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Emerson or Hawthorne?

Abstract

This paper focuses on Ralph Waldo Emerson's influence on prominent American writers. Specifically, the paper examines themes that Emerson emphasizes in *Self-Reliance* and *Nature* and how those themes are central to selected works by Nathaniel Hawthorne, Walt Whitman, Henry David Thoreau, and Herman Melville. Motifs include, but are not limited to, identity, independence, individuality, introspection, isolation, and ingenuity.

Keywords

Emerson, Hawthorne, Whitman, Thoreau, Melville

Disciplines

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“Emerson or Hawthorne?”

Lauren Bly

Admittedly, when faced with the question “Emerson or Hawthorne?” I was immediately conflicted: my two favorite authors were suddenly going head to head and the “no waffling” implication of the word “or” made it a decidedly challenging task. *The Scarlet Letter* is one of my favorite novels, but *Self-Reliance* and *Nature* are two essays that continually inspire me. It was quite the conundrum; however, after rereading my journal entries for the class, I brought to the surface the answer that, later on, I realized was always in the back of my mind. The truth was easy to see—Emerson is everywhere. I noticed that in my journals Emerson was always the focal point, whether explicitly or implicitly, and in the end I could not help but see correlations between all the works we read this semester and the main themes of Emerson’s works. All of the quotations and themes that I liked best from *Walden*, *The Scarlet Letter*, *Moby-Dick*, and “Song of Myself” were Emersonian ideas. Identity, independence, individuality, introspection, isolation, and ingenuity were all present in each characters’ or authors’ quests to discover the answer to the question “Who am I?” where the purpose of “I” and how it relates to society and other external factors were central to emotional, psychological and intellectual growth.

In regard to the connections between Emerson and Hawthorne, I found that I had not just one, but two journals comparing the two authors. In the first one, I asserted that Hester is the epitome of an Emersonian hero. Society brands Hester with a scarlet “A” for adultery, but really it is a symbol of her defiance and nonconformity and for that Emerson himself would probably happily don an “A” right along with her. In many ways, Hester is a manifestation of the character traits that Emerson praises in *Self-Reliance*. Hester raises Pearl on her own in an unforgiving society and instead of running away from conflict, she

remains a member of that society—though isolated—which is a testament to her strength. Even though one of her motives behind staying is to keep close proximity to Arthur Dimmesdale (the antithesis of Emerson’s heroic vision), the fact that she continues to follow the influence of her socially unacceptable emotions is an example of how she proceeds to act according to her own volition, rather than the official doctrine of the Puritan society. “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” (*Self-Reliance*, p. 272). Hester, though she remains a member of Puritan society, was never truly like her fellow townspeople and after her “sin” she is further isolated from their conformist lifestyle. Despite being a constant object of ridicule and scorn, though, she continues to be a strong social and moral influence. Emerson’s idea that “my life is not an apology, but a life” (*Self-Reliance*, p. 272) is directly applicable to Hester who, despite the scathing remarks and disapproving glares, continues to live her life and raise her daughter. She does not dramatically and apologetically beg for forgiveness; instead, she endures her punishment and ultimately, with her “natural dignity and force of character” (*The Scarlet Letter*, p. 479), she turns a symbol of sin into a symbol of strength.

Thus, when admiring Hawthorne’s unique writing style and meticulous symbolism, one cannot ignore the fact that the entire concept of his work is rooted in Emersonian principles. Though many would argue that Hawthorne and Emerson are very different writers and thinkers, Hawthorne’s most famous work focuses on the same themes that Emerson emphasizes in his prominent essays. While I can marvel at Hawthorne’s style and enjoy a novel that always leads to new discoveries and

discussions, in the end it is Emerson's main motif of remaining an individual in the midst of the controlling and often unrelenting forces of society that makes Hawthorne's work so controversial and interesting.

While I value Hawthorne's writing, his complexity, and his ability to create a convincing and accurate depiction of Puritan society, I did not find myself saying, "*Moby-Dick* reminds me of *The Scarlet Letter*" or "Thoreau and Hawthorne are really on the same page when it comes to x, y, or z." Instead I thought, "*Walden* has so many fascinating suggestions and opinions that Emerson actually touches upon in *Nature*" or I stumbled upon an annotation where I had written "Emerson" next to a few of Whitman's lines in "Song of Myself." Consequently, in the match between Emerson and Hawthorne, it was Emerson's fist that stood triumphantly in the air. Having established that Emerson was the clear victor, I then went back to reexamine his influence on the other works we read in class.

Both human nature and Mother Nature are central to Thoreau's observations in *Walden*, making it hard not to think about the interplay between human nature and the natural environment in Emerson's *Nature*. One idea from *Walden* was particularly genuine and real—as most things in nature are—and that was the realization of the superficiality that pervades society and comes from complacency. "To speak truly, very few adult persons can see nature. Most persons do not see the sun. At least they have a very superficial seeing" (*Nature*, p.216). The "superficial seeing" that Emerson points out is directly applicable to one of my favorite quotations from *Walden*: "Could a greater miracle take place than for us to look through each other's eyes for an instant?" (*Walden*, p.985). Thoreau goes into the woods to rediscover what is important and what is real in

his life and to wash away the apathy that often pollutes our ability to feel and to think. The reoccurring theme of fleeing society to regain what we lose in the daily process of life is something that Thoreau and Emerson both advocate in order to gain a better understanding of one's purpose and how that purpose contributes to the greater picture. "The mortal influence of nature upon every individual is that amount of truth which it illustrates to him" (*Nature*, p.229) and as Thoreau sat in the sun for hours on end just thinking and allowing introspection and the beauty of nature to guide him, he "grew in those seasons like corn in the night" (*Walden*, p. 1039). The idea of seeing nature and recognizing its power and fragility and how that relates to human power and fragility is a simultaneously humbling and reassuring experience. Emerson conveys how humans shape the world around them as they are actively being shaped by the world and that cyclical experience is something that Thoreau had the opportunity to discover and write about while at Walden Pond.

