

# What Do You Think Of Emerson?

Posted on January 14, 2020

## Introduction

Ralph Waldo Emerson remains one of the most influential and disputed figures in American intellectual history. The original essay asks whether he was a genius and correctly emphasizes self-trust, individualism, nature, and his mixed critical reputation. It sometimes treats disagreement as evidence that Emerson may have been irrational and relies on secondary websites instead of his own texts. A stronger judgment begins by defining genius more carefully. Emerson was not a systematic philosopher who proved each conclusion step by step. He was an essayist, lecturer, poet, religious dissenter, and cultural critic whose compressed language changed how Americans discussed the self, nature, education, reform, and intellectual independence. (Emerson, 1983)

## Emerson's Historical Setting

Born in Boston in 1803, Emerson was educated at Harvard and entered the Unitarian ministry before resigning after disagreements about doctrine and the administration of Communion. His intellectual career developed during rapid industrialization, territorial expansion, religious debate, abolitionism, and the emergence of a national literature. He traveled in Europe, met writers such as Thomas Carlyle, and returned to build a career through lectures and essays. This context matters because his call for independence was cultural as well as personal. American writers still measured themselves against European authority, and Emerson wanted them to develop forms adequate to their own landscape and experience without simply rejecting the traditions that educated them. (Buell, 2003)

## Transcendentalism

Emerson became the central public voice of American Transcendentalism, a varied movement rather than a fixed creed. Transcendentalists emphasized intuition, conscience, the spiritual significance of nature, and the capacity of individuals to challenge inherited institutions. They drew from German idealism, British Romanticism, Asian religious texts, Unitarian theology, and American reform movements. Emerson's version argues that reality cannot be exhausted by sensory facts or conventional doctrine. Human beings participate in larger patterns of mind and nature, though his language for that participation changes across essays. Critics who demand a single technical system may find him vague, while readers attentive to rhetoric see a deliberate attempt to provoke perception rather than close argument permanently.

## Nature and the Active Mind

In *Nature*, Emerson describes the natural world as material reality, symbolic language, and a source of spiritual insight. He does not simply worship whatever the senses present. Instead, he asks how perception and mind cooperate in producing meaning. The famous image of becoming a transparent eye expresses a temporary release from narrow ego, not a scientific account of vision. Nature educates because it resists complete possession and reflects human categories back to the observer. This idealism can sound abstract, but it helped make landscape central to American writing. It also encouraged later environmental thought, even though Emerson's nature often becomes a symbol for human development rather than an ecosystem valued entirely on its own terms.

## Self-Reliance

"Self-Reliance" urges readers to trust an inward conviction rather than conform automatically to public opinion. Emerson attacks imitation, fear of inconsistency, and social pressure that rewards agreeable appearances. His ideal is not simple selfishness. The self he trusts is connected with a universal moral capacity, and genuine independence should permit original contribution rather than withdrawal from everyone else. Nevertheless, the essay's aphoristic force can invite misuse. Readers may quote it to justify stubbornness, ignore expertise, or treat dependence as weakness. Emerson is most persuasive when self-reliance means disciplined judgment and willingness to accept responsibility, not the belief that an individual owes nothing to relationships or institutions.

## The American Scholar

In "The American Scholar," Emerson addresses educated people as active thinkers rather than passive receivers of books. He values the past but warns that books can become tyrannical when readers worship established conclusions instead of using them. Nature, action, and study should work together. Experience tests what reading proposes, while reading expands the range of experience a single life can interpret. The address helped define an aspiration for American intellectual independence and was later praised as a kind of cultural declaration. Its continuing value lies in the distinction between learning and submission. Education should enable students to judge, connect, and create rather than reproduce authority without understanding.

## Emerson's Prose Style

Emerson's essays proceed through aphorism, image, paradox, and sudden shift more than conventional linear proof. Individual sentences often feel complete enough to circulate independently, which contributes to his influence and to distortion. The style can awaken attention by making familiar assumptions appear strange. It can also frustrate readers who expect every term to remain

consistent. Orestes Brownson and other contemporaries criticized Emerson's idealism and logical looseness, and that criticism is reasonable when a passage makes large claims without defining its evidence. Yet the form is partly intentional. Emerson writes to activate the reader's mind, not to replace it with a finished doctrinal system. His best prose combines intellectual pressure with musical cadence.

