Summary and Analysis of Self-Reliance- About Self-Reliance

Published first in 1841 in *Essays* and then in the 1847 revised edition of *Essays*, "Self-Reliance" took shape over a long period of time. Throughout his life, Emerson kept detailed journals of his thoughts and actions, and he returned to them as a source for many of his essays. Such is the case with "Self-Reliance," which includes materials from journal entries dating as far back as 1832. In addition to his journals, Emerson drew on various lectures he delivered between 1836 and 1839.

The first edition of the essay bore three epigraphs: a Latin line, meaning "Do not seek outside yourself"; a six-line stanza from Beaumont and Fletcher's *Honest Man's Fortune*; and a four-line stanza that Emerson himself wrote. Emerson dropped his stanza from the revised edition of the essay, but modern editors have since restored it. All three epigraphs stress the necessity of relying on oneself for knowledge and guidance.

The essay has three major divisions: the importance of self-reliance (paragraphs 1-17), self-reliance and the individual (paragraphs 18-32), and self-reliance and society (paragraphs 33-50). As a whole, it promotes self-reliance as an ideal, even a virtue, and contrasts it with various modes of dependence or conformity.
Because the essay does not have internally marked divisions delineating its three major sections, readers should number each paragraph in pencil as this discussion will make reference to them.

Summary or Paragraphs 1-17 - The Importance of Self-Reliance

Emerson begins his major work on individualism by asserting the importance of thinking for oneself rather than meekly accepting other people's ideas. As in almost all of his work, he promotes individual experience over the knowledge gained from books: "To believe that what is true in your private heart is true for all men — that is genius." The person who scorns personal intuition and, instead, chooses to rely on others' opinions

lacks the creative power necessary for robust, bold individualism. This absence of conviction results not in different ideas, as this person expects, but in the acceptance of the same ideas — now secondhand thoughts — that this person initially intuited. The lesson Emerson would have us learn? "Trust thyself," a motto that ties together this first section of the essay. To rely on others' judgments is cowardly, without inspiration or hope. A person with self-esteem, on the other hand, exhibits originality and is childlike — unspoiled by selfish needs — yet mature. It is to this adventure of self-trust that Emerson invites us: We are to be guides and adventurers, destined to participate in an act of creation modeled on the classical myth of bringing order out of chaos.

Although we might question his characterizing the self-esteemed individual as childlike, Emerson maintains that children provide models of self-reliant behavior because they are too young to be cynical, hesitant, or hypocritical. He draws an analogy between boys and the idealized individual: Both are masters of self-reliance because they apply their own standards to all they see, and because their loyalties cannot be coerced. This rebellious individualism contrasts with the attitude of cautious adults, who, because they are overly concerned with reputation, approval, and the opinion of others, are always hesitant or unsure; consequently, adults have great difficulty acting spontaneously or genuinely.

Emerson now focuses his attention on the importance of an individual's resisting pressure to conform to external norms, including those of society, which conspires to defeat self-reliance in its members. The process of so-called "maturing" becomes a process of conforming that Emerson challenges. In the paragraph that begins with the characteristic aphorism "Whoso would be a man, must be a nonconformist," he asserts a radical, even extreme, position on the matter. Responding to the objection that devotedly following one's inner voice is wrong because the intuition may be evil, he writes, "No law can be sacred to me but that of my nature . . . the only right is what is after my constitution, the only wrong what is against it." In other words, it is better to be true to an evil nature than to behave "correctly" because of society's demands or conventions.

The non-conformist in Emerson rejects many of society's moral sentiments. For example, he claims that an abolitionist should worry more about his or her own family and community at home than about "black folk a thousand miles off," and he chides people who give money to the poor. "Are they *my* poor?" he asks. He refuses to support morality through donations to organizations rather than directly to individuals. The concrete act of charity, in other words, is real and superior to abstract or theoretical morality.

In a subdued, even gentle voice, Emerson states that it is better to live truly and obscurely than to have one's goodness extolled in public. It makes no difference to him whether his actions are praised or ignored. The important thing is to act independently: "What I must do is all that concerns me, not what the people think . . . the great man is he who in the midst of the crowd keeps with perfect sweetness the independence of solitude." Note that Emerson contrasts the individual to society — "the crowd" — but does not advocate the individual's physically withdrawing from other people. There is a difference between enjoying solitude and being a social hermit.

Outlining his reasons for objecting to conformity, Emerson asserts that acquiescing to public opinion wastes a person's life. Those around you never get to know your real personality. Even worse, the time spent maintaining allegiances to "communities of opinion" saps the energy needed in the vital act of creation — the most important activity in our lives — and distracts us from making any unique contribution to society. Conformity corrupts with a falseness that pervades our lives and our every action: ". . . every truth is not quite true." Finally, followers of public opinion are recognized as hypocrites even by the awkwardness and falsity of their facial expressions.

Shifting the discussion to how the ideal individual is treated, Emerson notes two enemies of the independent thinker: society's disapproval or scorn, and the individual's own sense of consistency. Consistency becomes a major theme in the discussion as he shows how it restrains independence and growth.

