Emerson And Whitman’s Common Ideas Of Self-reliance

Ralph Waldo Emerson’s (1841) “Self-reliance” and Walt Whitman’s (1892) “Song of Myself” express similar ideas about self-reliance. Emerson’s text is entirely about the topic of self-reliance, but Whitman’s (1892) poetic form conveys very similar arguments even if they are in the form of poetry rather than prose. Both authors are critical of society and the process of cultural conditioning because they believe that the original self is trustworthy and capable of expressing a greater potential. In different ways, Emerson (1841) and Whitman (1892) criticize the conditioning of schooling and the reliance upon other people of knowledge. Whitman (1892)’s emphasis on just being, as seen in his just laying around in nature, is similar to Emerson’s frequent allusions to children as being the role models for self-reliance. Further, both authors attribute a degree of spirituality to explain why people should trust themselves without needing to look for others’ affirmations. Emerson (1841) is more pronounced on this topic of religion, but Whitman (1892) also references religious ideals. Last, both authors’ sense of transcendentalism extends to nature, which is likewise both correlated to the original and natural self. Despite the dissimilarities in styles of text, Emerson (1841) and Whitman (1892) are advancing the same ideas about self-reliance as being important and sourced from a transcendental nature that is more trustworthy and good than societal customs and knowledge.

Emerson (1841) believes that creativity is important to the task of becoming self-reliant, but even more important than just creating for Emerson (1841) is the idea of creating original work. He says that when one has become educated and wise enough, one should know that “envy is ignorance” and “is suicide” (paragraph 2). Emerson’s (1841) main point is that each person has a unique creative ability that should not be wasted by trying to conform to an image that others said was good. It is important to see that Emerson’s (1841) idea of self-reliance takes hard work: He believes that one has to put one’s whole heart into the work of expressing oneself and to do one’s best. Otherwise, Emerson (1841) says one will find no peace and no hope. Therefore, Emerson (1841) is very convinced that to be self-reliant in expressing one’s creative originality to the fullest is the only way to really be fulfilled.

Whitman (1892) similarly expresses that each person is unique and therefore should be honored for one’s individuality, but he does not believe that one must work as hard as Emerson (1841) says. Rather, Whitman’s (1892) entire poem is about celebrating himself in a process of simply existing. Though Whitman (1892) surely had to work hard at creating and refining “Song of Myself,” the poem tells his story where he loafs around on the grass appreciating his body processes and nature. He exalts in his “respiration and inspiration, the beating of my heart, the passing of blood and air through my lungs,” and in many aspects of his senses such as sights and sounds of nature (Stanza 2, lines 12-15). In this explanation, Whitman (1892) shows that he does indeed celebrate his individuality, but unlike Emerson (1841), he does not have to put forth a great effort to cultivate art, at least not in the experience of enjoying himself and nature.

In “Self-Reliance,” Emerson (1841)’s discussion about the free nature of children resonates more with Whitman’s (1892) approach of celebrating his freedom. Emerson (1841) says, “Society everywhere is in a conspiracy against the manhood of every one of its members” (paragraph 6). By this, Emerson (1841) means that people are weakened by their conditioned beliefs about what is proper or improper, which, compared to children, reflects an imprisoned

way of being. For instance, Emerson (1841) sees children as “independent, irresponsible,” and with an “unaffected, unbiased, unbribable, affrighted innocence” that “must always be formidable” (paragraph 5). It is formidable because it challenges the adult state of learning to be a certain way. It is interesting that Emerson’s (1841) views on “self-reliance” are more representative of children than they are of most adults because we would expect children to be more reliant upon adults.

Whitman’s (1892) argument for simplicity and a lack of effort is further seen throughout the poem, such as when insists that striving and doing things cannot match the experience of just doing nothing and enjoying the moment. He says, “Have you felt so proud to get at the meaning of poems,” and then immediately instructs us to “Stop this day and night with me and you shall possess the origin of all poems” (Verse 2, Stanza 4, 5). In fact, Whitman’s (1892) approach to just being led to a conclusion that by doing less, then one can understand more, and thus be more self-reliant. Whitman (1892) says of one who follows his lead and possesses “the origin of all poems” will “no longer take things at second or third hand, nor look through the eyes of the dead, nor feed on the specters in books” (Verse 2, Stanza 4). Whitman (1892) moves us to consider that what we take as true is really just looking through the “eyes of the dead”—of those people in history that we read about and repeat their stories. For Whitman (1892), those past philosophers, artists, scientists, priests, politicians or other people are “specters in books” which creates a great contrast to the feelings of being alive that he celebrates earlier in the poem. If one can learn truths for oneself, then one does not need to be reliant upon the people of the past who are recorded in books. Whitman (1892) therefore makes a statement on self-reliance that resonates with Emerson (1841).

Emerson (1841) correlates this ideal of self-reliance that Whitman (1892) has also expressed with greatness. Emerson (1841) compels the reader to “Trust thyself,” and trust that divine intelligence has placed us where we need to be and with what we need to be originally creative and great in our lives. (Paragraph 3). Indeed, Emerson (1841) says that great men have always done this, and have known that the “absolutely trustworthy was seated at their heart, working through their hands, predominating in all their being” (Paragraph 3). Emerson (1841) means that one should trust oneself and intelligence because there is goodness and wisdom in the heart of every person. This is therefore also a religious argument, which then leads to further comparison with Whitman (1892)’s ideas.

