

## Before You Read

FROM **SELF-RELIANCE**

### Make the Connection

#### Rugged Individualism

For Americans in the early years of the country's history, belonging to a bold, young nation was a tremendous source of group pride. Perhaps the greatest source of that pride was the high value the group placed on individual liberty. In 1841, Emerson nourished this creed of individualism with his essay "Self-Reliance."

#### Quickwrite

Write down the associations you make with the word *self-reliance*: definitions, examples, and synonyms. How does self-reliance differ from selfishness or self-centeredness?



### Elements of Literature

#### Figures of Speech

Emerson makes many of his points through a series of **figures of speech** that compare abstract ideas with ordinary things or events, such as "Society is a joint-stock company." Some of his figures of speech are difficult and require rereading before you can fully understand Emerson's point.

**A figure of speech** is a word or phrase that describes one thing in terms of another and that is not meant to be taken literally.

For more on *Figures of Speech*, see page 78 and the *Handbook of Literary Terms*.



*Long Island Farmer Husking Corn* (1833–1834) by William Sidney Mount. Oil on canvas mounted on panel (20 $\frac{7}{8}$ "  $\times$  16 $\frac{7}{8}$ ").

The Museums at Stony Brook, Stony Brook, New York. Gift of Mr. & Mrs. Ward Melville.

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. The power which resides in him is new in nature, and none but he knows what that is which he can do, nor does he know until he has tried. Not for nothing one face, one character, one fact makes much impression on him, and another none. This sculpture in the memory is not without preestablished harmony. The eye was placed where one ray should fall, that it might testify of that particular ray. We but half express ourselves, and are ashamed of that divine idea which each of us represents. It may be safely trusted as proportionate and of good issues, so it be faithfully imparted, but God will not have his work made manifest by cowards. A man is relieved and gay when he has put his heart into his work and done his best; but what he has said or done otherwise, shall give him no peace. It is a deliverance which does not deliver. In the attempt his genius deserts him; no muse befriends; no invention, no hope.

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. And we are now men, and must accept in the highest mind the same transcendent destiny; and not minors and invalids in a protected corner, not cowards fleeing before a revolution, but guides, redeemers, and benefactors, obeying the Almighty effort, and advancing on Chaos and the Dark. . . .

These are the voices which we hear in solitude, but they grow faint and inaudible as we enter into the world. Society everywhere is in conspiracy against the manhood of every one of its members. Society is a joint-stock company in which the members agree for the better securing of his bread to each shareholder, to surrender the lib-

erty and culture of the eater. The virtue in most request is conformity. Self-reliance is its aversion. It loves not realities and creators, but names and customs.

Whoso would be a man must be a non-conformist. He who would gather immortal palms<sup>1</sup> 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. . . .

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 tomorrow speak what tomorrow thinks in hard words again, though it contradict everything 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, and Galileo, and Newton,<sup>2</sup> and every pure and wise spirit that ever took flesh. To be great is to be misunderstood. . . .

1. **he who . . . immortal palms:** he who would win fame. In ancient times, palm leaves were carried as a symbol of victory or triumph.

2. **Pythagoras . . . Newton:** people whose contributions to scientific, philosophical, and religious thought were ignored or suppressed during their lifetimes.

#### WORDS TO OWN

**conviction** (kən·vik'shən) *n.*: belief.

**proportionate** (prō·pōr'shən·it) *adj.*: having a correct relationship between parts; balanced.

**imparted** (im·pärt'əd) *v.*: revealed.

**manifest** (man'ə·fest') *adj.*: plain; clear.

**predominating** (prē·dām'ə·nāt'īn) *v.* used as *adj.*: having influence.

**transcendent** (tran·sen'dənt) *adj.*: excelling; surpassing.

**benefactors** (ben'ə·fak'tərz) *n. pl.*: people who help others.

**conspiracy** (kən·spir'ə·sē) *n.*: secret plot with a harmful or illegal purpose.

**aversion** (ə·vər'zhən) *n.*: intense dislike.

**integrity** (in·teg'rə·tē) *n.*: sound moral principles; honesty.

## SPOTLIGHT ON Emerson's Aphorisms

**S**tudded throughout Emerson's work are quotable, memorable sayings on broad topics. These are **aphorisms**—short statements that express wise or clever observations about life. (Aphorisms are also called "maxims" or "adages.") Try paraphrasing Emerson's aphorisms in your own words: You'll see how much meaning the writer has packed into a few words. That is what makes an aphorism memorable.

Many of Emerson's aphorisms originated in the journal he began keeping when he was a junior in college; by the end of his life, it filled many volumes.

For more aphorisms, see those by the poet Wallace Stevens, page 786.

I confess I am a little cynical on some topics, and when a whole nation is roaring Patriotism at the top of its voice, I am fain<sup>1</sup> to explore the cleanness of its hands and purity of its heart. I have generally found the gravest and most useful citizens are not the easiest provoked to swell the noise, though they may be punctual at the polls.

—*Journals*, 1824

Don't trust children with edge tools. Don't trust man, great God, with more power than he has, until he has learned to use that little better. What a hell should we make of the world if we could do what we would! Put a button on the foil<sup>2</sup> till the young fencers have learned not to put each other's eyes out.

—*Journals*, 1832

The maker of a sentence, like the other artist, launches out into the infinite and builds a road into Chaos and old Night, and is followed by those who hear him with something of wild, creative delight.

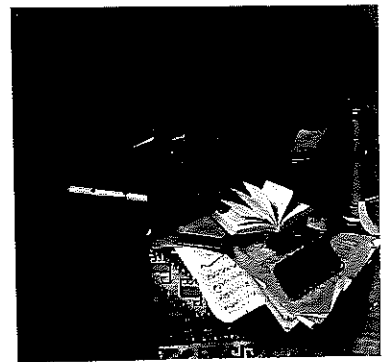
—*Journals*, 1834

Poetry must be as new as foam and as old as the rock.

—*Journals*, 1844

1. **fain**: reluctantly willing.

2. **foil**: sword.



*A Study Table* (1882) by William Harnett  
Oil on canvas (39 7/8" × 51 3/8").

Munson-Williams-Proctor Institute Museum of Art  
Utica, New York.

The invariable mark of wisdom is to see the miraculous in the common.

—*Nature*

A man is a god in ruins.

—*Nature*

Nothing can bring you peace but yourself. Nothing can bring you peace but the triumph of principles.

—"Self-Reliance"

Prayer as a means to effect a private end is meanness and theft. It supposes dualism and not a unity in nature and consciousness. As soon as the man is at one with God, he will not beg. He will then see prayer in all action.

—"Self-Reliance"

This time, like all times, is a very good one, if we but know what to do with it.

—"The American Scholar"

Books are the best of things, well used; abused, among the worst.

—"The American Scholar"

Public and private avarice make the air we breathe thick and fat.

—"The American Scholar"