

PAL: Perspectives in American Literature - A Research and Reference Guide - An Ongoing Project

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Chapter 4: Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882)

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R. Waldo Emerson

Source: [Unitarian . . . : RWE](#)

Please Note: The poem "Success" ("To laugh often and much . . .") was not written by Emerson; for details, logon to [RWE Quotes](#) or read Joel Myerson's "Emerson's 'Success'--Actually, It Is Not," *Emerson Society Papers* 11. 1 (Spring 2000): 1, 8.

Major Essays and Lectures

Nature (1836)

This essay is considered the "gospel" of American Transcendentalism. It has an Introduction and eight chapters: 1. Nature 2. Commodity 3. Beauty 4. Language 5. Discipline 6. Idealism 7. Spirit 8. Prospects. The major thesis of the essay, in Emerson's words, is that we should now "enjoy an original relation to the universe," and not become

dependent on past experiences of others and on holy books, creeds and dogma.

Contemporary Comments on *Nature*

1. "I have just finished reading *Nature* by R. W. Emerson. It is a beautiful work. Mr. E. attempts to show the meaning of Nature to the minds of men. It is the production of a spiritualist, subordinating the visible and outward to the inward and invisible. Nature becomes the transparent emblem of the soul. Psyche animates and fills the earth and external things." - A. Bronson Alcott, 1836
2. "We find beautiful writing and sound philosophy in the little work, but the effect is injured by occasional vagueness of expression, and by a vein of mysticism that pervades the writer's whole course of thought. The highest praises that could be accorded to it is that it is a suggestive book for one who can read it without tasking his faculties to the utmost, and relapsing into severe fits of meditation." - Frances Bowen, 1837
3. "Your little azur-coloured *Nature* gave me true satisfaction. I read it, and then lent it about to all my acquaintances that had a sense for such things, from whom a similar verdict always came back. You say it is the first chapter of something greater. I call it rather the Foundation and Groundplan on which you may build whatsoever of great and true has been given you to build," - Thomas Carlyle, February 13, 1837
4. "... we would call all those together who have feared that the spirit of poetry was dead, to rejoice that such a poem as *Nature* is written. It grows upon us as we re-peruse it. It proves to us, that the only true and perfect mind is the poetic." - Anonymous, 1838

Twentieth Century Comments on *Nature*

1. "Emerson was not a mystic in the usual 'visionary' sense of the word. He was not seeking in the angle of vision an escape from the world; as it formed, the angle of vision was to make 'use' of the world. But the mystical union, for him, was an epistemological necessity. Vision, he said of the inner seeing of the mind, is not like the vision of the eye, but is union with the things known." - Sherman Paul, *The Angle of Vision*, 1952
2. "The essay itself seems like a stepping-stone than a stumbling block in Emerson's career; the last of his apprentice exercises rather than the first of his mature works; a thing that had to be done before he could do something better, to be put behind him before he could go ahead." - Richard P. Adams, 1954
3. "*Nature* is the gospel of the new faith rather than, like Thoreau's *Walden*, a record of an experience of earth. Lifted by the excitement of recognition to the plane of prose-poetry, it is nevertheless a concise statement of the 'First Philosophy'. The primary assumption of this essay is that man, whether regarded individually or generically, is the starting point of all philosophic speculation. His functions, his relations, and his destiny are its only concerns." - Robert E. Spiller, 1949

"The American Scholar" (1837)

Delivered as a lecture to the Phi Beta Kappa Society, Harvard College, on August 31, 1837, "The American Scholar" is popular and important in expressing the practical aspects of Transcendentalism. Emerson prods the students to become more confident in their abilities and to take pride in native Americanism: "We have listened too long to the courtly muses of Europe. ... We will walk on our own feet, we will work with our own hands, we will speak our own minds."

"The Divinity School Address" (1838)

A lecture addressed to the senior class at the Harvard Divinity College on July 15, 1838. The important theme of this lecture is that truth cannot be presented as doctrines or creeds. Emerson says, "It (the truth) cannot be received at second hand. Truly speaking, it is not instruction, but provocation, that I can receive from another soul." He goes on to tell the graduating class to be original and not imitative.

"Self-Reliance" (1841)

This essay elaborates further on the familiar Emersonian thesis - trust yourself. This is also a very popular essay written in forceful and memorable language. "There is a time in every man's education when he arrives at the conviction that envy is ignorance; that imitation is suicide ... " "Trust thyself: every heart vibrates to that iron string."

[Top](#) Emerson's Poetry

"I am born a poet, of a low class without doubt, yet a poet. That is my nature and vocation." - RWE in a letter to Lydia Jackson, February 1835

Comments from RWE's famous essay "The Poet" 1844:

"The poet is the sayer, the namer, and represents beauty. He is a sovereign, and stands on the centre. For the world is not painted, or adorned, but is from the beginning beautiful; and God has not made some beautiful things, but Beauty is the creator of the universe. Therefore the poet is not any permissive potentate, but is emperor in his own right. ...

