

Examining the Social Complications of Ralph Waldo Emerson's "Self-Reliance"

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Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882) is a critical figure in the American literary canon, renowned for his leadership of the transcendentalist movement. His essay "Self-Reliance" is celebrated as a fundamental work in American letters, as it helped engender values of individual responsibility and autonomy into American society. Since its publication, "Self-Reliance" has garnered both scorn and praise from critics for its individualist mindset. Rightfully, critics have hailed the work as a celebration of the individual for whom Emerson demonstrates a considerable love. Others have derided Emerson for creating a movement of egomaniacal personages who outright reject all societal limitations. Unsurprisingly, the truth lies somewhere in the middle. Although Emerson does espouse an unmitigated rejection of society, it should be noted that many of the ideas put forth in the essay are intentionally provocative, a factor some critics choose to ignore. Similarly, although Emerson is right in celebrating individual autonomy and action, he fails to realistically demonstrate how his ideas can be applied to the material world.

My work examines specific passages of Emerson's essay to substantiate valid criticisms of the ideas put forth, while taking into consideration that Emerson is purposely provoking the reader. Central to my conceptualization of Emerson's work is the following passage: "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 every thing you say to-day" (538). This

passage is representative of the failures inherent in Emersonian dogma. It fails to recognize that there needs to be room for questioning and debate and exchange and compromise; these are the necessary tools of social and intellectual interaction. These primary tools of understanding are rendered obsolete if every individual is hard pressed to his or her own opinion.

Similar problematic propositions appear throughout the essay, all of which retain contemporary relevance. As noted, a particularly vexing bit of Emerson's philosophy is his outright rejection of society. Although Emerson's rhetoric is often extreme, the discourse of the following passage cannot help but be recognizable in modern society: "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" (535).

Again, although contemporary audiences may find Emerson's language extreme, the values he champions continue to thrive within modern society, manifesting themselves in all aspects of political and social discussion. Emerson's claims may fall short in the context of the real world, but they are ideas that must be evaluated, as they have undeniable instilled themselves within us. Often, Emerson's views leave little room for moral growth, or compassion for those who think differently, or love for those one is close to. Emerson's love for the individual should be cherished but it needs to be reconciled with the benefits that society is proven to cultivate. Despite the wide divide between Emerson's critics and his supporters, I believe that a reasonable compromise can and should be made regarding Emerson's ideas, as they are central to American identity.

Work Cited

Cain, William E. *American Literature*. Vol. 1, Penguin Academics, 2004.