Although the scorn of "the cultivated classes" is unpleasant, it is, according to Emerson, relatively easy to ignore because it tends to be polite. However, the outrage of the masses is another matter; only the unusually independent person can stand firmly against the rancor of the whole of society.

The urge to remain consistent with past actions and beliefs inhibits the full expression of an individual's nature. The metaphor of a corpse as the receptacle of memory is a shocking — but apt — image of the individual who is afraid of contradiction. In this vivid image of the "corpse of . . . memory," Emerson asks why people hold onto old beliefs or positions merely because they have taken these positions in the past. Being obsessed with whether or not you remain constant in your beliefs needlessly drains energy — as does conformity — from the act of living. After all, becoming mature involves the evolution of ideas, which is the wellspring of creativity. It is most important to review constantly and to reevaluate past decisions and opinions, and, if necessary, to escape from old ideas by admitting that they are faulty, just as the biblical Joseph fled from a

seducer by leaving his coat in her hands, an image particularly potent in characterizing the pressure to conform as both seductive and degrading.

Noteworthy in this discussion on consistency is the famous phrase "A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds." The term "hobgoblin," which symbolizes fear of the unknown, furthers the effect produced by the "corpse" of memory and reinforces Emerson's condemnation of a society that demands conformity. Citing cultures that traditionally frown on inconsistency, Emerson points out that history's greatest thinkers were branded as outcasts for their original ideas — and scorned as such by their peers. Notable among these figures is Jesus Christ.

What appears to be inconsistency is often a misunderstanding based on distortion or perspective. Emerson develops this idea by comparing the progress of a person's thoughts to a ship sailing against the wind: In order to make headway, the ship must tack, or move in a zigzag line that eventually leads to an identifiable end. In the same way, an individual's apparently contradictory acts or decisions show consistency when that person's life is examined in its entirety and not in haphazard segments. We must "scorn appearances" and do what is right or necessary, regardless of others' opinions or criticisms.

Society is not the measure of all things; the individual is. "A true man," Emerson's label for the ideal individual, "belongs to no other time or place, but is the centre of all things. Where he is, there is nature." Nature is not only those objects around us, but also our individual natures. And these individual natures allow the great thinker — the ideal individual — to battle conformity and consistency.

Summary Paragraphs 18-32 - Self-Reliance and the Individual

The second section of "Self-Reliance" offers more suggestions for the individual who wants to achieve the desirable quality of self-reliance. Emerson begins with a directive: "Let a man then know his worth, and keep things under his feet." Material objects, especially those that are imposing — Emerson cites magnificent buildings and heroic works of art, including costly books — often intimidate people by making them feel of lesser worth. This feeling of inferiority is a mistake: Humans determine an object's worth, not vice versa. Emerson illustrates this point by relating a fable of a drunkard who is brought in off the street and treated like a royal personage; the unthinking individual is

like the drunkard, living only half awake, until he comes to his senses by exercising reason and discovers that he is actually a prince.

One cause for our not exercising reason is the uncritical manner in which we read. Complaining that we often enjoy reading about the exploits of famous people while ignoring or devaluing books about ordinary righteousness and virtue, Emerson asks why people view the acts of well-known individuals as more important than the behavior of ordinary citizens, even though the good or bad behavior of ordinary people can have effects as noble or as dire as the actions of the powerful. Condemning European monarchies, he considers why royalty is accorded exaggerated respect despite the equal importance of common people; he can reason only that ordinary people respect royalty in recognition that a king or a queen represents the "royal" nature of every person, an argument he rejects outright.

Given the inferiority that an individual can feel when confronted by conformity and consistency, and now commonality, Emerson wonders how people remain confident in their abilities. The answer is provided by "that source, at once the essence of genius, of virtue, and of life, which we call Spontaneity or Instinct." The wisdom that springs from spontaneous instinct is Intuition, or inner knowledge from directly apprehending an object. All other knowledge is mere tuition, secondhand beliefs received from others instead of a uniquely individual response that was sparked by the source itself. This notion of Intuition is closely related to a main idea of transcendentalism: An all-encompassing "soul" animates the universe and is the source of all wisdom and inspiration. Direct knowledge, or intuition, is gained as a gift from this overwhelming source. But exactly what Emerson means by "Intuition" and "soul" is difficult to grasp, even for him: "If we ask whence this comes, if we seek to pry into the soul that causes, all philosophy is at fault. Its presence or its absence is all we can affirm."

Emerson now introduces a contrasting idea to the portrait he has drawn of the intuitive individual: the characteristics and behavior of the "thoughtless man," who cannot see the depth of truth being used by the self-reliant, intuitive person. Thoughtless people cannot understand self-reliant individuals' seeming inconsistencies because thoughtless people are too worried about being consistent — as society oppressively wants them to be.

