

Self-Reliance

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EMERSON

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
10 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 absolutely trustworthy was seated at their heart, working through their hands, predominating in all their being. . . .

15 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
20 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
25 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. . . .

GUIDE FOR READING

9 the divine providence: God.

12–13 betraying . . . trustworthy: revealing their awareness that God.

16 immortal palms: everlasting triumph and honor. In ancient times, people carried palm leaves as a symbol of victory, success, or joy.

19 suffrage: approval; support.

21 wont to importune me: accustomed to trouble me.

26–29 What is implied by Emerson's use of the word *sacred*? Why does he believe that one should follow his or her own nature?

29 after my constitution: consistent with my physical and mental nature.

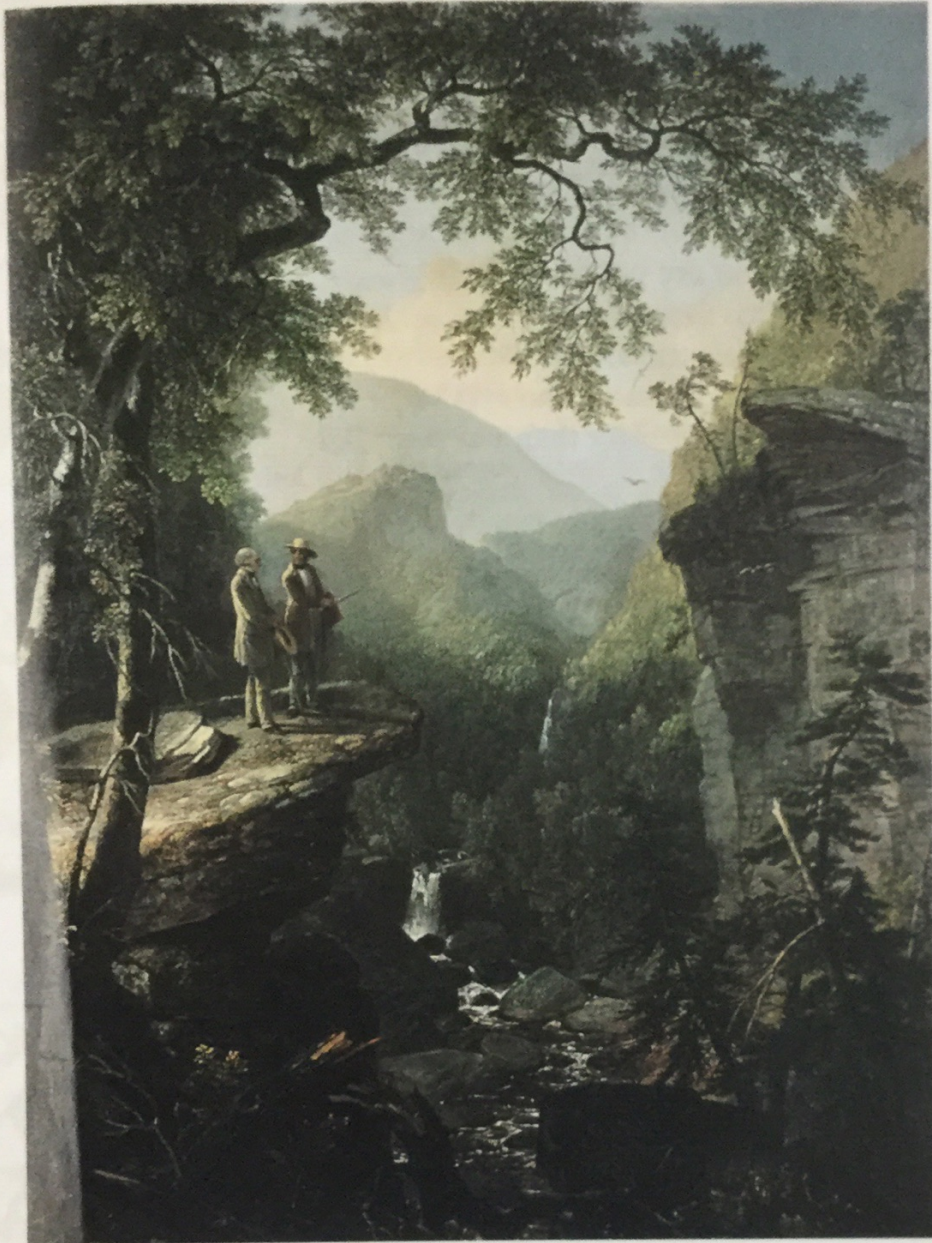
WORDS
TO
KNOW

bestowed (bĭ-stōd') *adj.* applied; used **bestow** *v.*

predominate (prĭ-dŏm'ə-nāt') *v.* to have controlling power or influence

nonconformist (nŏn'kən-fŏr'mĭst) *n.* one who does not follow generally accepted beliefs, customs, or practices

absolve (əb-zŏlv') *v.* to clear of guilt or blame



Kindred Spirits (1849), Asher B. Durand. Oil on canvas, collection of The New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations.