## Religion and the Divinity School Address

Emerson's 1838 Divinity School Address criticized lifeless institutional religion and argued that moral and spiritual truth should be encountered directly rather than accepted only through historical authority. The address offended many Unitarian leaders because it appeared to diminish the unique status of Christian revelation and the ministry's institutional role. Its importance lies in how it joins religious experience with intellectual freedom. Emerson does not reject the ethical example of Jesus; he resists a church that turns example into distant worship while neglecting present conscience. The address demonstrates both his courage and his tendency to state contested theological positions through prophetic assertion rather than patient doctrinal argument.

## Reform, Slavery, and Political Engagement

Emerson is sometimes portrayed as an isolated individualist uninterested in politics, but his public position developed over time. He opposed slavery, supported abolitionist causes, denounced the Fugitive Slave Law, and spoke about John Brown. His antislavery writing shows conscience becoming public action rather than private self-culture. Still, his record should not be idealized. Scholars have examined racial assumptions and hierarchical language in some journals and early writings, as well as tensions between universal ideals and nineteenth-century theories of race. A responsible evaluation recognizes genuine moral growth and political courage while refusing to treat influence as immunity from historical criticism. His later speeches therefore complicate the stereotype that transcendental self-culture necessarily withdraws from collective responsibility.

## Individualism and Social Dependence

The strongest criticism of Emerson concerns the distance between his sovereign individual and the conditions that make independence possible. Education, property, health, family labor, political rights, and social recognition are distributed unequally. A person denied legal freedom cannot overcome every barrier through self-trust. Emerson's language sometimes underestimates institutions and material constraint, although his antislavery speeches demonstrate increasing recognition of political structures. Contemporary readers can preserve his demand for conscience while adding an account of mutual dependence and justice. The self becomes capable through relationships, public goods, and inherited language. Independence is therefore not the absence of dependence but the ability to

participate without surrendering judgment.

## Emerson and Education

Emerson's educational thought values curiosity, individuality, direct observation, and respect for the learner's developing mind. He distrusts instruction that treats students as empty containers or rewards recitation without insight. These ideas influenced later conversations about progressive education and creative learning. They also require balance. Students need guidance, shared knowledge, practice, and correction; originality without disciplinary competence can remain shallow. Emerson's contribution is to insist that education should not destroy the very agency it hopes to cultivate. A teacher should help learners encounter ideas as living possibilities, not merely as answers guarded by authority. His educational legacy is strongest when freedom and rigor support each other.

## Influence on American Literature

Emerson influenced Henry David Thoreau, Walt Whitman, Margaret Fuller, William James, Robert Frost, and many later writers, although each accepted and resisted different parts of his thought. Whitman expanded Emersonian selfhood into a democratic poetic voice, while Thoreau tested transcendental ideas through natural observation, civil disobedience, and deliberate living. Pragmatists transformed intuition into questions about experience and consequence. Modern poets inherited his confidence in the charged individual sentence. Influence does not mean that later writers simply followed him. It means his language created problems and possibilities they had to answer. That generative power is one reasonable measure of intellectual greatness. (Richardson, 1995)

## Was Emerson a Genius?

Calling Emerson a genius is defensible if genius means unusual imaginative power, cultural originality, stylistic force, and the ability to transform later thought. It is less useful if it implies infallibility or a perfectly coherent philosophical system. Emerson's insights coexist with abstraction, inconsistency, historical limitation, and claims that require correction. His greatness lies partly in producing sentences and conceptual tensions that readers continue to test. The mixed reviews described in the original essay do not cancel genius; serious influence often generates disagreement. A mature assessment should neither worship prophetic language nor dismiss it as moonshine. It should ask what the language enables, obscures, and demands from later readers.

## My Evaluation

I find Emerson most convincing when he challenges passive conformity and asks individuals to connect reading with experience. His writing can restore responsibility by refusing the excuse that

inherited opinion must determine present judgment. I am less convinced when the sovereign self appears detached from economic inequality, communal obligation, or the expertise required for complex decisions. His aphorisms need to be read slowly and in context because a memorable sentence can conceal qualifications supplied elsewhere. Emerson is valuable not as a source of motivational slogans but as a difficult companion in thinking about conscience. He encourages independence while forcing readers to decide how independence should coexist with evidence and care for others.

## Conclusion

Emerson deserves his central place in American literature and philosophy because he changed the language of selfhood, nature, education, religion, and cultural independence. His essays are not systematic demonstrations, and their prophetic style sometimes substitutes intensity for proof. His individualism can overlook social dependence, while his universal claims must be examined against the exclusions of his period. Yet his work also supported intellectual emancipation, antislavery conscience, original literature, and active learning. Whether the label is genius or major thinker, Emerson's importance rests on a rare capacity to make readers feel that inherited categories are not final. The best response is neither reverence nor dismissal but critical engagement.

## Works Cited

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