

Vocabulary

absolve (ab zälv') v. pardon; free from guilt

Whoso would be a man must be a nonconformist. He who would gather immortal palms 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 suffrage of the world. . . .

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 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,¹ and every pure and wise spirit that ever took flesh. To be great is to be misunderstood. . . .

1. **Pythagoras ... Newton** individuals who made major contributions to scientific, philosophical, or religious thinking.

Critical Reading

1. **Respond:** Do you agree with Emerson that "to be great is to be misunderstood"? Why or why not?
2. (a) What terms does Emerson use to describe society?
(b) **Interpret:** According to Emerson, what is society's main purpose? (c) **Draw Conclusions:** In what ways does Emerson believe people should be affected by the way others perceive them?
3. (a) **Make a Judgment:** How important is Emerson's use of the adjective "foolish" in his discussion of consistency?
(b) **Speculate:** Do you think there are any circumstances in which Emerson would advocate the benefits of consistency? Explain.
4. (a) **Interpret:** According to Emerson, what role does the "divine" have in determining each person's circumstances?
(b) **Generalize:** What would Emerson say is each person's reason for living? Explain.



How does literature shape or reflect society?

Which passage in these essays best expresses belief in the importance of the individual? Explain the reasons for your choice. In your response, use at least two of these Essential Question words: *conformity, integrity, society, agreement.*

FROM

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. 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. This sculpture in the memory is not without preestablished harmony. The eye was placed where one ray should fall, that it might testify of that particular ray. 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. 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 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 trustworthy 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 minors and invalids in a protected corner, but guides, redeemers, and benefactors. Obeying the Almighty effort and advancing on chaos and the Dark. . . .

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. It loves not realities and creators, but names and customs.

Vocabulary

conviction (ken vik' shən)
n. strong belief

Literary Analysis

Figurative Language

How does the metaphor of tilling soil help clarify Emerson's ideas in this opening paragraph?

Vocabulary

chaos (kā' äs') *n.* disorder of matter and space, supposed to have existed before the ordered universe

aversion (ə vur' zhən)
n. object arousing an intense dislike



According to Emerson, what have great men always done?