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*Transcendentalism: Essential
Essays of Emerson and Thoreau*

Ralph Waldo Emerson and
Henry David Thoreau

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Transcendentalism: Essential Essays of Emerson and Thoreau

**Ralph Waldo Emerson and
Henry David Thoreau**



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To The Student

Although we may read a novel, play, or work of non-fiction for enjoyment, each time we read one, we are building and practicing important basic reading skills. In our ever-more complex society, in which reading has become more and more crucial for success, this, in itself, is an important reason to spend time reading for enjoyment.

Some readers, however, are able to go beyond basic reading techniques and are able to practice higher thinking skills by reflecting on what they have read and how what they read affects them. It is this act of reflection—that is, stopping to think about what you are reading—that this journal is attempting to encourage.

To aid you, we have included writing prompts for each section; however, if you find something that you wish to respond to in the book more compelling than our prompts, you should write about that. We hope you enjoy reading this book and that the act of responding to what you have read increases this enjoyment.

After you read the indicated sections, choose the questions to which you will respond. Keep in mind that there are no right or wrong answers to these prompts, and there is no one direction in which you must go.

Pre-Reading

1. Each of us has a preference in the type of literary genre we enjoy. Some of us might devour poetry and struggle with the novel, others may look forward to nonfiction but have little patience with fiction. What is your preference and why?

Write a letter to a friend explaining your preference and telling whether you are or are not looking forward to reading a series of essays.

2. Societies throughout history have established formal or informal “coming-of-age” standards for each new generation. For example, some American Indian tribes sent each adolescent male into the wilderness with very limited resources. During the several weeks he was required to spend alone, the young man had not only to survive physically, but also, upon return to his tribe, to show evidence of spiritual growth. This was sometimes called a “vision quest”.

In the societies of today, a benchmark of adulthood seems to be self-reliance. The Transcendentalists also stressed the importance of self-reliance in the development of human potential. Emerson writes an entire essay on this topic. Write an editorial for the local newspaper informing the readership about what it means to be self-reliant.

3. One important tenant of Transcendentalism is that every living thing contain a piece of the same creative force known as the “oversoul”. Because of this, man is closely connected to nature, and by using his imagination to observe nature, man can gain intuition to understand himself and human nature more deeply. Many of Emerson’s essays were developed from the daily journal entries about scenes he observed in nature and the truths those led him to intuit about life. One poet, for example, watched a lone goose flying as night fell, imagined that an unseen power was guiding the bird to where it needed to be, and then developed this into an insight for his own life: The same power that guided the waterfowl would guide the poet himself through life.

Transcendentalism

6. Emerson says, in the second paragraph of “Self-Reliance,” that “envy is ignorance, that imitation is suicide.” However, interestingly enough, in life and in careers, young professionals are encouraged to respond to mentors or role models as a means of personal and professional growth.

Your friend, who is strong Emersonian individualist has dropped you an e-mail complaining that the mentoring program in an otherwise wonderful new job is stifling his or her creativity. He or she quotes Emerson to support the desire for more freedom in creativity. Write an e-mail response in which you explain to your friend the difference between imitating and being mentored.

7. Emerson strongly establishes the value of individualism and stresses the importance of solitude for a person’s growth as an individual. How much does society today value solitude? Write a dialogue between two sets of parents. One set believes the best way to raise their children is to schedule organized social, athletic, and academic activities that fill the childrens days, teaching them to socialize and compete and not allowing them to waste time, daydream, or become bored. The other set believes that the best way to raise children is to limit their organized activities, allowing time for them to be alone to daydream, invent, or find a way out of boredom.

Construct a dialogue between these two sets of parents. Develop it in such a way that the approach with which you agree becomes apparent.

8. Emerson’s work is filled with aphorisms memorable little statements packed with big meaning. An example of an aphorism is “Society everywhere is in a conspiracy against the manhood of every one of its members.”
9. In the essay, Ralph Waldo Emerson makes a statement that Henry David Thoreau will later explore in his works. This comment is that “no law can be sacred except that of our own nature.” Emerson goes on to say that any opposition to this integrity of self should be treated as “titular and ephemeral.” Do you agree with Ralph Waldo Emerson’s assertion or do you think that it would create dangerous problems in our society?

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18. Emerson points out that man is the only living thing in nature that does not live totally in the present. He makes this point by contrasting man with a leaf-bud that is complete in each phase of its existence because it cannot re-live its past nor anticipate its future. On the other hand, man is often not complete in any stage of living because in constantly re-viewing the past and pre-viewing the future, people cannot fully realize the present.

Describe an experience from your life when you missed out on an opportunity, a good time, or something else that was important at the time because you were too influenced by looking into your past or future.

19. As “Self-Reliance” progresses, the reader is presented with “the highest truth of the subject.” Emerson contends that an individual’s experience of the highest truth is a moment of calm when his or her portion of the oversoul is in connection with the parts of that oversoul that exist in all other living things in the universe. During this moment, passion, space, time, even life and death pale in the light of the truth of pure existence and the reality of being. For example, standing on the beach in the morning, feeling the breeze, hearing the waves, and seeing the clear expanse of ocean meet the empty sky, an individual might feel a moment of being one with the universe—of being at total peace because everything fits perfectly, if only for a second.

Write about a time you experienced this feeling of highest truth. What kinds of activities would you suggest to someone who wanted to experience this?

20. Ralph Waldo Emerson concludes his essay on self-reliance with a list of four numbered, specific effects of self-reliance. These include the effects on religion, education, and other areas of living.

Choose the effect with which you most agree, and explain your reasons for making this choice. Then, select the effect with which you most disagree and explain the reasons you think it is not accurate.

Friendship

24. Emerson begins his explanation of friendship with the image of “the whole human family...bathed with an element of love like a fine ether.” He goes on to clarify this by asking readers to recall a time when they felt warm and happy to be part of a crowd on a street or in a church. Furthermore, the author says that when an individual feels this connection to a crowd of unknown people, he or she experiences a “cordial exhilaration” that brings “inward irradiations” which cheer and warm like fire, and which also are “the sweetness of life.”

Write a short scene from a story, narrated in the first-person, that shows a character experiencing this feeling that Ralph Waldo Emerson describes.

25. Following the discussion of the anticipation of meeting new people, the author of “Friendship” brings in another interesting point. Ralph Waldo Emerson asks his readers to consider that friends come unsought. This, he explains, is because the common elements of their oversouls are what draw people together.

Do you agree that people are drawn together in friendship as sort of “soul-mates,” or do you think that people need to make a direct effort to make friends? Write a short essay that gives the reasons for your opinion.

26. How much time with friends is too much time, and how much time alone is too much time? How does one balance time with friends and time alone? Ralph Waldo Emerson offers the idea that, “The law of nature is alternation for evermore...The instinct of affection revives the hope of union with our mates and the returning sense of isolation recalls us from the chase.”

Write a letter to a friend who wants more of your time than you can give. Explain your need for balancing friendship with solitude.