

## The Transcendentalists



**READING 2A** Analyze the way in which the theme or meaning of a selection represents a view or comment on the human condition. **RC-11(B)** Make complex inferences about text and use textual evidence to support understanding.

### from *Self-Reliance* from *Nature*

Essays by Ralph Waldo Emerson

VIDEO TRAILER



KEYWORD: HML11-368A

### Meet the Author

## Ralph Waldo Emerson 1803–1882

As the acknowledged leader of the transcendentalists, Ralph Waldo Emerson, poet, essayist, and lecturer, was a towering figure in the 19th-century literary world. He helped shape a new, uniquely American body of literature and is often cited as one of the most significant writers in American history. “All life is an experiment,” the radical thinker and writer once said. “The more experiments you make, the better.”

**An Average Student** Emerson was born in Boston, Massachusetts. His father, a prominent Unitarian minister, died when Emerson was eight, plunging the family into financial trouble. Although money was tight, funds were found to enroll Emerson at Harvard. When he graduated in 1821, ranked 30th out of a class of 59, there was little indication that Emerson would soon become one of the most celebrated literary figures of all time.

**Spiritual Crisis** In 1825, Emerson returned to Harvard to study for the Unitarian ministry and was ordained in 1829. Just over a year later, his beloved wife, Ellen, died of tuberculosis. Ellen’s death threw Emerson into a state of spiritual crisis, causing him to question many aspects of the Christian tradition and his

duties as a minister. In 1832, after much consideration, Emerson resigned his post.

**The Voice of Transcendentalism** Following his wife’s death, Emerson settled in Concord, Massachusetts, and devoted himself to the study of philosophy, religion, and literature. In 1836 Emerson published *Nature*, in which he eloquently articulated his transcendental philosophy, an outgrowth of European romanticism. That same year, Emerson formed the Transcendental Club with a group of like-minded friends, including Henry David Thoreau and Margaret Fuller. *Nature*, with its emphasis on self-reliance and individuality, became the group’s unofficial manifesto.

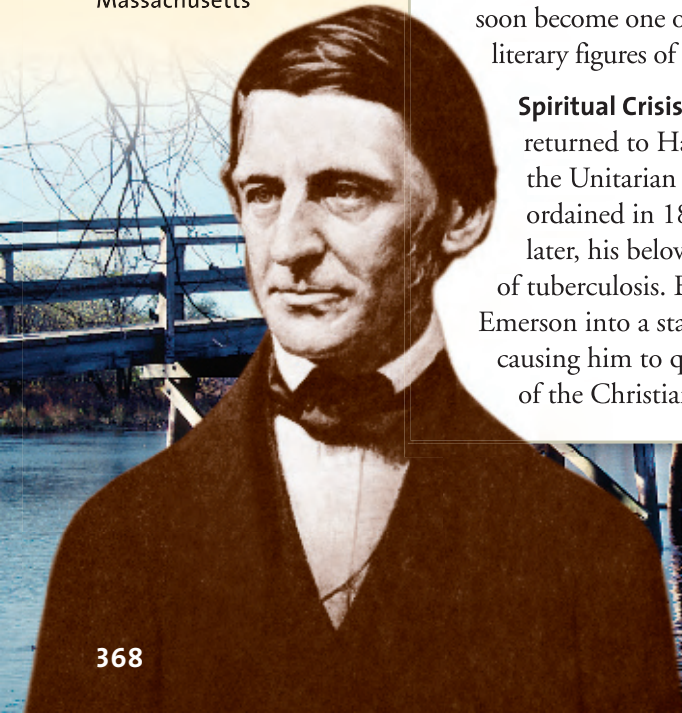
**The Sage of Concord** Those who met Emerson in person often thought him a rather stiff and formal person, dressed always in black. He reserved his passion for the page and the podium, where he elaborated upon his ideas in essays and a series of popular lectures. By the 1840s the Sage of Concord, as he was known, had become a major literary force whose influence is still evident in American culture today.

### DID YOU KNOW?

Ralph Waldo Emerson . . .

