

from *Self-Reliance*

I read the other day some verses written by an eminent painter which were original and not conventional. Always the soul hears an admonition in such lines, let the subject be what it may. The sentiment they instill is of more value than any thought they may contain. To believe your own thought, to believe that what is true for you in your private heart, is true for all men—that is genius. Speak your latent conviction and it shall be the universal sense; for always the inmost becomes the outmost, and our first thought is rendered back to us by the trumpets of the Last Judgment. Familiar as the voice of the mind is to each, the highest merit we ascribe to Moses, Plato,<sup>1</sup> and Milton,<sup>2</sup> is that they set at naught books and traditions, and spoke not what men did but what they thought. A man should learn to detect and watch that gleam of light which flashes across his mind from within, more than the luster of the firmament of bards and sages. Yet he dismisses without notice his thought, because it is his. In every work of genius we recognize our own rejected thoughts; they come back to us with a certain alienated majesty. Great works of art have no more affecting lesson for us than this. They teach us to abide by our spontaneous impression with good humored inflexibility then most when the whole cry of voices is on the other side. Else, tomorrow a stranger will say with masterly good sense precisely what we have thought and felt all the time, and we shall be forced to take with shame our own opinion from another.

There is a time in every man's education when he arrives at the conviction that envy is ignorance; that imitation is suicide; that he

must take himself for better, for worse, as his portion; that though the wide universe is full of good, no kernel of nourishing corn can come to him but through his toil bestowed on that plot of ground which is given to him to till. . . .

Trust thyself: every heart vibrates to that iron string. Accept the place the divine Providence has found for you; the society of your contemporaries, the connection of events. Great men have always done so and confided themselves childlike to the genius of their age, betraying their perception that the Eternal was stirring at their heart, working through their hands, predominating in all their being. And we are now men, and must accept in the highest mind the same transcendent destiny; and not pinched in a corner, not cowards fleeing before a revolution, but redeemers and benefactors, pious aspirants to be noble clay plastic under the Almighty effort, let us advance and advance on Chaos and the Dark. . . .

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. How is a boy the master of society; 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

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1. Plato (plā' tō): A Greek philosopher who lived from 427?-347 B.C.

2. Milton: John Milton, the famous English poet who wrote "Paradise Lost"; he lived from 1608-1674.

himself never about consequences, about interests: he gives an independent, genuine verdict. You must court him: he does not court you. But the man is, as it were, clapped into jail by his consciousness. As soon as he has once acted or spoken with éclat, he is a committed person, watched by the sympathy or the hatred of hundreds whose affections must now enter into his account. There is no Lethe<sup>3</sup> for this. Ah, that he could pass again into his neutral, godlike independence! . . .

Society everywhere is in conspiracy against the manhood of every one of its members. Society is a joint-stock company in which the members agree for the better securing of his bread to each shareholder, to surrender the liberty and culture of the eater. The virtue in most request is conformity. Self-reliance is its aversion. It loves not realities and creators, but names and customs.

Whoso would be a man must be a nonconformist. He who would gather immortal palms must not be hindered by the name of goodness, but must explore if it be goodness. Nothing is at last sacred but the integrity of your own mind. Absolve you to yourself, and you shall have the suffrage of the world. I remember an answer which when quite young I was prompted to make to a valued adviser who was wont to importune me with the dear old doctrines of the church. On my saying, "What have I to do with the sacredness of traditions, if I live wholly from within?" my friend suggested—"But these impulses may be from below, not from above." I replied, "They do not seem to me to be such, but if I am the devil's child, I will live then from the devil." No law can be sacred to me but that of my nature. Good and bad are but names very readily transferable to that or this; the only right is what is after my constitution, the only wrong what is against it. A man is to carry himself in the presence of all opposition as if every thing were titular and ephemeral but he. I am ashamed to think how easily we capitulate to badges and names, to

large societies and dead institutions. Every decent and well spoken individual affects and sways me more than is right. I ought to go upright and vital, and speak the rude truth in all ways. . . .

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. It is the harder, because you will always find those who think they know what is your duty better than you know it. 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.

The objection to conforming to usages that have become dead to you, is, that it scatters your force. It loses your time and blurs the impression of your character. If you maintain a dead church, contribute to a dead Bible Society, vote with a great party either for the Government or against it, spread your table like base housekeepers—under all these screens I have difficulty to detect the precise man you are. And, of course, so much force is withdrawn from your proper life. But do your thing, and I shall know you. Do your work, and you shall reinforce yourself. . . .

For nonconformity the world whips you with its displeasure. And therefore a man must know how to estimate a sour face. The bystanders look askance on him in the public street or in the friend's parlor. If this aversion had its origin in contempt and resistance like his own, he might well go home with a sad countenance; but the sour faces of the multitude, like their sweet faces, have no deep cause,—disguise no god, but are put on and off as the wind blows, and a newspaper directs. Yet is the discontent of the multitude more formidable than that of the senate and

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3. Lethe (lē' thē): a river in Hades whose waters cause drinkers to forget their past.

the college. It is easy enough for a firm man who knows the world to brook the rage of the cultivated classes. Their rage is decorous and prudent, for they are timid as being very vulnerable themselves. But when to their feminine rage the indignation of the people is added, 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, it needs the habit of magnanimity and religion to treat it godlike as a trifle of no concernment.

