criticism of American culture by turning Americans' lack of amenities associated with progress—especially cities—into a strength.*



*Another significant tension in early American culture was the rise of a striving middle class that was eager to attain property and become more engaged in the political progress to support that desire for gain; their interests clashed with those of an older, more aristocratic ruling class and gave birth to rival political parties. In this last section, Emerson addresses practical concerns over factionalism and class by offering self-reliance as a counter to the materialism he sees as a danger to American society.*





## HOW TO CITE

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