

“Self-Reliance”: Study Guide

Epigrams

1. What themes are pointed to in the opening epigrams?
2. Is there any unifying idea that connects the three separate epigrams? If so, what is it?

Paragraph 1

3. What is genius, according to Emerson?
4. Why are Moses, Plato, and Milton great?
5. Why is a man tempted to dismiss his own thoughts? What should he do instead?

Paragraph 2

6. What exactly is killed by imitation? Why is it *suicide* rather than murder?
7. “The power which resides in [you] is new in nature, and none but [you] knows what that is which [you] can do, nor [do you] know until [you have] tried.” In this sentence, a philosophy of human nature is embedded. Based on this statement, what is the value of the individual? If you ignore, deny, or fail to act on your own “genius,” what are the personal consequences? The consequences to the world?
8. Why does Emerson think we should trust ourselves? (Hint: it has to do with the “divine idea.”).

Paragraph 3

9. Emerson suggests that “great men” have always trusted “divine providence.” What behavior shows this trust?

Paragraph 4

10. Why are children “oracles”?

11. How does one babe make babies out of four or five adults?

Paragraph 5

12. Why is the nonchalance of boys the healthy attitude of human nature?

13. How is a man clapped into jail by his consciousness? Why does taking action imprison one?

Paragraph 6

14. How is society in conspiracy against all of its members?

Paragraph 7

15. Emerson recreates an argument with a “valued advisor.” What was the topic? Of what does the valued adviser warn Emerson? How does Emerson respond?

16. According to Emerson, what “law” should he follow? Where do his conceptions of right and wrong come from?

17. What forces take us away from following our own natures?

18. Why does Emerson not want to give to charity? To whom is he willing to give?

Paragraph 8

19. Emerson says of some men that “their virtues are penances.” What does this mean?

Paragraph 9

20. In your own words, explain what Emerson says about greatness in this paragraph.

Paragraph 10

21. How does being part of a church, a Bible society, or a political party keep Emerson from “[detecting] the precise man you are”?

22. How does conformity damage a man?

Paragraph 11

23. How does the world treat the nonconformist?

24. Why is “the discontent of the multitude more formidable than that of the senate or the college”?

25. How should the nonconformist react to the world?

Paragraph 12

26. How does consistency scare us from self-trust?

Paragraph 13

27. Emerson uses a “corpse” as a metaphor for what mental reaction?

28. How should we treat the past?

Paragraph 14

29. Why should a great soul not concern himself with being consistent?

Paragraph 15

30. How is a character like an acrostic?

Paragraph 16

31. How are honest actions like the voyage of a ship (“a zigzag line of a thousand tacks”)? How does this explain why we don’t need to worry about consistency?

Paragraph 17

32. How will Emerson treat the great man coming to his house to dinner? How does this fit with his ideas about the value of the individual?

33. What does Emerson mean when he states that “an institution is the lengthened shadow of one man”?

Paragraph 18

34. How is man like the sot in the fable? (Look up “sot” if you don’t know what it means.)

Paragraph 19

35. Emerson doesn’t appear to have a very high opinion of education as provided by our “reading” and our study of history. What has our study done to us?

36. How do our private acts compare to the public acts of kings?

Paragraph 20

37. How has the world been instructed by its kings? What have we learned from them?

38. What is “the right of every man”?

“Self-Reliance:” Study Guide, Part II

Paragraph 21

1. In this paragraph, Emerson outlines a religious theory. What is his concept of the divine?
2. On what grounds should we put so much faith in self-trust?

Paragraph 22

3. What is wrong with religious organizations, according to this paragraph?

Paragraph 23

4. What point does Emerson make with the roses outside his window?

Paragraph 24

5. According to Emerson, should you memorize his words as a guide for life?

Paragraph 25

6. How does one receive the “highest truth”? How does one know when it has arrived?

Paragraph 26

7. “This one fact the world hates, that the soul *becomes*; for, that forever degrades the past; turns all riches to poverty; all reputation to a shame; confounds the saint with the rogue; shoves Jesus and Judas equally aside.” In this sentence, Emerson asserts a main principle of his philosophy. What does Emerson believe about the nature of existence?

Paragraph 27

8. As described here, what is the relationship between the individual and the universal?

Paragraph 28

9. According to this paragraph, where is God? Who is God?

Paragraph 29

10. Why does Emerson say, “Isolation must precede society”?

Paragraph 30

11. What warning does Emerson issue here? On what terms does he agree to maintain his familial and societal relationships?

Paragraphs 31 & 32

12. Emerson rejects the idea that he is advocating selfish and amoral behavior. Why?

Paragraph 33

13. What is the practical purpose of Emerson’s philosophy, according to this paragraph? In other words, why is society in need of this philosophy?

Paragraph 34

14. Why is the sturdy Vermont lad “worth a hundred” of the young merchant or college-education genius?

Paragraph 35

15. How does Emerson think a greater self-reliance would affect the world?

Paragraph 36 & 37

16. What does Emerson believe should be the function of prayer? What is wrong with the prayer many people engage in?

Paragraph 38

17. Emerson says, “Every new mind is a classification.” What does that mean? How can such a classification be abused by an “unbalanced mind”?

Paragraphs 39-42

18. What does Emerson think about travel? Why do people do it? Is it needed for one’s education?

Paragraph 43

19. Explain this line: “Shakespeare will never be made by the study of Shakespeare.”

Paragraphs 44 & 45

20. What point does Emerson make about society in these paragraphs?

Paragraph 46

21. What point about “civilized man” does Emerson make with his list of gains and losses in this paragraph?

Paragraph 47

22. What does Emerson mean when he says, “No greater men are now than ever were”?

Paragraph 48

23. Explain the wave metaphor.

Paragraph 49

24. How is “the reliance on Property . . . the want of self-reliance”? (Note: in this context, “want” means “lack”).

Paragraph 50

25. Why should you not count on good fortune? What is the only thing on which you can rely?