

**Cornell Notes: Self-Reliance**

Key Points/Questions	Notes
<p>1. What is important about the verses written by the painter in the first sentence?</p>	<p>They “were original and not conventional.”</p>
<p>2. How does Emerson define genius?</p>	<p>He defines it as possessing the confident belief that what is true for you is true for all people.</p>
<p>3. Why, according to Emerson, do we value Moses, Plato, and Milton?</p>	<p>We value them because they ignored the wisdom of the past (books and traditions) and spoke not what others thought but what they thought, the “inmost” truth they discovered in their own hearts. They are great because they transformed their “inmost” truth to “outmost” truth.</p>
<p>4. Based on your reading of paragraph 1, how does Emerson define individualism? Support your answer with references to specific sentences.</p>	<p>Emerson defines individualism as a profound and unshakeable trust in one’s own intuitions. Just about any sentence from 4 through 11 could be cited as support.</p>

**Summary**

See summary of paragraphs #1-3 in the summary box on the next page.

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<p>5. What does Emerson mean by stating, “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”? What is the effect of this analogy in the text?</p>	<p>Emerson means that each and every individual must pursue his or her own truth rather than seeking to follow the truth/ideas of others. By using the analogy, Emerson creates a vivid picture for readers that emphasizes that the work of each individual is unique to him or her, just as each individual farmer has his own soil to tend and develop. He also connects the pursuit of individual truth with the idea of work; it is not easy for individuals to follow their intuition, but it is necessary.</p>
<p>6. What, according to Emerson, makes a man content?</p>	<p>Emerson states that men (and women) are most content when they have “put their heart into their own work and done their best.” In other words, he states that individuals are most happy when they pursue their own ideas, convictions, and truth rather than conforming or following the expectations of others.</p>
<p>7. The author describes the heart as “vibrating on an iron string.” How do the figurative and connotative meanings of “iron” contribute to the author’s idea of individualism?</p>	<p>Emerson includes the phrase “vibrating on an iron string” to communicate that one should be steadfast in his or her convictions. Iron is a mineral that is known to be hard and difficult to bend. By using iron as the material for a heart string, Emerson implies that the heart should be unyielding, meaning one must not bend to the opinions of others. The author’s purpose in using iron figuratively is to further communicate the central idea of standing by one’s own beliefs as a self-reliant individual.</p>
<p><b>Summary</b></p>	
<p>In the opening three paragraphs of “Self-Reliance,” Emerson conveys the idea that individuals should trust their intuition and pursue their own idea of truth rather than relying on or following the ideas of others. He makes this point by highlighting Moses, Plato, and Milton, who he believes are valued because they created and contributed their own unique ideas to society rather than simply perpetuating ideas that had already existed. Emerson states a belief that individuals are most content when they have pursued their own ideas, convictions, and truth and tried their best in doing so. He believes that individualism and the steadfast ability to stand by one’s own beliefs and be self-reliant in that regard is the most important thing.</p>	

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<p>8. Explain the contrast Emerson makes between boys and men in paragraph 5. How are men trapped by society?</p> <p>9. What is a joint-stock company? What point is Emerson making through this comparison? What is the effect of this comparison?</p>	<p>Emerson describes boys as independent spirits who act on their interests and do not fear consequences, which also enables them to try things out even if they may fail. Emerson describes the man as “clapped into jail by his consciousness,” and state that he is always conscious of what others think or how they feel, which ultimately drives him to act according to how others view him or want him to act. He makes the point that men are trapped by society because they are expected to live up to expectations or please others in the way that we do not expect from children.</p> <p>A joint-stock company is one in which you get something in return for investing. By using this comparison, Emerson makes the point that society squashes people’s individualism. For society to function and thrive, it relies on some element of conformity. As Emerson states, society loves “names and customs,” not “realities and creators.” As such, Emerson makes the point that as children get older, they succumb to the pressures of society and conform, losing their individualism and spirit of self-reliance in the process. This comparison appeals to the emotions of the reader to persuade them to become non-conformists and rebel against the dictates of society.</p>

**Summary**

Emerson presents the idea that children are self-reliant because they do not worry about the opinions of others. In Emerson’s view, children have not yet been pressured to conform their minds to society, and such they are able to be self-reliant in the way in which they think and act. This allows them to speak their mind, try things even though they may lead to trouble and failure, and stay true to their own desires. By juxtaposing children with adults, Emerson conveys the idea that if children are able to be self-reliant, adults, too, should be able to do this. While we may think of children as being immature or lacking wisdom, Emerson shows that in many ways, they are able to live their truth while many adults conform to society’s expectations. If children can do so, certainly adults should be able to resist the pressures of society and become self-reliant as well.



