

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Class: \_\_\_\_\_

## Excerpt from "Self Reliance"

By Ralph Waldo Emerson  
1841

*Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882) was an American writer, poet, abolitionist, lecturer, and a key figure in the Transcendentalist movement. The following excerpt comes from his famous essay "Self-Reliance," which expounds upon some of his recurrent ideas and themes. As you read, take notes on these ideas and Emerson's argument.*

*"Ne te quaesiveris extra."*<sup>1</sup>

*"Man is his own star; and the soul that can  
Render an honest and a perfect man,  
Commands all light, all influence, all fate;  
Nothing to him falls early or too late.  
Our acts our angels are, or good or ill,  
Our fatal shadows that walk by us still."*<sup>2</sup>



*"Ralph Waldo Emerson [front]" is licensed under CC BY-NC-ND 2.0.*

- [1] 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. It is not without pre-established harmony, this sculpture in the memory. The eye was placed where one ray should fall, that it might testify of that particular ray. Bravely let him speak the utmost syllable of his confession. 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. It needs a divine man to exhibit any thing divine. 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<sup>3</sup> 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 Eternal was stirring 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 pinched in a corner, not cowards fleeing before a revolution, but redeemers and benefactors, pious aspirants to be noble clay plastic under the Almighty effort, let us advance and advance on Chaos and the Dark....

1. "Seek no one besides yourself."

2. Epilogue to Beaumont and Fletcher's "Honest Man's Fortune"

3. **Providence (noun):** spiritual guidance, often depicted as divine in nature

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 liberty and culture of the eater, the virtue in most request is conformity. Self-reliance is its aversion<sup>4</sup>. It loves not realities and creators, but names and customs.

Whoso would be a man must be a nonconformist. He who would gather immortal palms<sup>5</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 our own mind. Absolve you to yourself, and you shall have the suffrage<sup>6</sup> of the world....

- [5] A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin<sup>7</sup> 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. Out upon your guarded lips! Sew them up with packthread, do. Else, if you would be a man, speak what you think today in words as hard as cannon balls, and tomorrow speak what tomorrow thinks in hard words again, though it contradict every thing you said today. Ah, then, exclaim the aged ladies, you shall be sure to be misunderstood. Misunderstood! It is a right fool's word. Is it so bad then to be misunderstood? Pythagoras was misunderstood, 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.

*Excerpt from "Self Reliance" by Ralph Waldo Emerson is in the public domain.*

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4. **Aversion (noun):** turning away or avoidance; feeling of repugnance  
5. **Palms (noun):** a symbol of triumph or superiority  
6. **Suffrage (noun):** (archaic) a vote given in assent to a proposal or in favor of a particular person  
7. **Hobgoblin (noun):** a mischievous goblin or imp

## Text-Dependent Questions

**Directions:** For the following questions, choose the best answer or respond in complete sentences.

1. PART A: Which of the following best summarizes a theme of the text? [RL.2]
- A. The strength of the common individual
  - B. The evils of society
  - C. True genius
  - D. Individualism and nonconformity

2. PART B: Cite evidence from the text to support the answer to Part A. [RL.1]

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3. Consider the italicized quote at the beginning of the excerpt. How does it contribute to the text and its theme? [RL.5]

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4. What does the term “plastic” most likely mean as used in paragraph 2? [RL.4]
- A. Elastic
  - B. A synthetic material made from a range of polymers
  - C. Something that can be molded or shaped
  - D. Something non-organic/man-made

5. PART A: Which of the following best summarizes how Emerson's depiction of society supports or contributes to his perspective on individualism? [RL.6]
- A. His critical appraisal of society contrasts his positive endorsement of the individual.
  - B. Emerson's depicts society as antithetical to the benefit of the individual, contributing to his call for self-reliance.
  - C. Emerson's metaphors showcase his perspective on the relationship between society and people as an unfair economic transaction.
  - D. His description of society as drowning out inner voices adds to his perspective on society as too crowded and unruly.

6. PART B: Cite evidence from the text to support the answer to Part A. [RL.1]

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7. "A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds...." Explain this quote in the context of the passage. What does Emerson mean when he says "a foolish consistency"? [RL.3]

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