The other terror that scares us from self-trust is our consistency; a reverence for our past act or word, because the eyes of others have no other data for computing our orbit than our past acts, and we are loath to disappoint them.

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. He may as well concern himself with his shadow on the wall. Out upon your guarded lips! Sew them up with packthread, do. Else, if you would be a man, speak what you think today in words as hard as cannon balls, and tomorrow speak what tomorrow thinks in hard words again, though it contradict every thing you said today. Ah, then, exclaim the aged ladies, you shall be sure to be misunderstood.

#### Getting at Meaning

1. How does Emerson define genius? Explain the statement, "In every work of genius we recognize our own rejected thoughts."
2. Explain Emerson's statement that every person must learn "that envy is ignorance; that imitation is suicide."
3. According to Emerson what happens to a person's independence as he or she grows older? Explain the statement, "... the man is, as it were, clapped into jail by his consciousness."

Misunderstood! It is a right fool's word. Is it so bad then to be misunderstood? Pythagoras<sup>4</sup> was misunderstood, and Socrates,<sup>5</sup> and Jesus,<sup>6</sup> and Luther, and Copernicus,<sup>6</sup> and Galileo,<sup>7</sup> and Newton,<sup>8</sup> and every pure and wise spirit that ever took flesh. To be great is to be misunderstood. . . .

The man must be so much that he must make all circumstances indifferent—put all means into the shade. This all great men are and do. Every true man is a cause, a country, and an age; requires infinite spaces and numbers and time fully to accomplish his thought; and posterity seem to follow his steps as a procession. A man Caesar is born, and for ages after, we have a Roman Empire. Christ is born, and millions of minds so grow and cleave to his genius, that he is confounded with virtue and the possible of man. An institution is the lengthened shadow of one man. . . .

4. Pythagoras (pə thag' ə rəs): a Greek philosopher and mathematician who died around 447 B.C.

5. Socrates (sək' rə tēz'): a Greek philosopher who lived from 470?-399 B.C.

6. Copernicus (kō pər' ni kəs): a Polish astronomer, the founder of modern astronomy, who lived from 1473-1543.

7. Galileo (gal' ə lē' ō): an Italian astronomer and physicist, who lived from 1564-1642.

8. Newton (nōŏt' 'n): an English mathematician and natural philosopher, who lived from 1642-1727.

4. In what ways is society "everywhere . . . in conspiracy against the manhood of every one of its members"? Summarize Emerson's views on society.

5. Emerson goes so far as to say, "Whoso would be a man must be a nonconformist." What reasons does he give for valuing nonconformity to this extent?

6. What is Emerson's objection to conforming to "usages" that no longer have meaning? What examples does he give?

7. Why does Emerson believe that consistency is not as important as most people say it is? Explain his

famous statement, "A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds. . . ."

8. Notice the examples that Emerson gives of geniuses who have been misunderstood. Why have these people been misunderstood? According to Emerson what enabled these geniuses to do their work anyway?

### Developing Skills in Reading Literature

1. **Essay.** As noted earlier an essay is a brief, nonfiction composition that offers an opinion on a subject, frequently with a persuasive intent. Some essays are formal and impersonal, and the major argument is developed systematically. Other essays are informal, personal, and loosely structured. The informal essay often includes anecdotes and humor.

Would you describe "Self-Reliance" as formal or informal? In answering the question consider the essay's organization, its diction, and its syntax, or the structure of its sentences.

Essays are sometimes classified as descriptive, narrative, or expository, though the same essay may be all three at once. Descriptive essays deal primarily with the appearances of people, objects, and places, working through images that appeal to the senses. Narrative essays tell stories. Expository essays focus mainly on presenting information.

Which type of essay is "Self-Reliance"? Do you see elements of the other essay types in its paragraphs? Explain your response.

2. **Metaphor.** Emerson uses a metaphor to illustrate his views on society. He says, "Society is a joint-stock company in which the members agree for the better securing of his bread to each shareholder, to surrender the liberty and culture of the eater." Discuss this comparison. Is the metaphor a true picture of society? What does Emerson conclude is the problem with society as dramatized in this metaphor?

3. **Aphorism.** Throughout "Self-Reliance" Emerson's style is characterized by the frequent use of

aphorisms; for example, "Whoso would be a man must be a nonconformist" and "A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds. . . ."

Explain the aphorism "For nonconformity the world-whips you with its displeasure. And therefore a man must know how to estimate a sour face." What other statements in the essay would you label as aphorisms? Select three or four and explain their meanings.

### Developing Writing Skills

See Handbook: How To Write About Literature, page 945, Lessons 1-6, 8.

1. **Explaining an Idea.** Select an aphorism from "Self-Reliance" and write a well developed paragraph in which you discuss the truth of the statement. Use examples from your own life and from your observation of others to support your ideas.

2. **Analyzing Theme.** Emerson says, "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."

Write a five paragraph essay in which you analyze this statement. In the opening paragraph place the statement in the context of the essay. Devote one paragraph to each part of Emerson's statements, relating his ideas to your own life and to the world around you. For example, in one paragraph discuss how "It is easy in the world to live after the world's opinion. . . ." Explain how this has been true in your own life and where you see its truth in the lives of others. Use specific examples wherever you can. In the concluding paragraph summarize briefly your main points or present a final thought on Emerson's philosophy as embodied in the quoted statement.