

Ralph Waldo Emerson

Biography

Poet, Journalist (1803–1882)



QUICK FACTS

NAME

Ralph Waldo Emerson

OCCUPATION

Poet, Journalist

BIRTH DATE

May 25, 1803

DEATH DATE

April 27, 1882

EDUCATION

Harvard University, Boston Public Latin School, Harvard Divinity School

PLACE OF BIRTH

Boston, Massachusetts

PLACE OF DEATH

Concord, Massachusetts

Ralph Waldo Emerson was an American Transcendentalist poet, philosopher and essayist during the 19th century. One of his best-known essays is "Self-Reliance."

Synopsis

Ralph Waldo Emerson was born on May 25, 1803, in Boston, Massachusetts. In 1821, he took over as director of his brother's school for girls. In 1823, he wrote the poem "Good-Bye." In 1832, he became a Transcendentalist, leading to the later essays "Self-Reliance" and "The American Scholar." Emerson continued to write and lecture into the late 1870s. He died on April 27, 1882, in Concord, Massachusetts.

Early Life and Education

Ralph Waldo Emerson was born on May 25, 1803, in Boston, Massachusetts. He was the son of William and Ruth (Haskins) Emerson; his father was a clergyman, as many of his male ancestors had been. He attended the Boston Latin School, followed by Harvard University (from which he graduated in 1821) and the Harvard School of Divinity. He was licensed as a minister in 1826 and ordained to the Unitarian church in 1829.

Emerson married Ellen Tucker in 1829. When she died of tuberculosis in 1831, he was grief-stricken. Her death, added to his own recent crisis of faith, caused him to resign from the clergy.

Travel and Writing

In 1832 Emerson traveled to Europe, where he met with literary figures Thomas Carlyle, Samuel Taylor Coleridge and William Wordsworth. When he returned home in 1833, he began to lecture on topics of spiritual experience and ethical living. He moved to Concord, Massachusetts, in 1834 and married Lydia Jackson in 1835.

Emerson's early preaching had often touched on the personal nature of spirituality. Now he found kindred spirits in a circle of writers and thinkers who lived in Concord, including Margaret Fuller, Henry David Thoreau and Amos Bronson Alcott (father of Louisa May Alcott).

American Transcendentalism

In the 1830s Emerson gave lectures that he afterward published in essay form. These essays, particularly "Nature" (1836), embodied his newly developed philosophy. "The American Scholar," based on a lecture that he gave in 1837, encouraged American authors to find their own style instead of imitating their foreign predecessors.

Emerson became known as the central figure of his literary and philosophical group, now known as the American Transcendentalists. These writers shared a key belief that each individual could transcend, or move beyond, the physical world of the senses into deeper spiritual experience through free will and intuition. In this school of thought, God was not remote and unknowable; believers understood God and themselves by looking into their own souls and by feeling their own connection to nature.

The 1840s were productive years for Emerson. He founded and co-edited the literary magazine *The Dial*, and he published two volumes of essays in 1841 and 1844. Some of the essays, including "Self-Reliance," "Friendship" and "Experience," number among his best-known works. His four children, two sons and two daughters, were born in the 1840s.

Later Work and Life

Emerson's later work, such as *The Conduct of Life* (1860), favored a more moderate balance between individual nonconformity and broader societal concerns. He advocated for the abolition of slavery and continued to lecture across the country throughout the 1860s.

By the 1870s the aging Emerson was known as "the sage of Concord." Despite his failing health, he continued to write, publishing *Society and Solitude* in 1870 and a poetry collection titled *Parnassus* in 1874.

Emerson died on April 27, 1882, in Concord. His beliefs and his idealism were strong influences on the work of his protégé Henry David Thoreau and his contemporary Walt Whitman, as well as numerous others. His writings are considered major documents of 19th-century American literature, religion and thought.

Brahma

‘*Brahma*’ by Ralph Waldo Emerson was written in 1856 and is a four stanza poem that is separated into sets of four lines, known as quatrains. The lines follow a specific rhyme scheme that conforms to the pattern of ABAB CDCD, and so on, changing end sounds as Emerson saw fit.

Repetition is one of the most important techniques used in ‘*Brahma*’. It can be seen through the use and reuse of words such as “slay” in the first stanza, as well as a general use of [alliteration](#). It occurs when words are used in succession, or at least appear close together, and begin with the same letter. For example, “Shadow,” “sunlight” and “same” in the second stanza and “doubter” and “doubt” in the third.