The very title of "Song of Myself" screams Emerson, as it is an expression of individual greatness. The opening salutation of "I celebrate myself, and sing myself, / And what I assume you shall assume, / For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you," ("Song of Myself, p.1330, ll.1-3) seems vain at first glance, but Whitman is inclusive in his celebration of the individual. Emerson, though a fan of isolation and introspection, also emphasizes the ability of *all* people to realize their potential and their divine spark. Though the road to realizing individuality is often one that requires a bit of seclusion, both Whitman and Emerson champion the ability to retain that individuality "in the midst of the crowd" (*Self-Reliance*, p. 272) and to have the confidence to collaborate without compromising creativity and unique insights. Interestingly, Whitman

even uses exactly the same phrasing to articulate the same idea: “A call **in the midst of the crowd**, / My own voice, orotund sweeping and final” (“Song of Myself,” p.1364, ll. 1053-54). Though it seems as though both men argue for self-confidence and conviction, they make it clear that there is a separation between confidence that leads to ingenuity and arrogance that leads to ignorance. Whitman’s acceptance of contradiction—“Do I contradict myself? / Very well then I contradict myself” (“Song of Myself,” p.1373, ll.1323-24)—is exactly what Emerson is trying to reach with his essays. The very fact that people get so comfortable and stuck in their opinions that they cannot branch out to see other perspectives is what leads to the fear of contradicting oneself, when contradiction is not a sign of hypocrisy, but rather it is a sign of evolving ideas and concepts. Therefore, the fact that Whitman employs some of Emerson’s ideas is not an indication of a lack of his own creative thought; conversely, it is the ability to recognize genius and interpret and expand upon it to create something entirely different (Whitman’s poem is a very different reading experience from Emerson’s essays), which is something Emerson would appreciate.

The tumultuous whaling journey of *Moby-Dick* acted as a pair of bookends for the semester, but Emerson’s essays were the overarching, omnipotent guides. Throughout the quest for the great white whale, there is also the struggle for identity, purpose and meaning, which is central to *Self-Reliance*. Incidentally, Ishmael—the character set on finding himself and his place in the universe—is the only member of the *Pequod* that survives. In trying to discover where he fits in, Ishmael is constantly studying relationships, whether it is the relationship between Ahab and the whale, the crew and the ocean, or more broadly, humanity, nature and human nature. Ishmael conveys the notion

that “man is an analogist, and studies relations in all objects” (*Nature*, p. 223), and as he makes connections he realizes that “some certain significance lurks in all things” (*Moby-Dick*, p.331). As Ishmael describes the ship, his fellow crewmembers, Ahab, and Moby Dick, he does so in a way that allows the reader to understand his external environment as well as his internal environment. “So that at last all three of us lifelessly swung from the spars, and for every swing that we made there was a nod from below from the slumbering helmsman. The waves, too, nodded their indolent crests; and across the wide trance of the sea, east nodded to west, and the sun over all” (*Moby-Dick*, p.230); here, Ishmael uses his technique of examining the micro and the macro to show how one man’s thoughts and the entirety of nature can be in unison. Emerson explains this idea in *Nature*: “Every appearance in nature corresponds to some state of the mind, and that state of the mind can only be described by presenting that natural appearance as its picture” (*Nature*, p.223), which is exactly what Ishmael does to describe the sleepiness of the men and the sea. At the close of *Moby-Dick*, Melville ends by stating that “the great shroud of the sea rolled on as it rolled five thousand years ago” (*Moby-Dick*, p.427) because there is a “permanence of nature” (*Nature*, p.232) that even the loss of a ship, a crew, and a dream cannot eradicate. In the end, nature and the individual (Ishmael) are the only two things that prevail, and that is what the reader takes away after reading both *Nature* and *Self-Reliance*.

There is definitely something to be said about the fact that major American poems and novels—“Song of Myself,” *The Scarlet Letter*, *Moby-Dick*, *Walden*— are all influenced by Emerson. While many people argue that Emerson is too extreme to be taken seriously, I find that his absolute conviction is what leads readers to challenge him,

which ultimately leads to the formation of new ideas and opinions so even those who do not agree with Emerson end up following his suggestion of finding one's voice. As I realized before, Emerson is everywhere. Not only were his ideas focal points for most of the works we read this semester, but his observations are also lessons that one can take outside of the classroom. The struggle for identity and individuality amongst a collective society is something that is directly applicable to life, especially life in college, and therefore I can decisively say that Emerson's optimistic and inspiring essays make him "A" clear winner for me.