Preparing to Read

from Self-Reliance

by Ralph Waldo Emerson

LITERARY SKILLS FOCUS: FIGURES OF SPEECH

Figures of speech are words or phrases that describe one thing in terms of another. Similes, metaphors, and personification are all figures of speech.

- A simile is a comparison of two things that uses words such as like or as.
- A metaphor is a comparison that does not use words such as like or as.
- Personification is giving human-like qualities to nonhuman things.

Figures of speech are not meant to be taken literally. For example, in “Self-Reliance,” Emerson says, “Society is a joint-stock company.” In this case, Emerson is using a metaphor to compare society to a business in which the owners share responsibility, but he does not literally mean that society is a business.

READING SKILLS FOCUS: UNDERSTANDING FIGURES OF SPEECH

Figures of speech are intended to engage the reader’s imagination. The meaning behind some figures of speech may be easy to understand, while others can be more difficult. In this essay, figures of speech help the reader think about complex ideas by looking at them in a new light.

To better understand figures of speech, ask yourself why the writer is making the comparison, and look for commonalities between the two objects being compared. Below is one example of finding the meaning in Emerson’s figures of speech.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Text</th>
<th>Interpretation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“imitation is suicide” (line 2)</td>
<td>Imitating others can lead to the loss of one’s self. In this sense, imitation is like suicide.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
from Self-Reliance

Vocabulary Development

**SELECTION VOCABULARY**

**conviction** (KUHN VIHK SHUHN) *n.*: firm belief.

*Emerson expresses his conviction that people should be self-reliant.*

**manifest** (MAN UH FEHST) *adj.*: apparent; clear.

*Emerson tries to make manifest the idea that people should trust themselves.*

**predominating** (PRIH DAHM UH NAYT IHNG) *adj.*: having great influence or power.

*A predominating principle in a person's life should be faith in oneself.*

**transcendent** (TRAN SEHN DUHNT) *adj.*: excelling; surpassing.

*Accept your transcendent destiny by living up to your full potential.*

**aversion** (UH VUR ZHUHN, -SHUHN) *n.*: strong or fixed dislike.

*Those who are self-reliant may have an aversion to conformity.*

**integrity** (IHN TEHG RUH TEE) *n.*: sound moral principles; honesty.

*Act with integrity and others will respect you.*

**WORD STUDY**

**DIRECTIONS:** On the lines below, write a short paragraph on any subject using at least three of the vocabulary words above.

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There is a time in every man's education when he arrives at the conviction that envy is ignorance; that imitation is suicide; that he must take himself for better, for worse, as his portion; that though the wide universe is full of good, no kernel of nourishing corn can come to him but through his toil bestowed on that plot of ground which is given to him to till. The power which resides in him is new in nature, and none but he knows what that is which he can do, nor does he know until he has tried. Not for nothing one face, one character, one fact makes much impression on him, and another none. This sculpture in the memory is not without preestablished harmony. The eye was placed where one ray should fall, that it might testify of that particular ray. We but half express ourselves, and are ashamed of that divine idea which each of us represents. It may be safely trusted as proportionate and of good issues, so it be faithfully imparted, but God will not have his work made manifest by

A LITERARY FOCUS

Explain what is meant by the metaphor a "kernel of nourishing corn."

B VOCABULARY

Selection Vocabulary

Use context clues in this sentence to write a definition for the word conviction.

C LITERARY FOCUS

Which type of figure of speech is Emerson using in this sentence?

1. proportionate: balanced.
2. imparted: revealed.
A man is relieved and gay when he has put his heart into his work and done his best; but what he has said or done otherwise, shall give him no peace. It is a deliverance which does not deliver. In the attempt his genius deserts him; no muse befriends; no invention, no hope.

Trust thyself: Every heart vibrates to that iron string. Accept the place the divine Providence has found for you; the society of your contemporaries, the connection of events. Great men have always done so and confided themselves childlike to the genius of their age, betraying their perception that the absolutely trustworthy was seated at their heart, working through their hands, predominating in all their being. And we are now men, and must accept in the highest mind the same transcendent destiny; and not minors and invalids in a protected corner, not cowards fleeing before a revolution, but guides, redeemers, and benefactors, obeying the Almighty effort, and advancing on Chaos and the Dark.

These are the voices which we hear in solitude, but they grow faint and inaudible as we enter into the world. Society everywhere is in conspiracy against the manhood of every one of its members. 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. The virtue in most request is conformity. Self-reliance is its aversion. It loves not realities and creators, but names and customs.

Whoso would be a man must be a non-conformist. He who would gather immortal palms must not be hindered by the name of goodness, but must explore if it be goodness. Nothing is at last sacred but the integrity of your own mind. Absolve you to yourself, and you shall have the suffrage of the world.

A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds, adored by little statesmen and philosophers and divines. With consistency a great soul has simply nothing to do. He may as well

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3. immortal palms: he who would win fame. In ancient times, palm leaves were carried as a symbol of victory or triumph.
4. absolve: pronounce free from guilt or blame.
5. suffrage: vote; used here to mean approval.
concern himself with his shadow on the wall. Speak what you think now in hard words, and tomorrow speak what tomorrow thinks in hard words again, though it contradict everything you said today—“Ah, so you shall be sure to be misunderstood”—Is it so bad then to be misunderstood? Pythagoras was misunderstood, and Socrates, and Jesus, and Luther, and Copernicus, and Galileo, and Newton, and every pure and wise spirit that ever took flesh. To be great is to be misunderstood . . . .

6. Pythagoras . . . Newton: people whose contributions to scientific, philosophical, and religious thought were ignored or suppressed during their lifetimes.
VOCABULARY DEVELOPMENT

DIRECTIONS: Use vocabulary words from the Word Box to complete the sentences below. Some words will not be used.

Word Box
- conviction
- manifest
- predominating
- transcendent
- aversion
- integrity

1. Emerson’s ________________ in the value of self-reliance led him to write this essay.
2. Emerson’s ideas are ________________ in his essays; he avoids unclear language.
3. Emerson had an ________________ to conformity; he despised the idea of trying to fit in.

LITERARY SKILLS FOCUS: FIGURES OF SPEECH

DIRECTIONS: On the chart below, write your own example for each of the types of figures of speech listed.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Simile</th>
<th>1.</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Metaphor</td>
<td>2.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personification</td>
<td>3.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

READING SKILLS FOCUS: UNDERSTANDING FIGURES OF SPEECH

DIRECTIONS: Demonstrate your understanding of figures of speech by writing a short interpretation of the passage from “Self-Reliance” below.

“Trust thyself: Every heart vibrates to that iron string. Accept the place divine Providence has found for you; the society of your contemporaries, the connection of events.” (lines 22–24)