- entered Harvard when he was only 14.
- was named class poet at Harvard—but only after seven other students had refused the honor.
- published *Nature*, one of his most famous works, anonymously.

Old North Bridge, Concord, Massachusetts



Author Online



Go to [thinkcentral.com](http://thinkcentral.com). KEYWORD: HML11-368B

## LITERARY ANALYSIS: TRANSCENDENTALISM

Ralph Waldo Emerson’s motto was “Trust thyself.” This principle lies at the heart of **transcendentalism**, an intellectual movement that emphasized the dignity of the individual and advocated a simple, mindful life. The transcendentalists, led by Emerson himself, wanted to transcend—or go beyond—the limitations of the senses and everyday experience. Key tenets of transcendentalism include

- a theory that “transcendent forms” of truth exist beyond reason and experience; every individual is capable of discovering this truth on his or her own, through intuition
- a conviction that people are inherently good and should follow their own beliefs, however controversial they may be
- a belief that humankind, nature, and God are all interconnected

As you read, consider how Emerson’s writing articulates his belief in the importance of the individual as well as his ideas about humankind’s relationship to the natural world.

## READING SKILL: IDENTIFY THEME

**Theme** is the underlying message or the central idea of a work, which can be stated in one sentence. Usually, writers do not state the theme directly; instead, readers must make inferences based on clues in the text. As you read “Self-Reliance” and *Nature*, record your inferences about each work’s theme in a chart like the one below.

Theme of “Self-Reliance”	Theme of <i>Nature</i>

## VOCABULARY IN CONTEXT

Emerson uses these words to state his convictions. Test your knowledge by deciding which word is suggested by each phrase.

<b>WORD</b>	aversion	exhilaration	nonconformist
<b>LIST</b>	decorum	importune	occult

1. a food you do not like
2. a race you have just won
3. a well-behaved crowd
4. a nagging younger sibling



Complete the activities in your **Reader/Writer Notebook**.

## What is your MOTTO?

The ancient Roman poet Horace gravely advised, “Never despair.” Modern comedian Woody Allen quipped that the secret to success in life is simple: “Eighty percent of success is showing up.” Each of these mottos captures an individual’s attitude toward life in one pithy phrase. Ralph Waldo Emerson’s motto, “Trust thyself,” distills the essence of the ideals he expressed in his essays and lectures.

**QUICKWRITE** Create your own personal motto. To get started, consider the traits or resources that helped you solve a difficult problem, or the best advice you have ever given a friend. Use your answers to develop a personal motto that is short and to the point.



# Self-Reliance

RALPH WALDO EMERSON



TEKS 2B

## THEME AND GENRE: TEXT STRUCTURE

The expository and reflective text-structures of “Self-Reliance” contrasts sharply with the narrative structure of *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*, Sherman Alexie’s 2007 novel. Although the essay structure contrasts with Alexie’s narrative, the narrator’s reflection echoes the reflective structure of Emerson’s essay. Like Emerson, he struggles to find his own unique path apart from the conventional expectations.

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. . . .

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<sup>1</sup> was seated at their heart, working through their hands, predominating<sup>2</sup> in all their being. . . . **A**

Whoso would be a man, must be a **nonconformist**. He who would gather immortal palms<sup>3</sup> 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<sup>4</sup> of the world. I remember an answer which when quite young I was prompted to make to a valued adviser

## Analyze Visuals ►

What elements of **transcendentalism** are reflected in the painting on the opposite page?

### **A** THEME

Re-read the ideas in lines 1–11. Based on these lines, what inferences can you make about the theme of this selection?