Context of *Brahma*

The title of the poem, ‘*Brahma*’ comes from the Hindu god of creation. He is one of the three major gods of the religion, alongside Vishnu and Shiva. It is from his perspective that the poem is written, alluding to his control over everything. The text is an exploration of the universality of the spirit of Brahma and how he moves through time and space.

Summary

‘*Brahma*’ by [Ralph Waldo Emerson](#) details the powers of the Hindu god to move effortlessly through the world, in his own words.

The poem begins with the [speaker](#) telling the reader that they are wrong about life or earth. Anyone who thinks they have killed or died does not understand how Brahma, the god of creation, works. He also explains how subtle he is in his movements and that he can pass through the world and come back again effortlessly.

In the second stanza Brahma presents a series of contrasting images that speak to the way he sees the world. Light and dark are the same, as are fame and shame. He can see into the spirit world and know where all the vanished gods are.

Brahma emphasizes how important he should be to worshipers. If one does not adequately appreciate him, they will only have cause to regret it. He concludes by asking the reader to give up worrying about heaven and instead devote their time to him.

Stanza One

If the red slayer think he slays,
Or if the slain think he is slain,
They know not well the subtle ways
I keep, and pass, and turn again.

In the first stanza of '*Brahma*' the speaker, Brahma, begins by telling the reader that if they have any presumptions about life or death, they're wrong. He says that if a "red slayer" thinks they have killed someone or if the "slain" think they are dead, then they clearly don't understand how "he" works. The phrase "red slayer" is a reference to the god of death.

He tells the reader that he is "subtle" and moves through the world without limitations. Emerson creates an additional rhythm in these lines with the repetition of the word "slay" in its various forms.

Brahma is more of a spirit than a physical human being. As seen through the phrase "I keep, and pass, and turn again." This refers to his ability to move between life and death easily.

Stanza Two

Far or forgot to me is near;
Shadow and sunlight are the same;
The vanished gods to me appear;
And one to me are shame and fame.

Through contrasting images and states of being Brahma asserts his dominance in the second stanza. He is attempting to show how different he is from humanity, in the way that he moves through, and sees, the world. To do this, he states that "Far" is the same thing to him as "near". Therefore, distance has no meaning. He can travel to one place as easily as to another.

He goes on, to say that "Shadow and sunlight are the same" to him as well. Plus, he is able to see the "vanished gods" that everyone else thinks have gone away for good. This last statement alludes to his ability to operate on a spiritual plane that is inaccessible to humans.

Last, he adds that “shame and fame” are equally worthless and valuable to him. He does not crave one and avoid the other.

Stanza Three

They reckon ill who leave me out;
When me they fly, I am the wings;
I am the doubter and the doubt,
I am the hymn the Brahmin sings.

Now, in the third stanza of '*Brahma*', he turns away from what he can do on his own, to speak on how he is considered by humanity. He tells the reader that those who “leave me out” are playing a dangerous game. They have made a poor decision to think this way. The reason for this is outlined in the next lines. *Brahma*, he states, is the reason that anything and everything happens. He is the “doubter and the doubt” and the hymn sung by the faithful. When anyone succeeds, it is also because of him. In the last lines of this section he refers to the “Brahmin,” the highest social caste. Members of this group are responsible for maintaining sacred knowledge and today makes up about 5% of the population of India.

Stanza Four

The strong gods pine for my abode,
And pine in vain the sacred Seven;
But thou, meek lover of the good!
Find me, and turn thy back on heaven.

In these last lines *Brahma* tells the reader that even those deemed most important by humanity, and the other strong gods, want what he has. He has an “abode” that includes all of the world, and it is enviable. He speaks about the “strong gods” such as *Agni* the god of fire, and *Yama*, the god of war (mentioned in the first stanza). The speaker also refers to the “sacred Seven,” the highest holy persons in Hinduism. Both groups seek to draw closer to *Brahma*. *Brahma* speaks directly to the reader in the last two lines. He tells “you” to “Find” him and “turn” your back “on heaven”. It is *Brahma*, the idea and spirit, that one should pursue, not the idealized heavenly end to one’s life. “You” are only a “meek lover of the god” and should do as he says.