

PREVIEWING

NONFICTION

from *Self-Reliance*

Ralph Waldo Emerson

PERSONAL CONNECTION

What do you think *self-reliance* means? How self-reliant do you feel you are? What are some advantages and disadvantages of being self-reliant? Answer these questions in your notebook, then discuss your answers with a small group of classmates.

BIOGRAPHICAL CONNECTION

Ralph Waldo Emerson was one of 19th-century America's greatest writers and thinkers. In 1836, Emerson formed the Transcendental Club with a group of friends, including Henry David Thoreau and the feminist writer and critic Margaret Fuller. As the intellectual leader of the transcendentalists, he defined many of his original ideas in lectures, poems, and essays. This excerpt from Emerson's essay "Self-Reliance" is a series of loosely related thoughts and extracts from lectures and journals that Emerson had written in the years between 1832 and 1840. Published in 1841, the essay elaborates Emerson's belief in the importance of the individual.



Emerson and his friends amuse themselves in the summer at this philosopher's camp. Archive Photos.

READING CONNECTION

Summarizing Main Ideas To summarize a piece of writing is to state its main ideas briefly in your own words. After reading this excerpt from "Self-Reliance," try to summarize Emerson's major points. These guidelines might help you.

Guidelines for Summarizing

- As you read each paragraph, identify the one or two most important phrases or statements in it.
- Write a sentence of your own to express the main idea of each statement you identified.
- Try phrasing your sentences as pieces of advice to live by.

FROM

Self-Reliance

RALPH
WALDO
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 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. . . .

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. . . .

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.

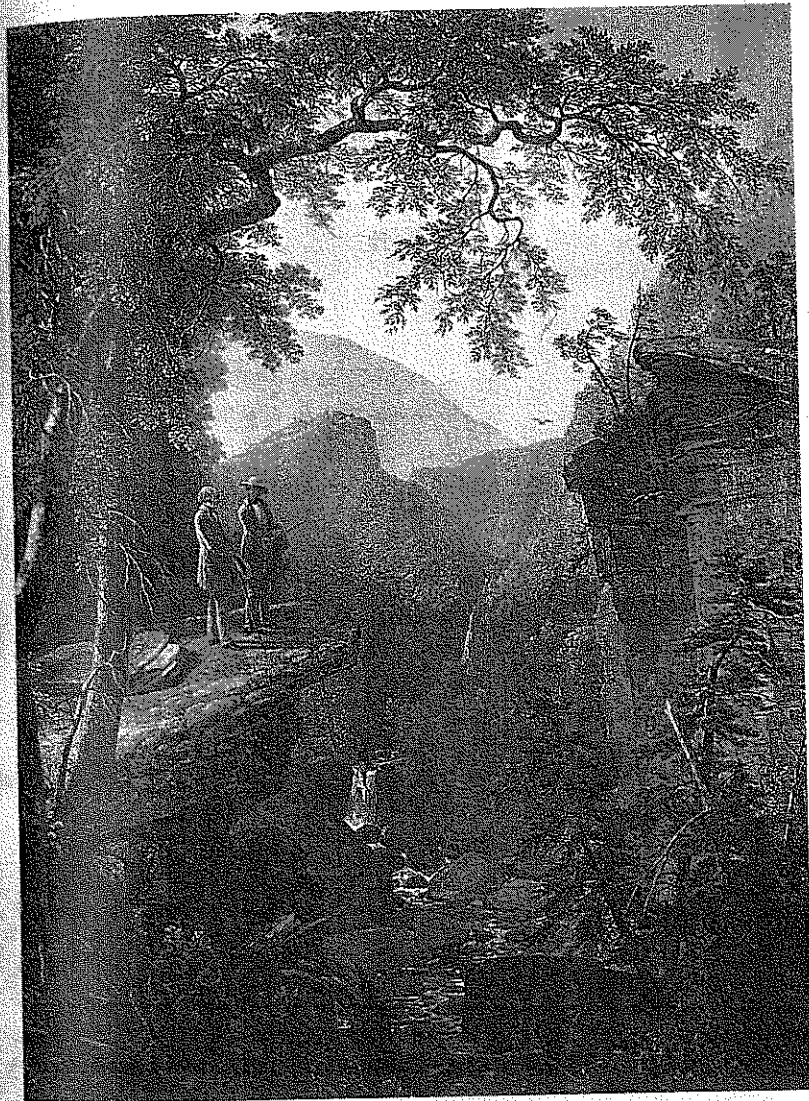
19 suffrage: approval; support.

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'kŏn-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 For 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
45 with a sad countenance; but the sour faces of the multitude, like
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
50 others have no other data for computing our orbit than our past
acts, and we are loth 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
55 concern himself with his shadow on the wall. Speak what you
think now in hard words and to-morrow speak what to-morrow
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,
60 and Socrates, and Jesus, and Luther, and Copernicus,
and Galileo, and Newton, and every pure and wise spirit that
ever took flesh. To be great is to be misunderstood. ❖

39-42

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.