### **nonconformist**

(nŏn’kən-fŏr’mĭst) *n.*  
one who does not follow generally accepted beliefs, customs, or practices

1. **the absolutely trustworthy:** God.
2. **predominating:** being predominant, or having controlling influence.
3. **immortal palms:** everlasting triumph and honor. In ancient times, people carried palm leaves as a symbol of victory, success, or joy.
4. **suffrage:** approval; support.








who was wont to **importune** me with the dear old doctrines of the church. On my saying, “What have I to do with the sacredness of traditions, if I live wholly from within?” my friend suggested—“But these impulses may be from below, not from  
20 above.” I replied, “They do not seem to me to be such; but if I am the Devil’s child, I will live then from the Devil.” No law can be sacred to me but that of my nature. Good and bad are but names very readily transferable to that or this; the only right is what is after my constitution;<sup>5</sup> the only wrong what is against it. . . . **B**

What I must do is all that concerns me, not what the people think. This rule, equally arduous in actual and in intellectual life, may serve for the whole distinction between greatness and meanness.<sup>6</sup> It is the harder because you will always find those who think they know what is your duty better than you know it. It is easy in the world to live after the world’s opinion; it is easy in solitude to live after our own; but the great man is he who in the midst of the crowd keeps with  
30 perfect sweetness the independence of solitude. . . . **C**

For nonconformity the world whips you with its displeasure. And therefore a man must know how to estimate a sour face. The by-standers look askance on him in the public street or in the friend’s parlor. If this **aversion** had its origin in contempt and resistance like his own he might well go home with a sad countenance; but the sour faces of the multitude, like their sweet faces, have no deep cause, but are put on and off as the wind blows and a newspaper directs. . . .

The other terror that scares us from self-trust is our consistency; a reverence for our past act or word because the eyes of others have no other data for computing our orbit than our past acts, and we are loth to disappoint them. . . .

40 A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin<sup>7</sup> of little minds, adored by little statesmen and philosophers and divines.<sup>8</sup> 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,<sup>9</sup> and every pure and wise spirit that ever took flesh. To be great is to be misunderstood. 

**importune** (ɪmˈpɔr-tōn) v. to ask urgently or repeatedly; to annoy or trouble

**B TRANSCENDENTALISM**  
Transcendentalists believed in disregarding external authority in favor of one’s own experience and intuition. What is implied by the word *sacred* in line 21?

**C GRAMMAR AND STYLE**  
Emerson adds detail and precision to his writing by using **adjective clauses**, which modify nouns and pronouns. In line 27 and lines 29–30, he uses adjective clauses beginning with *who* to describe specific types of people.

**aversion** (ə-vûrˈzhən) n. a strong dislike

### Language Coach

**Figurative Language** In lines 37–39, “computing our orbit” is an example of figurative language, language that communicates ideas beyond the literal meaning of words. “Computing our orbit” can be understood as “deciding what we’ll do next.” State lines 37–39 in your own words.

5. **after my constitution:** consistent with my nature.

6. **meanness:** the state of being inferior in quality, character, or value.

7. **hobgoblin:** a source of fear or dread.

8. **divines:** religious leaders.

9. **Pythagoras** (pɪˈθæɡˈər-əs) . . . **Newton:** great thinkers whose radical theories and viewpoints caused controversy.

# Nature

RALPH WALDO EMERSON

Nature is a setting that fits equally well a comic or a mourning piece. In good health, the air is a cordial of incredible virtue. Crossing a bare common, in snow puddles, at twilight, under a clouded sky, without having in my thoughts any occurrence of special good fortune, I have enjoyed a perfect **exhilaration**. I am glad to the brink of fear. In the woods too, a man casts off his years, as the snake his slough,<sup>1</sup> and at what period soever of life, is always a child. In the woods, is perpetual youth. Within these plantations of God, a **decorum** and sanctity reign, a perennial festival is dressed, and the guest sees not how he should tire of them in a thousand years. In the woods, we return to reason and faith. There I feel that  
10 nothing can befall me in life,—no disgrace, no calamity, (leaving me my eyes,) which nature cannot repair. Standing on the bare ground,—my head bathed by the blithe air, and uplifted into infinite space,—all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eye-ball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or particle of God. The name of the nearest friend sounds then foreign and accidental: to be brothers, to be acquaintances,—master or servant, is then a trifle and a disturbance. I am the lover of uncontained and immortal beauty. In the wilderness, I find something more dear and connate<sup>2</sup> than in streets or villages. In the tranquil landscape, and especially in the distant line of the horizon, man beholds somewhat as beautiful as his own nature. **D**

## exhilaration

(ĭg-zĭl'ə-rā'shən) *n.* a feeling of high spirits or lively joy

## decorum (dĭ-kôr'əm) *n.*

good taste in conduct or appearance

## **D** TRANSCENDENTALISM

Review the elements of transcendentalism listed on page 369. Which aspect of transcendentalist thought is reflected in lines 12–19? Explain your answer.