30 **W**hat 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
35 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. . . .

33 meanness: the state of being inferior in quality, character, or value.

35–38 What does Emerson say is easy to do? What does he say a great person is able to do?

40 **F**or nonconformity the world whips you with its displeasure.
And therefore a man must know how to estimate a sour
face. The by-standers 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
45 their sweet faces, have no deep cause, but are put on and off as
the wind blows and a newspaper directs. . . .

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 loth to disappoint them. . . .

50 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. Speak what you think now in hard words and to-morrow speak what to-morrow
55 thinks in hard words again, though it contradict every thing you said today.—“Ah, so you shall be sure to be misunderstood.”—Is it so bad then to be misunderstood? Pythagoras was misunderstood, and Socrates, and Jesus, and Luther, and Copernicus,
60 and Galileo, and Newton, and every pure and wise spirit that ever took flesh. To be great is to be misunderstood. ❖

39–42 What does Emerson say is one consequence of being a nonconformist?

41 askance (ə-skāns'): with disapproval, suspicion, or distrust.

47–52 Why does consistency scare us from trusting ourselves?

50 loth (lōth): unwilling; reluctant.

51 hobgoblin: a source of fear or dread. Notice that Emerson does not criticize all consistency, only “foolish” consistency that does not allow for change or progress.

52 divines: religious leaders.

58–60 Pythagoras . . . Newton: great thinkers whose radical theories and viewpoints caused controversy.

L I T E R A R Y L I N K

from *Memoirs*

MARGARET FULLER

In the chamber
of death, I prayed
in very early years,
“Give me truth;
5 cheat me by no illusion.”
O, the granting of
this prayer is
sometimes terrible to me!

I walk over the
10 burning ploughshares,¹
and they sear²
my feet. Yet nothing but
the truth will do.

1. ploughshares (plou'shārz'): the cutting blades of plows.
2. sear: scorch; burn.

WORDS TO KNOW
aversion (ə-vûr'zhən) *n.* a strong dislike

Connect to the Literature


1. What Do You Think?

What kind of impact did this essay have on you? Share your reaction with your classmates.

Comprehension Check

- Which does Emerson value more—original thought or traditional wisdom?
- According to Emerson, which virtue does society demand most—truth, conformity, creativity, or self-reliance?
- What is the only law that Emerson says can be sacred to him?

Think Critically

2. **ACTIVE READING** **SUMMARIZING** How did you summarize Emerson's main ideas in this excerpt? Share what you wrote in your  **READER'S NOTEBOOK**.

3. Describe situations or aspects of your own life in which Emerson's ideas about the importance of the individual might apply.

THINK ABOUT

- his idea that all people should be nonconformists
- his disregard for consistency in thought and deed
- peer pressures to conform to certain standards of appearance or behavior

4. If you had heard this essay as a public lecture, what questions would you have liked to ask Emerson directly about his philosophy?

Extend Interpretations

5. **Critic's Corner** The noted writer Henry James said that Emerson "had no great sense of wrong... no sense of the dark, the foul, the base." How do you think Emerson might have defended his views against this charge?

6. **What If?** If Emerson had specifically addressed the institution of slavery in this essay, what do you think he would have said about it?

7. **Comparing Texts** How do Margaret Fuller's ideas in the Literary Link poem on page 366 compare with Emerson's ideas in "Self-Reliance"?

8. **Connect to Life** Refer to the ideas you wrote about self-reliance for the Connect to Your Life activity on page 363. How do the ideas in Emerson's essay compare with your own?

Literary Analysis

APHORISM "Self-Reliance" is sprinkled with memorable sayings or **aphorisms**—brief statements, usually one sentence long, that express a general principle or truth about life. "A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds" is one of the most frequently quoted aphorisms from American literature. Emerson's aphorisms are interesting for their shock value. They proclaim his radical ideas in clear, concise sentences. His idea about consistency, for example, is distilled into one easy-to-remember aphorism and thereby immortalized.

Cooperative Learning Activity With a small group of classmates, identify at least three other aphorisms from "Self-Reliance," then list them on a sheet of paper. Compare your list with those of other groups. How similar are the ideas expressed in different aphorisms?