There are some allusions to spirituality in “Song of Myself” that suggest like Emerson (1841), Whitman’s (1892) ideas of self-reliance have a transcendent element. Whitman’s (1892) statement, “Divine am I inside and out, and I make holy whatever I touch or am touch’d from,” indicates this religious frame of his argument (Verse 24, Stanza 10). From the rest of the poem, it is clear that Whitman (1892) correlates the divine nature with a trustworthy state, just like Emerson (1841). For instance, Whitman (1892) says that if one stops trying to learn what other people say, and instead trust that there is goodness and intelligence within oneself and nature, then one will know more and be happier. Therefore, it looks like both Whitman (1892) and Emerson’s (1841) ideas of self-reliance are related to a reliance upon a religious experience or spirit that is seen to be central to our lives.

Emerson’s (1841) piece is much more reliant upon religious ideas, as seen in his frequent references to God. He says that “God has armed youth and puberty and manhood no less with its own piquancy and charm, and made it enviable and gracious,” which makes us consider again that people, in their original state, have everything they need to be satisfied and good

(Paragraph 4). In this quote, Emerson (1841) says that both the young and old have been blessed by God with charm, and then he continues to criticize adults for losing touch with this charm. Rather, Emerson (1841) sees adults as having rejected their original trustworthiness because of cultural conditioning. This conditioning is what Emerson (1841) means by saying that “man” has been “clapped into jail by his consciousness” (Paragraph 5). Children are by contrast free to express themselves without worrying about their expressions. More than once Emerson (1841) says that children don’t need the recognition or permission from others to be themselves, but that adults by contrast are always worried about this for themselves.

Emerson (1841) is very critical about society and cultural expectations which draws further similarities to Whitman’s (1892) views. Emerson (1841) says that “Society is a joint-stock company, in which the members agree, for the better securing of his bread to each shareholder, to surrender the liberty and culture of the eater” (Paragraph 6). This intense statement shows that people surrender their self-reliance in order to be more secure in getting food and maybe other types of survival. Further, Emerson (1841) says conformity is most important for society to function, and that “self-reliance is its aversion” (Paragraph 6). It is hard to think of a type of society that could exist with Emerson’s (1841) ideas because he states that “society everywhere is in a conspiracy against the manhood of every one of its members” (Paragraph 6). Thus, according to Emerson (1841), the very idea of society may always contradict the state of self-reliance.

Whitman (1892) does not as clearly state that society and culture are impediments to self-reliance, but he does express this idea in his poetic way. For instance, he talks about keeping creeds and schools “in abeyance,” and criticizes houses and rooms that are full of perfumes, because he can learn more and enjoy his scent more without school or perfume (Verse 1, Stanza 4). School and perfume both reflect aspects of how people learn to trust the views of others and therefore lose their self-reliance. In schools, people learn to trust the truth of teachers and books, which Whitman (1892) has condemned, as discussed above. As for perfume, people use perfume to mask their original scent, which shows a cultural idea about the original self-being unworthy or untrustworthy. By contrast, Whitman (1892) trusts that he is, without any expectations of his culture, good and knowledgeable.

This trust of himself extends to nature because he also loves the “sniff of green leaves and dry leaves” and other aspects of nature (Verse 2, Stanza 3). There is then with Whitman (1892) a connection between self-reliance and nature that Emerson (1841) also shares. Emerson (1841), in talking about aspects of nature, says, “We first share the life by which things exist, and afterward see them as appearances in nature, and forget that we have shared their cause” (Paragraph 21). In this, Emerson (1841) says that people share the same nature as nature and again alludes to a metaphysical spiritual presence that is the cause of everything. Whitman (1892) feels a deep connection to nature, and his enjoyment of nature is related to his enjoyment of himself—his trust for nature and himself is the same. Emerson (1841) likewise trusts nature and himself because he sees the deeper truth of his being as the same thing as nature. Both Emerson (1841) and Whitman (1892) therefore share a sense of transcendental naturalism in their views which is the source of their trust in self-reliance.

Emerson (1841) and Whitman (1892) therefore both have the same essential ideas about self-reliance as being the most worthwhile path because of the trustworthiness of the natural self and order of things. Emerson (1841) looks at children as his role models because they have not yet learned from society who they are supposed to be. Likewise, Whitman (1892) celebrates a

simple way of just being that is not trying to discern anything from books or others. Emerson (1841) explicitly says that humankind's trustworthiness comes from sharing the divine nature of reality. Whitman (1892) less often makes outright statements like this but says enough to show that he believes the same thing. Last, the connection to nature is present for both authors. We can look at Emerson's (1841) removal from society and choice to live in nature as a further cause for his similarity with Whitman (1892). In short, nature is more closely related to the true, original, and most trustworthy self as compared to the self that has been conditioned by society.

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