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<p>10. What is Emerson’s call to action in the beginning of paragraph 7?</p>	<p>Emerson is saying that we must not be conformists. Even if something is deemed “good” by society, we should examine it to determine for ourselves if it is good. Our own integrity and the ability to live according to our own ideas and truth is the most important thing; if we do this, everything else in the world will fall into place.</p>
<p>11. What does the conversation with Emerson’s trusted advisor show about Emerson’s conviction in living one’s truth?</p>	<p>When Emerson questions why he has to engage with sacred traditions, his advisor warns him that perhaps the impulses that he feels to live his own way are coming from “below, not from above,” which suggests concern that he is being influenced by evil forces. However, Emerson replies by saying that if he is the Devil’s child, he will live from the Devil. This shows that it is more important for Emerson to remain true to who he is - even if who he is he is unacceptable or perceived as bad by others - than to conform with society.</p>
<p>12. What does Emerson mean by “Your goodness must have some edge to it, —else it is none.” How does he support this claim?</p>	<p>Emerson aims to show that often people are driven to do good works because they want others to view them as good people and not because they are internally motivated to do those things. He suggests that to be truly good is to be genuine and that by doing good and sharing the truth about people’s actions and motivations, no matter how hurtful or rude, will, in turn, lead to a better life--one that does not conform to society’s expectations. He supports this claim with a few examples, such as the philanthropist, who others may perceive as good by society, but who really is motivated by appearances and not truth. By saying, “Thy love afar is spite at home,” Emerson is saying the philanthropist believes he is doing good by helping in Barbados (which he may), but he is ignoring the problems and inequity right in front of him at home. He also describes all the charities and philanthropies he does not donate to as they not his poor and they do not belong to him and he does not belong to them. He also describes the virtues of men as existing as punishment and says he would rather lead a lowly, genuine life, than a life of virtue, deception, and guilt/punishment.</p>
<p><b>Summary</b></p>	
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13. What does <i>expiate</i> mean?	to apologize or make amends
14. What does Emerson mean when he says, "My life is for itself and not for a spectacle"?	Emerson means that he lives his life to please himself, not for others. In other words, he will not concern himself with what others think of how he presents himself or how he acts toward others because his life is not meant for other people to view and judge. The only person that he she worry about making happy is himself.
15. According to Emerson, what makes a man great?	<p>In the last lines of the text, Emerson states: 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 perfect sweetness the independence of solitude.</p> <p>By this, Emerson means that it is easy to follow the crowd when you are with others and it's easy to follow your intuition and live by your own accord when you are by yourself; what is difficult is to live among others in the world - as we all must do - and stay as true to yourself as you would if you were living in solitude.</p>

**Summary**

Emerson's argument to resist the pressure to conform and live a life based on your own truth is compelling because:

- Emerson's explanation of the ways in which children and youth are able to stay true to themselves because they are not expected to know everything or act in a certain way are strong examples that people can follow; if kids can do it, certainly adults should be able to as well.
- The anecdotes that he includes show that we often live for others, but do so in ways that are disingenuous because we seek society's approval. For example, people may engage in philanthropy to make themselves look good but ignore issues of inequity that are right in front of them that they could address. By living for ourselves and not seeking to appear a certain way in others' eyes, perhaps all individuals could live honest, more enjoyable lives.
- *Accept additional reasons that are relevant and grounded in text.*

Emerson's argument to resist the pressure to conform and live a life based on your own truth is **not** compelling because:

- While Emerson shares several examples that demonstrate his commitment to individualism and self-reliance, he does not provide any information that individuals might need to draw upon in order to successfully resist the pressure to conform
- Emerson's focus on the self undermines the way in which individuals should also consider the greater good of their community. For example, Emerson disagrees with giving money to charity or the poor, which are actions that are needed to support society's most vulnerable people.
- *Accept additional reasons that are relevant and grounded in text.*