For poetry was all written before time was, and whenever we are so finely organized that we can penetrate into that region where the air is music, we hear those primal warblings, and attempt to write them down, but we lose ever and anon a word, or a verse, and substitute something of our own, and thus miswrite the poem. ... For nature is as truly beautiful as it is good, or as it is reasonable, and must as much appear, as it must be done, or be known. Words and deeds are quite indifferent modes of the divine energy. Words are also actions, and actions are a kind of words.

The sign and credentials of the poet are, that he announces that which no man foretold. He is the true and only doctor (teacher); he knows and tells; he is the only teller of news, for he was present and privy to the appearance which he describes. He is a beholder of ideas, and an utterer of the necessary and causal. For we do not speak now of men of poetical talents, or of industry and skill in metre, but of the true poet. ...

For it is not metres, but a metre-making argument, that makes a poem, & a thought so passionate and alive, that, like the spirit of a plant or an animal, it has an architecture of its own, and adorns nature with a new thing. The thought and the form are equal in the order of time, but in the order of genesis the thought is prior to the form. The poet has a new thought: he has a whole new experience to unfold; he will tell us how it was with him, and all men will be the richer in his fortune. For, the experience of each new age requires a new confession, and the world seems always waiting for its poet."

At Harvard, Emerson was selected as the class poet of 1821. His many poems can be grouped together in broad categories (with few examples) like:

- Public, political, and patriotic ("Concord Hymn," "Boston Hymn," "Voluntaries)
- Nature poems ("Berrying," "The Rhodora," "The Snow-Storm," "Wood-notes," "Musketaquid," "May-day," "The Adirondacs," "My Garden," "The Titmouse," "Seashore)
- Personal poems ("To Ellen," "Thine Eyes Still Shined," "Threnody" "Terminus," "Grace)
- Philosophical, religious and aesthetic ("The Sphinx," "Each and All," "The Problem," "Uriel," "Hamatreya," "Ode Inscribed to W. H. Channing," "Give All to Love," "Initial, Dtmonic, and Celestial Love," "Merlin," "Bacchus," "Saadi," "Brahma," "Days," "Two Rivers," and "Waldeinsamkeit")

The popular ten:

"Each and All," "The Problem," "Hamatreya," "The Rhodora," "The Snow-Storm," "Ode Inscribed to W. H. Channing," "Brahma," "Concord Hymn," "Days," and "Terminus."

The less popular ten:

"Uriel," "The Sphinx," "The Humble-Bee," "Woodnotes," "Give All to Love," "Merlin," "Bacchus," "Threnody," "Grace," and "Two Rivers."

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| [Top](#) | **Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882): A Brief Biography**

A Student Project by Cindy Youngquist

Ralph Waldo Emerson was born on May 25th in 1803 in the parsonage of the first church on Summer Street in Boston. He was one of eight children born into the Emerson family but sadly Ralph was the only one to live till maturity. His father William Emerson was a reverend who was able to trace his family tree back to the first generation of Americans and was the product of a long line of ministers. His mother Ruth Emerson whose maiden name was Haskins family made there family name through trading in west India. (Myerson, 10)

Emerson spent his childhood years in school with his brothers. When his father died in 1811 the Emerson's money diminished quickly and forced his mother to open boarding houses to provide for the family. Emerson entered Harvard University at age fourteen. Although he was quite bright as Emerson was growing up there was no hint that he would ever make the contributions to America that he had through his writing. While attending Harvard university Emerson took quite a liking to both writing and Latin but performed merely "no better than satisfactory" in the subjects of mathematics and philosophy. (Myerson, 11)

Between the years of 1821 and 1825 upon graduating Harvard Emerson took a job in teaching in the Boston area. Although he found little pleasure in his work as a teacher he did enjoy walking tours and attempting poetry. As he came from a long line of ministers Emerson felt inclined to join the ministry himself. In 1825 Emerson studied at the Harvard divinity school but did not take a degree. However he was approbated in 1827 by the American Unitarian Association to preach. Over the next few months he preached at his father's old church in Boston until he began to experience problems with his eyes and joints which he knew to be signs of tuberculosis so he sought the advice of a physician who advised him to spend some time in the south to recuperate. (Myerson, 11)

Emerson returned to Boston in mid 1827. While traveling home Emerson stopped in Washington D.C. to deliver a sermon. Not interested in a church of his own Emerson continued to preach around the Boston area until he made the acquaintance of Ellen Louise Tucker. When Emerson met Ellen he decided to keep preaching for a little while longer and they were wed on September 30th 1829. There marriage was quite short though as she died of tuberculosis on February 8th 1831. (Myerson, 13)

In 1832 Emerson ventured on a trip to Europe. While in Italy he tried to absorb the literary atmosphere by visiting the tombs of literary greats and attending operas. In England however he was more interested in trying to get a feel for how the Anglo Saxon culture started. A lifelong friendship also formed for Emerson on his trip to Europe when he made the acquaintance of Thomas Carlyle. Emerson later said that Carlyle had "invited him back into the world of the

living" (Myerson, 16).

