

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 trustworthy¹ was seated at their heart, working through their hands, predominating² in all their being. . . . **A**

Whoso would be a man, must be a **nonconformist**. He who would gather immortal palms³ 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 suffrage⁴ of the world. I remember an answer which when quite young I was prompted to make to a valued adviser

ANALYZE VISUALS

What elements of **transcendentalism** are reflected in the painting on page 363?

A TRANSCENDENTALISM

Summarize the ideas Emerson presents in lines 1–11. After reading these lines, how would you define self-reliance?

nonconformist

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

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1. **the absolutely trustworthy:** God.
 2. **predominating:** being predominant, or having controlling influence.
 3. **immortal palms:** everlasting triumph and honor. In ancient times, people carried palm leaves as a symbol of victory, success, or joy.
 4. **suffrage:** approval; support.

Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog (1818),
Caspar David Friedrich. Oil on
canvas, 94.8 cm × 74.8 cm.



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
20 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;⁵ the only wrong what is against it. . . . **B**

What 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.⁶ It is the harder because you will always find those who think they know what is your duty 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
30 perfect sweetness the independence of solitude. . . . **C**

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 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 others have no other data for computing our orbit than our past acts, and we are loth to disappoint them. . . .

40 A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin⁷ of little minds, adored by little statesmen and philosophers and divines.⁸ 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,⁹ and every pure and wise spirit that ever took flesh. To be great is to be misunderstood.  **D**

importune (ĩm'pôr-tōon')
v. to ask urgently or repeatedly; to annoy or trouble

B TRANSCENDENTALISM

Transcendentalists believed in disregarding external authority in favor of one’s own experience and intuition. What is implied by the word *sacred* in line 21?

C GRAMMAR AND STYLE

Emerson adds detail and precision to his writing by using **adjective clauses**, which modify nouns and pronouns. In line 27 and lines 29–30, he uses adjective clauses beginning with “who” to describe specific types of people.

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

D IDENTIFY APHORISMS

Identify at least one aphorism in lines 40–48. How does that aphorism reflect Emerson’s transcendentalist ideals?

5. **after my constitution:** consistent with my nature.

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

7. **hobgoblin:** a source of fear or dread.

8. **divines:** religious leaders.

9. **Pythagoras** (pĩ-thăg'ər-əs) . . . **Newton:** great thinkers whose radical theories and viewpoints caused controversy.