**Emerson**

Professor: All right, so let me close today’s class with some thoughts to keep in mind while you are doing tonight’s assignment. You will be reading one of Ralph Waldo Emerson’s best-known essays ‘Self-Reliance’ and comparing it with his poems and other works. I think this essay has the potential to be quite meaningful for all of you as young people who probably wonder about things like truth and where your lives are going - all sorts of profound questions.

Knowing something about Emerson’s philosophies will help you when you read ‘Self-Reliance’. And basically, one of the main beliefs that he had was about truth. Not that it’s something that we can be taught, Emerson says it’s found within ourselves. So this truth, the idea that it’s in each one of us, is one of the first points that you’ll see Emerson making in this essay. It’s a bit abstract but he’s very into…uh… into each person believing his or her own thought, believing in yourself, the thought or conviction that’s true for you.

But actually, he ties that in with a sort of ‘universal truth’ – something that everyone knows but doesn’t realize they know. Most of us aren’t in touch with ourselves in a way, so we just aren’t capable of recognizing profound truth. It takes geniuses, people like, say, Shakespeare, who’re unique because when they have a glimpse of this truth, this universal truth, they pay attention to it and express it and don’t just dismiss it like most people do. So Emerson is really into each individual believing in and trusting him or herself.

You’ll see that he writes about, well, first, conformity. He criticizes that people of his time for abandoning their own minds and their own wills for the sake of conformity and consistency. They try to fit in with the rest of the world even though it’s at odds with their beliefs and their identities. Therefore, it’s best to be a non-conformist – to do your own thing, not worrying about what other people think. That’s an important point. He really drives this argument home throughout the essay.

When you are reading, I want you to think about that and why that kind of thought would be relevant to the readers of his time. Remember this is 1838, ‘Self-Reliance’ was a novel idea at the time and the United State’s citizens were less secure about themselves as individuals and as Americans.

The country as a whole was trying to define itself. Emerson wanted to give people something to really think about, help them find their own way and what it meant to be who they were. So that’s something that I think is definitely as relevant today as it was then, probably, um, especially among young adults like yourselves, you know, uh, college being a time to sort of really think about who you are and where you’re going.

Now we already said that Emerson really emphasizes non-conformity, right? As a way to sort of not lose your own self and identity in the world, to have your own truth and not be afraid to listen to it. Well, he takes this a step further. Not conforming also means, uh, not conforming with yourself or your past.

What does that mean? Well, if you’ve always been a certain way or done a certain thing, but it’s not working for you any more, or you’re not content, Emerson says that it’d be foolish to be consistent even with our own past. “Focus on the future,” he says, “That's what matters more. Inconsistency is good.”

He talks about a ship’s voyage and this is one of the most famous bits of the essay - how the best voyage is made up of zigzag lines. Up close, it seems a little all over the place, but from farther away, the true path shows and in the end it justifies all the turns along the way. So, don’t worry if you are not sure where you’re headed or what your long-term goals are.

Stay true to yourself and it’ll make sense in the end. I mean, I can attest to that. Before I was a literature professor, I was an accountant. Before that, I was a newspaper reporter. My life is taking some pretty interesting turns and here I am, very happy with my experiences and where they’ve brought me. If you rely on yourself and trust your own talents, your own interest, don’t worry, your path will make sense in the end.