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American Romanticism

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Emerson's Everlasting Essence

Emerson's thoughts and philosophies were progressive for his time period. He questioned the authority of New England churches and the group mindsets found within society. Throughout "The American Scholar" and "The Divinity School Address" Emerson focuses on how one can better him/herself by recognizing their place in nature and how they are connected to everyone else through an all-encompassing soul. Emerson also spends a great deal of time warning readers of some of the aspects and/or activities of life that may distract them from gaining a better understanding of themselves. Much of Emerson's success as an orator, author, and philosopher can be credited to his unique and impressive use of allusion, differing styles of language, and imagery to share his points of view. His renowned points of view later became the foundations for a new philosophical mentality known as Transcendentalism. Emerson's essays were extremely liberal for his time and his messages were effective, and are still applicable today. His well thought out allusions help to bring credibility to his message. His employment of both subtle language and poetic, elaborate phrases allow him to inspire a wide range of readers who preference different writing styles. Also, his use of imagery adds a visual element to his philosophies about nature and its connection to the individual soul. It is the combination of these literary techniques that make Emerson effective in his writing and explain why his ideologies are still relevant today.

As a starting point, Emerson transforms one of his standpoints into a warning: avoid becoming your occupation. Emerson wants people to realize that they are first and foremost a soul and everything else about oneself is a secondary trait. He causes readers to think about possible occupations and he discusses how a man who works at these jobs will eventually become known by their job title rather than as a soul, “The tradesman scarcely ever gives an ideal worth to his work, but is ridden by the routine of his craft, and the soul is subject to dollars” (Emerson, “Scholar” 1139). Nearly two hundred years after Emerson presented this essay, the American public still struggles to heed his warning. In this capitalist economy time is money and therefore people, and the jobs they do, are money as well. Emerson’s perspective on separating oneself from one’s occupation is effective because it scares his audience into taking care to place the soul of the individual above any other descriptive characteristic of one’s life. His viewpoints about the importance of the soul become even more effective when he begins using allusions.

In “The American Scholar”, Emerson alludes to the creation of books and their impact on scholars. He begins by praising books for being the avenue by which the first scholars were able to turn their thoughts into action and promote change. Emerson suggests that books can be a remarkable resource for man to find inspiration for their soul; however, books can become dangerous to man and society if they are taken as undeniable truth. He warns that if these books are continuously viewed as irrefutable truth that man will argue and judge one another for having opinions that differ from the “correct” text, “The sluggish and perverted mind of the multitude...having once received this book, stands upon it, and makes an outcry if it is disparaged” (Emerson, “Scholar”

1139). It's true that books share knowledge through the experiences of past generations, but this doesn't mean that people should live and die by the claims of books. Emerson's point of view about books is that they can be helpful in broadening man's perspectives, but they shouldn't be used to abuse others into thinking the same way as everyone else. To further his point about books, Emerson uses allusion to reference quintessential authors of times gone by. Emerson alludes to the writers Cicero, Locke, and Bacon to remind his audience that these authors were no worldlier than the current young people of today. Emerson's allusion here is successful because it promotes the audience to go think and write their own ideologies and to not sell their minds to the ideas of past generations.

In "The Divinity School Address", Emerson uses another powerful allusion to convey his belief that every man has an individual soul that connects them directly to God. Emerson alludes to Jesus as a historical figure who uncovered man's capacity for greatness; he doesn't refer to Jesus as the son of God or the savior of man in the traditional, religious sense. Rather, Emerson describes Jesus as, "the only soul in history who has appreciated the worth of a man" (*Divinity* 1155). His decision to reference the most notable figure within Christianity is effective because the vast majority of readers know the story of Christ and will be more likely to grasp the message. He builds off of this allusion by suggesting that we all have God within us, which makes this allusion even more effective by giving readers a sense of confidence about themselves. Emerson continues to relate to and inspire readers through his use of language.

Aside from the effectiveness of his allusions, Emerson utilizes a unique style of language as another component of his writing that helps make his message more effectual. Emerson employs both elaborate poetic phrasing as well as subtle, yet thought-

provoking, statements throughout his writing to strengthen his points of view. For example, in “The Divinity School Address”, Emerson delves into what it means to be virtuous. He claims that to be moral is to be true to your soul and who you are as an individual. Emerson is able to explain this idea with the subtle sentence, “Character is always known” (“Divinity” 1152). Although the sentence is short the message is powerful: you know for yourself the difference between right and wrong. Shortly after this statement, Emerson continues with the discussion of being true to yourself, but begins using a more poetic language style, “Speak the truth, and all things alive or brute are vouchers, and the very roots of the grass underground there, do seem to stir and move to bear you witness” (“Divinity” 1152). By being more poetic when he reiterates himself, Emerson allows readers to come a tad close to understanding the message he is trying to convey. His tendency to vary his language styles gives him the capability to bring readers just close enough to his message to give them something to philosophize about; his language never becomes assertive nor demanding about what readers must do, but rather, he provides a base concept that readers would do well to consider. The subtlety of one sentence satisfies readers’ general understanding of Emerson’s points while the complexity of the following sentences leaves the reader room to interpret and reflect on the compelling ideas. It is Emerson’s mastery of both subtlety and poetic elaboration that makes him effective among an extensive amount of people. His ability to use both language styles within his writing is also why he is deemed to be the most quotable American author. While subtlety is clear-cut, poetic elaboration requires more imaginative effort and flows together well with his use of imagery.

There is a plethora of examples of imagery found within Emerson's works. Much of his imagery is centered around nature and it typically relates to how one may use those natural images to better recognize how we may nurture our individual souls. To describe summer and the celebration of life, Emerson uses imagery to craft a vivid image of nature, "The grass grows, the buds burst, the meadow is spotted with fire and gold in the tint of flowers" ("Divinity" 1151). Emerson's use of imagery here helps him set the stage for his discussion about the divine qualities of nature. Rather than jumping immediately into his main points, he takes the time to paint a vibrant picture of nature for his readers. Emerson's thoughtful depictions make him effective as an author by making it possible for him to captivate readers with mental images that convey the beauty and importance of the topics at hand. Emerson expends much energy in providing these grand images, which are efficient in keeping the reader's attention and influencing their emotions throughout his lengthy essays.

In conclusion, Emerson utilizes these literary techniques to warn readers of possible injustices that could be committed against one's soul if one forgets to celebrate the soul and its importance to the natural world. The theme throughout both "The American Scholar" and "The Divinity School Address" is how the power of nature influences the growth of the individual soul. Due to his incredible mastery of literary techniques such as allusion, language styles, and imagery Emerson is effective in developing a powerful disclaimer against religious institutions and toxic societal mentalities that impede upon the growth of one's soul and its association with nature. So long as the soul remains in union with nature, so will Emerson remain pertinent to humanity.

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