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1. **slough** (slŭf): the cast-off skin of a snake.
  2. **connate**: agreeable; able to be related to.

20 The greatest delight which the fields and woods minister, is the suggestion of an **occult** relation between man and the vegetable. I am not alone and unacknowledged. They nod to me, and I to them. The waving of the boughs in the storm, is new to me and old. It takes me by surprise, and yet is not unknown. Its effect is like that of a higher thought or a better emotion coming over me, when I deemed I was thinking justly or doing right.

Yet it is certain that the power to produce this delight, does not reside in nature, but in man, or in a harmony of both. It is necessary to use these pleasures with great temperance. For, nature is not always tricked<sup>3</sup> in holiday attire, but the same scene which yesterday breathed perfume and glittered as for the frolic of the  
30 nymphs, is overspread with melancholy today. Nature always wears the colors of the spirit. To a man laboring under calamity, the heat of his own fire hath sadness in it. Then, there is a kind of contempt of the landscape felt by him who has just lost by death a dear friend. The sky is less grand as it shuts down over less worth in the population. ∞

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3. **tricked**: dressed.

**occult** (ə-kŭlt') *adj.* secret or hidden from view

### Language Coach

**Word Definitions** In line 26, *reside* means “live” or “exist.” (Think of related words: *residence* and *resident*.) Where does Emerson say the power to appreciate nature exists? Now, read lines 30–34. What is Emerson saying about our perception of the natural world?

### ▼ Analyze Visuals

Emerson says that “nature always wears the colors of the spirit.” What **mood** does this painting convey? Describe the elements of the painting that establish this mood.

*Ben Lomond* (1829–1830), Thomas Doughty. Oil on canvas. © Christie's Images/SuperStock.



## Comprehension

- 1. Recall** According to “Self-Reliance,” what is the only law that Emerson can hold sacred?
- 2. Summarize** What are three ways the woods can transform a man, according to Emerson in *Nature*?
- 3. Clarify** In *Nature*, Emerson discusses the “delight” the natural world often inspires. What does Emerson think this power to delight comes from?



**READING 2A** Analyze the way in which the theme or meaning of a selection represents a view or comment on the human condition. **RC-11(B)** Make complex inferences about text and use textual evidence to support understanding.

## Critical Analysis

- 4. Draw Conclusions** Reread lines 37–48 of “Self-Reliance.” What is Emerson speaking of when he mentions consistency, and why does he berate it as “the hobgoblin of little minds”? Consider the following examples of Emerson’s statements as you formulate your response:
  - “Good and bad are but names very readily transferable to that or this. . . .”
  - “. . . The sour faces of the multitude . . . have no deep cause, but are put on and off as the wind blows. . . .”
- 5. Identify Elements of Transcendentalism** Review the elements of transcendentalism listed on page 369. Then reexamine “Self-Reliance” and *Nature*, identifying key ideas that reflect each tenet of transcendentalism. Record your answer in a chart like the one shown.

<i>Element of Transcendentalism</i>	<i>Example from the Text</i>
<i>Every individual is capable of discovering higher truths on his or her own, through intuition.</i>	<i>“Nothing is at last sacred but the integrity of your own mind.” (“Self-Reliance,” line 14)</i>

- 6. Analyze Theme** Look at the themes you recorded for each of Emerson’s writings. How does each theme relate to the ideals of transcendentalism?

## Literary Criticism

- 7. Critical Interpretation** Writer Henry James argued that Emerson had no concept of the evil that exists in the world. In James’s words, it was “a side of life as to which Emerson’s eyes were thickly bandaged. . . . He had no great sense of wrong . . . no sense of the dark, the foul, the base.” In your opinion, is this a valid criticism of Emerson? Citing evidence, explain why or why not.