Transcendence is gained only through intuitive knowledge. Describing this transcendent quality is difficult, Emerson says, because we have no concrete words for such an abstract state of mind. It is beyond language and can be conveyed only in negatives, by telling what it is not: "And now at last the highest truth of this subject remains unsaid;

probably cannot be said; for all that we say is the far-off remembering of the intuition." This type of understanding does not come from any teacher or intermediary; moreover, it reaches deeper than any kind of emotion, such as hope, gratitude, or even joy. Attempting to relate transcendence to what he has been saying about self-reliance, Emerson emphasizes the important process of eternally evolving for the better. The self-reliant individual is not beholden to society: Although society may remain stagnant, the individual constantly changes, growing more virtuous and noble. This person gains something that others in society do not: namely, the knowledge — and, by extension, the power — of the permeating spirit that animates all things, be they natural objects — plants, animals, or trees — or social activities — for example, commerce or war.

In the paragraphs leading up to this section's conclusion, Emerson moves from analysis to exhortation, offering suggestions on how we should act. Although everyone can become a model of self-reliance for the improvement of society, he asserts that "we" — the lazy, non-self-reliant individuals — are a "mob." Too many people, he says, are led by suggestions, by desires, and by feelings of responsibility. Instead of practicing independent self-reliance, we give in to others' demands. He urges us to place truth before politeness, value integrity more than comfort, and abandon hypocrisy in favor of honesty. Acknowledging that the self-reliant individual risks being misunderstood as merely selfish or self-indulgent, he vows that individuals who rigorously follow their consciences will be more "godlike" than individuals who follow society's laws.

In the final third of "Self-Reliance," Emerson considers the benefits to society of the kind of self-reliance he has been describing. His examination of society demonstrates the need for a morality of self-reliance, and he again criticizes his contemporary Americans for being followers rather than original thinkers. Condemning the timidity of most young people, whose greatest fear is failure, he levels his complaint especially at urban, educated youths, unfavorably comparing them with a hypothetical farm lad, who engages himself in many occupations largely self-taught and entrepreneurial. The comparison between the city youths and the country fellow is to be expected given the quality of life Emerson traditionally assigns to each environment. Of no surprise is his favoring the bucolic life.

Emerson now focuses on four social arenas in which self-reliant individuals are needed: religion, which fears creativity; culture, which devalues individualism; the arts, which teach us only to imitate; and society, which falsely values so-called progress.

Religion, Emerson says, could benefit from a good dose of self-reliance because self-reliance turns a person's mind from petty, self-centered desires to a benevolent wish for the common good. Religion's main problem is its fear of individual creativity. As a consequence, it opts for the art of mimicry: "Everywhere I am hindered of meeting God in my brother, because he has shut his own temple doors, and recites fables merely of his brother's, or his brother's brother's God." Any religion can introduce new ideas and systems of thought to an individual, but religious creeds are dangerous because they substitute a set of ready answers for the independent thought required of the self-reliant person.

Although we might question Emerson's relating travel — or culture — to religion, both substitute an external source of wisdom for an individual's inner wisdom. The person who travels "with the hope of finding [something] greater than he knows . . . travels away from himself, and grows old even in youth among old things." The reference to youth reminds us that the self-reliant individual is childlike and original, whereas a person who travels for the wrong reasons creates nothing new and chooses instead to be surrounded by "old things."

The urge to travel is a symptom, according to Emerson, of our educational system's failure: Because schools teach us only to imitate, too often we travel to experience others' works of art rather than create them ourselves. In "The American Scholar," Emerson advises young scholars to break with European literary traditions.

Likewise, in "Self-Reliance," he addresses American artists with many of the same arguments: "Beauty, convenience, grandeur of thought, and quaint expression are as near to us as to any," if only American artisans would consider "the climate, the soil, the length of the day, the wants of the people, the habit and form of the government."

Emerson's criticism of society, and especially its ill-conceived notion of progress, differs from his earlier comments on the subject. The progression of ideas symbolized in the zigzag line of a ship is not what he is addressing here. He is arguing that society does not necessarily improve from material changes. For example, advances in technology result in the loss of certain kinds of wisdom: The person who has a watch loses the ability to tell time by the sun's position in the sky, and improvements in transportation and war machinery are not accompanied by corresponding improvements in either the physical or mental stature of human beings. The most effective image for this static nature of society is the wave. A wave moves in and out from the shoreline, but the water that composes it does not; changes occur in society, but "society never advances."

The last two paragraphs of "Self-Reliance" are a critique of property and fortune. Emerson castigates reliance on property, as he earlier attacked reliance on the thinking of others, as a means to a full life. Rather than admiring property, the cultivated man is ashamed of it, especially of property that is not acquired by honest work. Respect for property leads to a distortion of political life: Society is corrupted by people who regard government as primarily a protector of property rather than of persons.

Finally, Emerson urges the individual to be a risk taker. No external event, he says, whether good or bad, will change the individual's basic self-regard. "Nothing can bring you peace but yourself. Nothing can bring you peace but the triumph of principles." Self-reliance, then, is the triumph of a principle.