

# Ralph Waldo Emerson

## Self-Reliance (1841)

- Born in 1803, the son of a conservative Unitarian minister.
- Father died when he was eight, leaving family in meager circumstances.
- Influenced by an eccentric aunt, who encouraged his education and broadminded thinking.
- Attended Harvard at age 14, graduating at 18 and working as a schoolmaster before studying theology.
- Ordained as junior pastor of Boston's Second Church (1829) where Cotton and Increase Mather preached more than a century before.
- Married Ellen Tucker who died of tuberculosis sixteen months later.
- Resigned his pastorate in 1832, because of his skepticism with the theological doctrines such as the Lord's Supper.
- Traveled to Europe meeting well-known writers, Coleridge, William Wordsworth, and Thomas Carlyle.
- Moved to Concord, Massachusetts, began lecturing and writing.
- Married Lydia Jackson; fathered four children. His first born, Waldo, died in 1842 at age 5.

- Believed in individualism, non-conformity, and the need for harmony between man and nature.
- A proponent of abolition.
- His first book, *Nature* (1836), influenced by a range of idealistic philosophies, confirmed his future as a prose writer -- establishing him as the center of the **Transcendental Movement**.
- ***Self Reliance*** is his most famous collection of essays. These essays were gathered from his journals and lectures and covered a period of years. The earliest essay from 1832, the year he left the pulpit.
- Contributed to the Transcendentalists' magazine, *The Dial*, serving as editor from 1842-1844.
- Known as a key figure in the "**New England Renaissance**" [helping American Literature find its place in world literature].
- Gained recognition for his poetry [collected in 1846].
- An inspiration for many writers, especially Henry Thoreau and Walt Whitman.

- Self reliance can be defined as the bringing into the light one's inner views on what is true and meaningful, and in the process enriching an entire community through diversity.
- "The power which resided in him is new in nature, and none but he knows what that is which he can do, nor does he know until he tries."
- Emerson calls for greater self-reliance, "a new respect for the divinity in man," bringing "revolutionary" change in all relations – religion and prayer, education and literature, pursuits, modes of living, property and views, and associations.
- In Emerson's time, America still looked to Europe for its art, architecture, literature, instead of developing its own. He believed that by adopting the talent of another, one could only claim only half possession. He was critical of Americans for not using their God-given individuality to become more than mere imitators.

- True happiness and fulfillment can only come through a recognition of one's own uniqueness, talent and effort.
- Envy is ignorance; imitation is suicide. It's only when a person puts his heart into his work and does his best that he is truly happy and at peace.
- Do not be ashamed to speak your unique thoughts, "divine idea[s]" rather than quoting the words of some former "saint or sage". Roses do not make reference to former roses, but "exist [perfectly] with God today."
- Actions should be genuine, honest and natural. Don't be afraid of being inconsistent -- genuine action will explain itself over time, just as the zigzag path of a ship's voyage seen over a distance straightens itself.

- Truth comes from within and lies beyond or “transcends” the knowledge we obtain from our senses. Trust in the truth, in your intuition.
- Accept your place in the world and do not cower in a corner, hemmed in by conformity. Be a nonconformist. An infant conforms to no one. The world conforms to it.
- Do not give to causes that you do not believe in, just because you feel society expects it. Trust yourself.
- There will be those who think they know your duty better than you do. Trust yourself.
- Do not be concerned about what others think. Trust that you have the innate wisdom from God within.
- Become intuitive and in touch with yourself. “Nothing is at last sacred but the integrity of your own mind.”

- Emerson advocates independence not only of thought but also of action. Society continually changes, do not let these changes encumber your virtue.
- When a man builds a coach, he loses the use of his feet. If one uses crutches, he loses muscle support. He wears a watch and forgets how to tell time by the sun.
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- Emerson believed that reliance on property and the government to protect it was a lack in self-reliance. Men have looked away from themselves at things too long and now measure each other by what he has not by what he is.
- Emerson describes dependence on foreign goods as leading to a “slavish respect for numbers.”
- Emerson recognized men’s gamble with Fortune, gaining and losing all, but concludes that nothing can bring you peace but yourself.

# Historical Significance

- *Self-Reliance* [1841], had a great impact on Emerson's society, becoming his most well-known essay. *Self-Reliance*, together with *Nature*, established Emerson as a writer and lecturer. He became regarded as the founder of the Transcendental movement, a distinctly American philosophy emphasizing optimism, individuality, and mysticism. He was one of the most influential literary figures of the nineteenth century.
- As a result of the new philosophy introduced in *Self-Reliance*, America developed literature and art uniquely different from any other country in the world and established for the first time America's place in the world of art and literature. Emerson, through his writing of *Self-Reliance*, had an impact on future generations also. He became an inspiration to such writers as Walt Whitman and Henry David Thoreau. Today, portions of *Self-Reliance* have been so quoted that many are now cliché. The philosophy of individual independence has, to some extent, become the American way.

- Self-Reliance had a significant impact not only on American writers and artists, but also on Unitarians and the liberally religious opening them to science, Eastern religions and a naturalistic mysticism. In addition to group impact, Self-Reliance, had an impact on the individual American, inspiring him to listen to and heed the still, small voice of God within.
- The impact of Self-Reliance and the subsequent Transcendental movement was one of supreme importance extending a challenge to Americans to use their God-given talents for the betterment of the individual and thus the community. It proved to be a positive, lasting, truly American change.