



SUNSHINE STATE STANDARDS

Literary Analysis

Benchmark LA.1112.2.2.2 Use information from the text to answer questions or to state the main idea or provide relevant details.

Benchmark LA.1112.2.2.3 Organize information to show understanding or relationships among facts, ideas, and events....

NOTABLE QUOTE

“Do not go where the path may lead, go instead where there is no path and leave a trail.”

FYI

Did you know that 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?

AuthorOnline

For more on Ralph Waldo Emerson, visit the [Literature Center at ClassZone.com](http://LiteratureCenteratClassZone.com).

Old North Bridge, Concord, Massachusetts

from *Self-Reliance* from *Nature*

Essays by Ralph Waldo Emerson



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.

● **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 APHORISMS**

An **aphorism** is a brief statement, usually one sentence long, that expresses a general principle or truth about life. Benjamin Franklin's famous declaration "Honesty is the best policy" is one example of an aphorism. As you read, use a chart to record aphorisms that stand out to you. Think about how these statements reflect Emerson's transcendentalist ideals.

"Self-Reliance"	Nature
"Trust thyself: every heart vibrates to that iron string."	

▲ **VOCABULARY IN CONTEXT**

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

WORD LIST	aversion	exhilaration	nonconformist
	decorum	importune	occult

1. a food you can't stand
2. a race you have just won
3. a well-behaved crowd
4. a nagging younger sibling

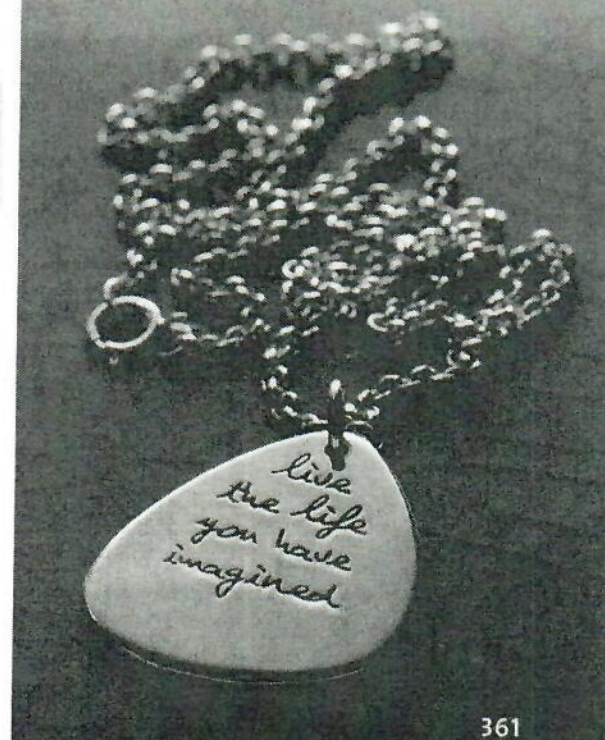
Explore the Key Idea



What is your **MOTTO**?

KEY IDEA 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've ever given a friend. Use your answers to develop a personal motto that is short and to the point.



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. . . .

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 trustworthy¹ was seated at their heart, working through their hands, predominating² in all their being. . . . **A**

Whoso would be a man, must be a **nonconformist**. He who would gather immortal palms³ 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 suffrage⁴ 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 page 363?

A TRANSCENDENTALISM

Summarize the ideas Emerson presents in lines 1–11. After reading these lines, how would you define self-reliance?

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.


Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog (1818),
Caspar David Friedrich. Oil on
canvas, 94.8 cm × 74.8 cm.

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;⁵ 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.⁶ 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 hobgoblin⁷ of little minds, adored by little statesmen and philosophers and divines.⁸ 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,⁹ and every pure and wise spirit that ever took flesh. To be great is to be misunderstood.  **D**

importune (im'pôr-tōon')
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-vûr'zhən) *n.* a strong dislike

D IDENTIFY APHORISMS
Identify at least one aphorism in lines 40–48. How does that aphorism reflect Emerson's transcendentalist ideals?

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** (pī-thäg'ər-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,¹ 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 connate² 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. **E**

1. **slough** (slŭf): the cast-off skin of a snake.

2. **connate**: agreeable; able to be related to.

exhilaration

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



decorum (dĭ-kŏr'əm) *n.* good taste in conduct or appearance

E TRANSCENDENTALISM

Review the elements of transcendentalism listed on page 361.

Which aspect of transcendentalist thought is reflected in lines 12–19?

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 tricked³ 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.  

3. **tricked:** dressed.

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



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

 **TRANSCENDENTALISM**
Reread 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.

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?

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 361. 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. Synthesize Ideas** Which ideals do the essays celebrate that reflect Emerson’s motto, “Trust thyself”? Citing specific lines from both essays, explain how Emerson’s main principles relate to his famous motto.
- 7. Evaluate Aphorisms** Review the aphorisms you recorded as you read. Choose three or four that you found meaningful or evocative and explain whether or not they have stood the test of time.

Literary Criticism

- 8. 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.



SUNSHINE STATE STANDARD

Literary Analysis

Benchmark LA.1112.2.2.3 Organize information to show understanding or relationships among facts, ideas, and events (e.g., representing key points within text through charting, mapping, paraphrasing, summarizing, comparing, contrasting, outlining).