**“Self-Reliance” Emerson Guided Annotations**

**Paragraph 1**

[1] I read the other day some verses written by an eminent painter which were original and not conventional. [2]The soul always hears an admonition in such lines, let the subject be what it may. [3] The sentiment they instil is of more value than any thought they may contain. [4] To believe your own thought, to believe that what is true for you in your private heart is true for all men, — that is genius. [5] Speak your latent conviction, and it shall be the universal sense; for the inmost in due time becomes the outmost, — and our first thought is rendered back to us by the trumpets of the Last Judgment. [6] Familiar as the voice of the mind is to each, the highest merit we ascribe to Moses, Plato, and Milton is, that they set at naught books and traditions, and spoke not what men but what they thought. [7] A man should learn to detect and watch that gleam of light which flashes across his mind from within, more than the lustre of the firmament of bards and sages. [8] Yet he dismisses without notice his thought, because it is his. In every work of genius we recognize our own rejected thoughts: they come back to us with a certain alienated majesty. [9] Great works of art have no more affecting lesson for us than this. [10] They teach us to abide by our spontaneous impression with good-humored inflexibility then most [especially] when the whole cry of voices is on the other side. [11] Else [otherwise], to-morrow a stranger will say with masterly good sense precisely what we have thought and felt all the time, and we shall be forced to take with shame our own opinion from another.

1. What is important about the verses written by the painter in sentence 1?
2. From evidence in this paragraph, what do you think Emerson means by “original”? In sentences 2 and 3, how does Emerson suggest we should read an “original” work?
3. In telling us how to read an original work, what do you think Emerson is telling us about reading his work?
4. How does Emerson define genius? Considering this definition of genius, what does Emerson mean when he says that “the inmost in due time becomes the outmost”?
5. Why, according to Emerson, do we value Moses, Plato, and Milton?
6. Thus far Emerson has said that we should seek truth by looking into our own hearts and that we, like such great thinkers as Moses, Plato, and Milton, should ignore what we find in books and in the learning of the past. What implications does his advice hold for education?
7. Based on your reading of paragraph 1, how does Emerson define individualism? Support your answer with reference to specific sentences.

**Paragraph 34 (excerpt)**

[1] The sinew and heart of man seem to be drawnout, and we are become timorous, desponding whimperers.

[2] We are afraid of truth, afraid of fortune, afraid of death, and afraid of each other. [3] Our age yields no great and perfect persons. [4] We want men and women who shall renovate life and our social state, but we see that most natures are insolvent, cannot satisfy their own wants [needs], have an ambition out of all proportion to their practical force [aim at goals they cannot achieve], and do lean and beg day and night continually…. [5] We are parlour soldiers. [6] We shun the rugged battle of fate, where strength is born.

1. What, according to Emerson, is wrong with the “social state” of America in 1841?
2. Given the political context in which he wrote “Self-Reliance,” why might Emerson think that American society was no longer capable of producing “great and perfect persons”?
3. What is Emerson’s solution for America’s problem, and how does that solution illuminate what he is trying to do in “Self-Reliance”?

**Paragraph 35 (excerpt)**

[1] If our young men miscarry in their first enterprises, they lose all heart. If the young merchant fails, men say he is ruined. [2] If the finest genius studies at one of our colleges, and is not installed in an office within one year afterwards in the cities or suburbs of Boston or New York, it seems to his friends and to himself that he is right in being disheartened, and in complaining the rest of his life. [3] A sturdy lad from New

Hampshire or Vermont, who in turn tries all the professions, who teams it, farms it, peddles, keeps a school, preaches, edits a newspaper, goes to Congress, buys a township,\* and so forth, in successive years, and always, like a cat, falls on his feet, is worth a hundred of these city dolls. [4] He walks abreast with his days, and feels no shame in not ‘studying a profession,’ for he does not postpone his life, but lives already. He has not one chance, but a hundred chances.

*\* Emerson does not mean that the “sturdy lad” would buy a town. He probably means that he would buy a large piece of uninhabited land (townships in New England were six miles square). The point here is that he would become a substantial landowner.*

1. What does Emerson mean by “miscarry”? What context clues help us discover that meaning?
2. What is the relationship between the young men who miscarry and the young merchants who fail in paragraph 35 and the “timorous, desponding whimperers” of paragraph 34?
3. According to Emerson, how does an “un-self-reliant” person respond to failure?
4. Emerson structures this paragraph as a comparison between a “city doll” and a “sturdy lad.” With reference to paragraph 34 what does the “sturdy lad” represent?
5. What are the connotations of “city doll”?
6. What point does Emerson make with this comparison? (What is the effect of the comparison?)
7. We have seen that Emerson hopes to raise above the mob people who will themselves be “great and perfect persons” and restore America’s ability to produce such people. What does the progression of jobs he assigns to the “sturdy lad” suggest about the roles these people will play in American society?

**Paragraph 36**

[1] It is easy to see that a greater self-reliance must work a revolution in all the offices and relations of men; in their religion; in their education; in their pursuits; their modes of living; their association; in their property; in their speculative views.

1. Why does Emerson think that “a greater self-reliance must work a revolution in all the offices and relations of men”?