### *What is your* **MOTTO?**

What are some of the ideals, or beliefs, that you adhere to? How are your ideals different from those of the people you know best?



# Vocabulary in Context

## ▲ VOCABULARY PRACTICE

Choose the vocabulary word that best completes each sentence.

1. An unexpected tragedy can quickly turn \_\_\_\_\_ into grief.
2. To constantly \_\_\_\_\_ a friend for favors can destroy the friendship.
3. One should act with \_\_\_\_\_ on serious or formal occasions.
4. It is not wise to pry into the \_\_\_\_\_ intrigues of others.
5. Certain values are held by every person, whether a traditionalist or a(n) \_\_\_\_\_.
6. It makes sense to avoid anything to which one has a(n) \_\_\_\_\_.

### WORD LIST

aversion  
decorum  
exhilaration  
importune  
nonconformist  
occult

## ACADEMIC VOCABULARY IN SPEAKING

• construct • expand • indicate • reinforce • role

Although Emerson believed that nature played an important **role** in life, he also saw it as inferior to the power found in humans. In fact, Emerson believed that nature **reinforces** what is already present in humankind. In a small group, discuss how people view nature and self-sufficiency today. In your discussion, use at least three of the Academic Vocabulary words.

## VOCABULARY STRATEGY: WORDS WITH MULTIPLE AFFIXES

You can decipher many long words if you are able to locate a recognizable base word within them. Removing the prefix and the suffix from the vocabulary word *nonconformist*, for example, reveals the base word *conform*. What meanings do the affixes add to the base word? Analyze similar words by separating them into a base word and affixes. Remember that many base words drop the final *e* before suffixes are added.

**PRACTICE** Write the base word and the affixes that make up each word listed. Then write a sentence that demonstrates the meaning of the longer word.

1. prefabricated
2. undiversified
3. disreputable
4. repagination
5. indefatigable
6. abnegation



**READING 1A** Determine the meaning of grade-level technical academic English words in multiple content areas derived from roots and affixes. **1D** Recognize and use knowledge of word origins to determine the meaning of words.

Interactive Vocabulary **THINK** central  
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KEYWORD: HML11-376

## Conventions in Writing

### ◆ GRAMMAR AND STYLE: Use Descriptive Details

Review the **Grammar and Style** note on page 372. The precision of Emerson’s prose owes much to his skillful use of **adjective clauses**—subordinate clauses that add important details about nouns and pronouns. An adjective clause usually follows the word it modifies and is introduced by words such as *when*, *who*, *whom*, *whose*, *that*, and *which*. Here is an example from “Self-Reliance”:

*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. . . .* (lines 1–3)

Notice that each of the highlighted clauses offers information about the noun it modifies. The first clause tells you about the “time in every man’s education” Emerson is discussing. The second, third, and fourth clauses explain what kind of conviction he embraces at this time.

**PRACTICE** Identify the adjective clause in each sentence from Emerson’s work. Then write your own sentences, using adjective clauses as Emerson does.

#### EXAMPLE

He who would gather immortal palms must not be hindered by the name of goodness, but must explore if it be goodness.

*Those who wish to make a true difference cannot worry what others might say behind their backs.*

1. There is a kind of contempt of the landscape felt by him who has just lost by death a dear friend.
2. Nature is a setting that fits equally well a comic or a mourning piece.

### READING-WRITING CONNECTION



Expand your understanding of Emerson’s writing by responding to this prompt. Then, use the **revising tips** to improve your speech.

#### WRITING PROMPT

**UPDATE EMERSON’S MESSAGE** Emerson’s ideas about nonconformity are still relevant today. Write a **short speech** presenting an updated version of Emerson’s message for an audience of contemporary high school students. Use at least one adjective clause in your speech.

#### REVISING TIPS

- Direct your speech to your peers.
- Check your examples to make sure they are current and that they support Emerson’s ideas.



**WRITING 15C** Write an interpretation of an expository or a literary text. **ORAL AND WRITTEN CONVENTIONS 17A** Use and understand the function of different types of clauses and phrases.

Interactive  
Revision

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