

Critical Analysis of the essay
Self-Reliance

by
R.W. Emerson

"Self-Reliance" is an 1841 essay written by American [transcendentalist](#) philosopher and essayist [Ralph Waldo Emerson](#). It contains the most thorough statement of one of Emerson's recurrent themes: the need for each individual to avoid conformity and false consistency, and follow his own instincts and ideas. It is the source of one of Emerson's most famous quotations: "A foolish consistency is the [hobgoblin](#) of little minds, adored by little statesmen and philosophers and divines."^[1] This essay is an analysis into the nature of the "aboriginal self on which a universal reliance may be grounded."^[2] Emerson emphasizes the importance of individualism and its effect on an individual's satisfaction in life. He stresses that anyone is capable of achieving happiness, simply if they change their mindset. Emerson focuses on seemingly insignificant details explaining how life is "learning and forgetting and learning again". ^[3]

The first hint of the philosophy that would become "Self-Reliance" was presented by [Ralph Waldo Emerson](#) as part of a sermon in September 1830 a month after his first marriage.^[4] His wife Ellen was sick with [tuberculosis](#)^[5] and, as Emerson's biographer Robert D. Richardson wrote, "Immortality had never been stronger or more desperately needed!"^[4]

From 1836 into 1837, Emerson presented a series of lectures on the philosophy of history at Boston's Masonic Temple. These lectures were never published separately, but many of his thoughts in these were later used in "Self-Reliance" and several other essays.^[6] Later lectures – such as "The American Scholar" and the Divinity School Address^[7] – by Emerson led to public [censure](#) of his radical views, the staunch defense of [individualism](#) in "Self-Reliance" being a possible reaction to that censure.^[8]

"Self-Reliance" was first published in his 1841 collection, *Essays: First Series*.^[9] Emerson helped start the beginning of the [Transcendentalist movement](#) in America. "Self-Reliance" is one of Emerson's most famous essays. Emerson wrote on "individualism, personal responsibility, and nonconformity."^[10]

Emerson had a very large background of religious affiliations. His father was a Unitarian minister; Emerson eventually followed in his father's footsteps to become a minister as well. Emerson's religious practices can be viewed as unconventional and his beliefs, non-traditional. Emerson understood that individuals are inexplicably different and ideas are constantly changing. He encouraged religious individuals to "breathe new life into the old forms of their religion".^[11]

The Transcendentalist movement flourished in New England, and proposed a revolutionarily new philosophy of life. This new philosophy drew upon old ideas of Romanticism, Unitarianism, and German Idealism. Some of these ideas pertained closely to the values of America at the time. These values included nature, individualism, and reform, and can be noted in Emerson's essay.

Emerson mentions that citizens control the government so they have control. He also mentions how "nothing has authority over the self." He says, "History cannot bring enlightenment; only individual searching can." He believes that truth is inside a person and this is an authority, not institutions like religion.^[10] Emerson's essay focuses and consistently relates back to one major theme: "Trust thyself".^[12] The idea of believing in one's self and one's worth is the main theme in the essay. Emerson enforces that idea when stating, "Unless we overtake ourselves, circumstances will overtake us".^[3]

One of the most prevalent themes in the essay is nonconformity. Emerson states, "Whoso would be a man must be a nonconformist." He counsels his readers to do what they think is right no matter what others think.^[13] Haijing Liang, author of an analysis of

others think.^[13] Haijing Liang, author of an analysis of *Self-Reliance*, explains how Emerson "encourages the readers to free themselves from the constraints of conformity and give themselves back to their nature."^[14]

Solitude and the community appears within the essay multiple times. Emerson wrote how the community is a distraction to self-growth, by friendly visits, and family needs. He advocates more time being spent reflecting on one's self. This can also happen in the community through a strong self-confidence. This would help the counseled to not sway from his beliefs in groups of people.^[13] Emerson mentions "but the great man is he who in the midst of the crowd keeps with perfect sweetness the independence of solitude."^[15]

Spirituality, specifically the idea that truth is within one's self, is a recurring theme in Emerson's essay. Emerson posits that reliance upon institutionalized religion hinders the ability to grow mentally as an individual.^[13]

The theme of individualism is often proposed within *Self-Reliance*. Emerson explains the ultimate form of happiness is achieved when a person learns and adapts an individualistic lifestyle.^[16]^[14] Emerson emphasizes, "Nothing can bring you peace but yourself."^[15]

The conflict between originality and imitation is often an oscillating theme in the essay. Emerson emphasizes that "Envy is ignorance, imitation is suicide." [15] [14] Towards the end of Emerson's essay, he encourages society to "Insist on yourself; never imitate." [15]

Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick* has been read as a critique of Emerson's philosophy of self-reliance, embodied particularly in the life and death of Ahab. Melville's critique of self-reliance as a way of life is seen to lie in its destructive potential, especially when taken to extremes. Richard Chase writes that for Melville, 'Death—spiritual, emotional, physical—is the price of self-reliance when it is pushed to the point of solipsism, where the world has no existence apart from the all-sufficient self.'^[17] In that regard, Chase sees Melville's art as antithetical to that of Emerson's thought, in that Melville '[points] up the dangers of an exaggerated self-regard, rather than, as [...] Emerson loved to do, [suggested] the vital possibilities of the self.'^[17] Newton Arvin further suggests that self-reliance was, for Melville, really the '[masquerade in kingly weeds of] a wild egoism, anarchic, irresponsible, and destructive.'^[18]

Although never directly stated, Emerson's *Self-Reliance* has religious influences tied into the values and beliefs presented. Critics argue that Emerson believes the Universe is not complete without "The Spirit". Without some form of spirituality or religious tendencies, society and the universe "is sad, hopeless, and largely meaningless." [19] In his work, the transcendentalist argues that no person, specifically individuals who are self-reliant, exists without a slight connection to a higher power. Mark Cladis, author of a published religious analysis of *Self-Reliance*, argues individuals are "intimately connected to that which is greater than the self alone." [19] Emerson encourages his readers to understand that self-reliance is "freedom in a spiritual universe that is just as rule-governed as the Newtonian physical universe." [19] Cladis explains that individuals are not expected to endure life alone; achieving self-reliance is understanding that "we are surrounded by helps and aids of all kinds, supporting us, sustaining us, journeying always with us." [19]

Ralph Waldo Emerson's essay "Self-Reliance" embodies some of the most prominent themes of the transcendentalist movement in the 19th century. First published in 1841, "Self-Reliance" advocates for individualism and encourages readers to trust and follow their own instincts and intuition rather than blindly adhere to the will of others. The writing is elegant and poetic; its concepts timeless and words pure. Emerson draws supporting examples from a range of major historical figures, from Aristotle to Napoleon Bonaparte, to show how their success and genius came from originality and innovation, instead of conformity. With its most early conception coming shortly after the death of his wife, "Self-Reliance" manifests feelings of hope and optimism that could seldom be expected at a time of such despair. Emerson doesn't withhold from letting his readers know the true value they have to offer the world, asserting that self-reliance serves as a beginning point for a more efficient, productive society.