When Emerson returned to the states in 1833 a year after leaving he abandoned the pulpit and began a new career as a public speaker. The area in which Emerson gained most of his notoriety was in the area of philosophy. In the year of 1835 Emerson met Lydia Jackson but didn't love her the way he had loved his previous wife Ellen and their marriage ended up being one more of respect for each other than one created out of love for one another.

| [Top](#) | In 1836 while mourning the death of his brother Charles Emerson kept working on one of his most important works "Nature". Around the time Emerson was writing "Nature" he became a member of a transcendental club and founded the "Dial" (a literary paper) which was first published in 1840 with co members such as Elizabeth Palmer Peabody, and Henry David Thoreau. (Rusk, 276)

In 1837 Emerson wrote one of his most popular essays "The American Scholar" which included the now famous quote "Insist on yourself; never imitate"(Rusk,279) to challenge future writers to not just imitate classic European writing but to create their own individual creative thoughts and work. Another one of Emerson's primary works that was written around this time and delivered to a group of graduates was entitled "The Divinity School Address." (Myerson, 25 Rusk, 279-280)

Nearing the end of the 1840's Emerson took his second trip to abroad to Europe with his friend Thomas Carlyle. While touring Europe Emerson not only toured literary venues but also delivered around 64 lectures during 1847 and 1848 in a series of lectures named "Mind and Matters of the Nineteenth Century". While not lecturing Emerson along with Carlyle visited many scientists and naturalists. Upon returning Emerson has journals full of his insights on art, history, and manors. It was also around this time in 1841 when Emerson wrote one of his most notable works "Self Reliance". (Myerson, 31-32)

In 1855 Walt Whitman published "Leaves of Grass" and Emerson "hails him to be a genius" but question whether or not Whitman should have used all the sexual passages needed to be included (Rusk, 403).

In 1862 Emerson meets the 16th president Abraham Lincoln. Later Lincoln's assassination in 1865 inspired Emerson to write another essay named "culture". This essay was later included in a book entitled "The conduct of life" Later in 1862 Emerson's friend and mentor Thoreau sadly died and Emerson recited a collection of his poetry he called "May-day and other pieces" (which will later be published in 1867) at his friend's funeral.

Emerson traveled to California in mid 1871 to lecture in San Francisco and Oakland. Even before he "Saw the marvels of the state he had fallen in love with it." While in California visits to Yosemite and Mariposa "Left him aghast with admiration, there was no lack of Californians willing to encourage him to remain in that mood." John Muir encouraged Emerson to remain in the area and tried to convince him to take up the "religion of an outdoor life." (Rusk, 447)

"The church bells tolled seventy-nine times" to announce Ralph Waldo Emerson's death in on April 27th 1882 at the age of 78. He would have turned 79 if he had only lived for one month longer. Close to one thousand people came to Concord to remember an honor Emerson and writers such as Louisa May Alcott spoke at his service in the Unitarian church in Concord. Emerson was laid to rest on a hill in Sleepy Hollow.

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[Top](#) Study Questions

1. What elements of Transcendentalism are evident in the short poem at the beginning of *Nature*?
2. How does Emerson characterize his age? How does he characterize its relation to the past?
3. What is the distinction Emerson makes between Nature and the Soul?
4. How accurate is Oliver Wendell Holmes's description of "The American Scholar" as "our intellectual Declaration of

Independence." In particular, discuss the three influences on the scholar and Emerson's views about them.

5. In his "Divinity School Address," Emerson deplors the defects of historical Christianity. Discuss these defects and Emerson's solutions.

6. In what ways was Emerson a radical? Discuss his break with the Puritan faith and his disagreement with Channing's Unitarianism.

7. Consider the anecdote in "Self-Reliance" of a valued advisor who was "wont to importune" Emerson "with the dear old doctrines of the church." What is going on in this exchange? What does it mean to say that the impulses may be "from below"? How adequate a moral position is the statement, "No law can be sacred to me but that of my nature"?

8. Consider Emerson's argument, in "The Poet," that it is "not metres, but a metre-making argument that makes a poem, ... a thought so passionate and alive that like the spirit of a plant or an animal it has an architecture of its own ..."

9. Robert Frost said that it took him thirty years to grasp the meaning of Emerson's "Brahma." What is most puzzling and difficult about the poem? What similar difficulties exist in Emerson's essays? Compare the voice of "Brahma" with the voice of the "Earth-Song" in Emerson's "Hamatreya." Note Mark Twain's parody of Emerson and "Brahma" in his ["Whittier Birthday Dinner Speech."](#)

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