Themes Across Centuries: Scholar’s Insights

Charles Johnson on Ralph Waldo Emerson

Emerson Gave Me Permission to Question Everything
At age sixteen, when I was an Illinois boy trying to figure out where my place might be in the tempestuous, rapidly changing decade of the 1960s, and long before I became a black American novelist and philosopher, my teachers at Evanston Township High School placed the essays of Ralph Waldo Emerson in front of me. I’m thankful they did.

In grand fashion, “Self-Reliance” gave me permission to be a free thinker and to rigorously question everything around me—from the status quo to social cliques in my school, from neighborhood gangs to eighty-year-old social “conventions” that enshrined racial segregation in the South and in the North. Emerson gave me the courage to resist the pressure to conform to things that were unreasonable, to always trust myself, to dream “impossible dreams,” and to value my own individual voice and vision, even if doing so resulted in disapproval and being unpopular with the hip “in crowd.”

Challenging Us to Go Beyond the Ordinary Just as he served me well in my teens, Emerson’s belief in “the infinitude of the private man,” and his identification with all forms of life, proved to be reliable guides during my adult years. First, that’s because he defined so beautifully the values that eight generations of Americans regard as the basis for our national character and core beliefs, particularly his devotion to what he called “the republic of Man.” He condemned the institution of slavery, championed the right of women to vote, and spoke out against the “wicked Indian policy.”

In his journal, Emerson dreamed of an America that would one day be an “asylum of all nations, the energy of Irish, Germans, Swedes, Poles & Cossacks, & all the European tribes—of the Africans, & of the Polynesians [who] will construct a new race, a new religion, a new State, a new literature, which will be as vigorous as the new Europe which came out of the smelting pot of the Dark Ages. . . .” He truly believed, and made me see, how “It is our duty to be discontented, with the measure we have of knowledge & virtue, to forget the things behind & press toward those before.”

Meet the Author

Charles Johnson has published in a wide variety of genres, including cartoons, philosophical and literary criticism, screenplays, and novels. His novel Middle Passage won the National Book Award in 1990.
Secondly, Emerson has long inspired me—as he does anyone with an adventurous spirit—because he challenges us to be flexible and resourceful, like the “sturdy lad from New Hampshire or Vermont, who in turn tries all the professions, who teams it, farms it, peddles, keeps a school, preaches, edits a newspaper, goes to Congress, buys a township, and so forth, in successive years, and always, like a cat, falls on his feet” (from “Self-Reliance”).

All those are our possibilities. There is nothing, Emerson says, that we cannot achieve if we believe in ourselves. As a Transcendentalist, he was a restless and superbly civilized man who went beyond (or transcended) the ordinary, the outdated, and the unoriginal, for, in his own words, he chose to “unsettle all things. No facts are to me sacred, none are profane; I simply experiment, an endless seeker, with no Past at my back” (from “Circles”).

**Critical Viewing**

This print shows Emerson delivering a lecture. What details reveal what he might have been like as a speaker? [Analyze]

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**Critical Reading**

1. **Key Ideas and Details (a)** When Johnson was a teenager, what three important lessons did he learn from Emerson? **(b) Connect:** What important life lessons have you learned from a favorite author?

2. **Key Ideas and Details (a)** What two qualities does Emerson’s “sturdy lad from New Hampshire or Vermont” display? **(b) Speculate:** Are these qualities still part of our “core beliefs” as Americans? Why or why not?

**As You Read the Selections by Emerson . . .**

3. **Integration of Knowledge and Ideas** Think about whether Emerson’s work is still as relevant to today’s high school students as it was to the young Charles Johnson.