The Sage of Concord: Ralph Waldo Emerson and Integrity

Handout A: Narrative

BACKGROUND

Transcendentalism dominated the early nineteenth-century thinking of the American Renaissance. One of the main leaders of the movement, Ralph Waldo Emerson, believed that spirituality was connected to one’s conscience. His writing focused on internal transformations and individual equality. Through his work, Emerson guided small groups of writers through logic and empirical study.

Emerson believed that the “essence of self-reliance is the resistance to conformity.” He defined an authentic belief as one that is accepted by an individual without coercion from an outside force. This message epitomized integrity in action for Emerson. Moreover, faithfully following one’s conscience was an essential part of his definition of integrity. He wanted people to believe in themselves and not conform to societal norms that were not serving the larger good. He was a role model for his generation and beyond when he stated, “What lies behind you and what lies in front of you, pales in comparison to what lies inside of you.” Emerson's message was for each individual to recognize their own inner truth (self-reliance) and to act on it with strength and confidence in order to find their wholeness (integrity).

NARRATIVE

“A little integrity is better than any career.”

Born in Boston, Massachusetts on May 25, 1803 into a strict Unitarian family, Ralph Waldo Emerson was destined to follow obediently in his father’s footsteps and become a minister. Sadly, Emerson’s father died when the boy was only eight years old. This heartbreak was the beginning of a long line of premature deaths of those Emerson loved that would shape his later life. As a boy, Emerson attended the Boston Latin School, and then proceeded to attend Harvard University before finally finishing his academic career at Harvard School of Divinity. He was ordained a minister of the Second Church in Boston in 1829, fulfilling his family’s calling.

Emerson resigned from the ministry after the death of his first wife, Ellen Tucker, whom he wed in 1829. Emerson’s strong personal sense of integrity caused the young man to consider the conflicts between his beliefs and theological doctrines. This quest spurred him to travel extensively in Europe. During his travels, he met literary figures like Thomas Carlyle, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, and William Wordsworth, who profoundly influenced Emerson’s philosophy. It was during these travels that Emerson began delineating his philosophies on nature and self-reliance.
Upon his return to the United States, Emerson settled down in Concord, Massachusetts, where he began a career as a writer and lecturer. He married his second wife, Lydia Jackson, in 1835 and they had four children together. Emerson emerged as a leading transcendentalist in the American literary landscape and helped define the early nineteenth century American Renaissance. Emerson became a celebrity in his own time and profoundly inspired many contemporaries, including Henry Thoreau and Walt Whitman. When many transcendentalists were beginning to espouse a socialist worldview, Emerson continually promoted the idea that individual reform was more valuable to the well-being of society than organized reform movements.

Emerson provoked the ire of many after his “Address at Divinity College” in July 1838. In his speech, he scoffed at the traditional norm of formal religion, instead promoting self-reliance and the internal spiritual beliefs held by individuals. Despite knowing he would cause controversy, Emerson felt compelled to maintain allegiance to his strong personal beliefs.

Just a few years later, at a time when society was deeply divided over issues such as slavery and basic human rights, Emerson stood steadfast in his belief that all individuals are equals in spirituality. He became an active opponent of slavery, welcoming abolitionist leaders and even expressing disappointment that President Abraham Lincoln didn’t immediately put an end to slavery.

Emerson dedicated his later years to encouraging his many followers to be servants to the greater good of society. He did not want them to fall victim to their own self-interest while seeking to improve themselves as individuals. To Emerson, it was essential that a person act with integrity. His belief in living life with integrity and self-reliance could be seen in his professional activities, from his decision to depart from the ministry to enter into secular scholarship to his outspoken opposition to slavery. Trusting the soundness of his own judgment, he embarked on a career as an independent author and lecturer, achieving great success as an honorable transcendentalist thinker.