

Emerson's "Self-Reliance"

1. How do you think Emerson would explain the difference between being original and being conventional?
2. Why does Emerson call it genius to believe that what is true for you is true for all men?
3. What does Emerson mean by, "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 or worse as his portion; that though the wide universe is full of good, no kernel of nourishing corn came to him but through his toil bestowed on that plot of ground which is given him to till."
4. What is meant by, "Trust thyself: every heart vibrates to that iron string." What is the metaphor of the iron string meant to represent or communicate?
5. What advantage does Emerson seem to think the young have vs. adults with his/her established habits of mind?
6. What is Emerson's attitude toward society? To what does he compare it--what does a person give up by being part of it?
7. Interpret the following quote: "Whoso would be a man, must be a non-conformist. He who would gather immortal palms must not be hindered by the name of goodness, but must explore it if it be goodness. Nothing is at last sacred but the integrity of your own mind."

8. What is self-reliance according to Emerson?

9. What is non-conformity according to Emerson?

10. A bit more from Emerson's "Self-Reliance":

"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 to-morrow speak what to-morrow thinks in hard words again, though it contradict everything you said to-day. — '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, and every pure and wise spirit that ever took flesh. To be great is to be misunderstood."

What do you think Emerson means by foolish consistency? To be consistent is usually seen as a positive trait or habit. How could it be foolish?

Emerson's "Nature"

1. Emerson states that "The foregoing generations beheld God and nature face to face; we, through their eyes" (Introduction). Paraphrase what Emerson means.

2. Emerson states that "Every man's condition is a solution in hieroglyphic to those inquiries he would put" (Introduction). "Hieroglyphic" here means a symbol with a hidden meaning. What is Emerson saying?

3. Before proceeding to his inquiry concerning "to what end is nature," Emerson defines a few key terms (Introduction). How does Emerson define the following terms?
 - a. Nature (in the philosophical sense):

 - b. Nature (in the common sense):

 - c. Art:

4. Why does Emerson suggest that a man feel a greater solitude when looking at the stars than when reading and writing by himself in his study?

5. What does Emerson mean when he writes that "few adult persons can see nature"? How do his examples of the "wood-cutter" and the farm owners of the preceding paragraph help Emerson set up his point?

6. What does Emerson mean by the statement "Nature always wears the colors of the spirit"?