

# History



## INTRODUCTION

### BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF RALPH WALDO EMERSON

Ralph Waldo Emerson was an American essayist, lecturer, and philosopher. Born at the turn of the nineteenth century in Boston, he was the son of a reverend who ensured that Emerson and his siblings had a strong spiritual and intellectual foundation in their upbringing. Emerson was an advanced student, learning to read at three and attending Harvard College at fourteen. Following in his father's footsteps, Emerson went on to Harvard Divinity School and was a pastor at Boston's Second Church until he became disenchanted with the institution of religion. Emerson, remarkably well-read and well-traveled, switched careers to become a lecturer of philosophy. He was a lead figure of American Transcendentalism, rebelling against the rationalism of the Unitarian religion and the empiricism of science to instead focus on the divinity of the individual. Emerson published his first essay, "Nature," in 1836, with "History" following in 1841 as part of the *Essays: First Series* collection. Emerson solidified himself as a revered author, orator, and philosophical thinker of the American Romantic era, publishing dozens of essays, poems, and other works before his death in 1882.

### HISTORICAL CONTEXT

As part of the transcendentalist movement, much of Emerson's work was a reaction to the eighteenth-century Age of Enlightenment, also referred to as the "Century of Philosophy." The Enlightenment marked a shift in the West's core beliefs, as new ideas and doctrines such as the separation of church and state emphasized reason over divine right as the ultimate source of authority. By contrast, Emerson believed in the transcendentalist valuation of the individual's spiritual intuition as the ultimate source of truth and wisdom. This notion is presented throughout "History," as Emerson advocates for the individual to make sense of history not through hard facts, but through their own personal experiences that unify them with other people. Emerson's philosophical and theological views also run parallel to Unitarianism, the religious movement that predominated Boston throughout his life. Emerson resonated with certain aspects of Unitarian belief (such as the oneness and omnipresence of God, reflected in the concept of universal nature in "History") but was in favor of a more intense spiritual experience than the reserved, rational mindset of the church encouraged.

### RELATED LITERARY WORKS

"History" was published in Emerson's *Essays: First Series*

collection, which also contains "Self-Reliance," arguably his most well-known work. "History" expands upon many of the ideas covered in "Self-Reliance," expressing a similar reverence for the unity of nature and the individual. This central theme of unity that Emerson explores in "History" also appears in his essay "The Over-Soul," where he tackles the complex relationships of the individual's soul with the ego, God, and other human beings. Emerson is widely considered to be the most important writer of the nineteenth century, with his ideas inspiring his fellow transcendentalists as well as contemporary writers such as Herman Melville, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and Edgar Allan Poe who resisted his ideas. Emerson was mutually influenced by other writers in the transcendentalist movement, with works such as Henry David Thoreau's book [Walden](#) and Walt Whitman's poetry collection *Leaves of Grass* drawing from many of the same ideas about the individual, spirituality, and nature. Emerson's deep metaphysical musings even went on to influence the works of philosophers like Friedrich Nietzsche.

### KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** "History"
- **When Written:** 1800s
- **Where Written:** Concord and Boston, Massachusetts
- **When Published:** 1841
- **Literary Period:** American Transcendentalism, American Romanticism
- **Genre:** Philosophical essay
- **Point of View:** Multiple (first-person, second-person, and third-person)

### EXTRA CREDIT

**Dear Diary.** Emerson was a prolific diarist, with his personal journals spanning from his junior year at Harvard College up through his elderly years. His journals served as a major source of inspiration for fellow transcendentalist writer Henry David Thoreau and were eventually published in 16 volumes.

**The Buddha of the West.** Emerson was revered as an orator as well as an author, giving as many as 80 philosophical lectures in a year throughout the United States. Many of his contemporaries regarded him as a brilliant and wise thinker whose lectures inspired people to see the underlying beauty and mysticism of the world.



## PLOT SUMMARY

Emerson argues that all things—God, humanity, and nature—are inherently connected, and that history serves as a record of this divine unity. He begins the essay with the claim that a “universal mind” unites the individual with all other people and that the experiences, ideas, and feelings of one person reflect the “universal nature” of human beings. While historical texts tend to set apart certain events or figures as distinct from the rest of humanity, Emerson believes that notable differences between peoples are merely the result of external circumstances acting on the same intrinsic spark of divinity that exists in everyone.

Since this universal mind is the author of history, argues Emerson, it must also be its reader. All experiences are universal, so history is biographical for each individual. Drawing on the transcendentalist philosophy of oneness, Emerson claims that the “universal nature” of the spirit unites everyone and everything across time. All of history, therefore, happened “for us” in the present, and the individual can understand past events through the parallel events of their own life. Emerson values the spiritual intuition of human beings over objective facts (another transcendentalist principle) and believes that laws are based upon humanity’s collective aspiration toward an “unattained but attainable self” of morality and intellectuality.

Emerson further outlines this inherent connection of all things, suggesting that the individual can see aspects of themselves in other people, artifacts, and events of the past. He argues that humanity’s everyday connection to nature is their most tangible link to the past, as a spiritual oneness with the natural world has pervaded all individuals over time. Nature repeats the same divine patterns in all living things, and human beings seek to immortalize nature’s beauty in their art and architecture. Emerson believes that art and nature unite people across time by conjuring the same images and emotional connotations for all individuals. And just as an artist must “become” their subject to effectively portray it, human beings must see the essence of themselves in history (and vice versa) to understand the past.

Emerson also addresses literature as a means of personalizing and making sense of the past. Characters are the written extensions of human beings, often serving as allegorical archetypes for universal human principles such as pain, truth, or justice. Emerson argues that the lessons of the “eternal figures” embodied in literature convey the true essence of life and should therefore be valued over detached empirical facts. By studying literature, the individual can come to realize how the universal mind has been developed and preserved throughout the ages.

Ultimately, Emerson believes that the personal development

and experiences of the individual reflect the same historical patterns at different levels of resolution. A person’s private life is a single iteration of the united spirit and consciousness of all things. Emerson points out that the history of all things is synergistic, as mankind could not have achieved any of its greatest feats without his connection to the rest of the natural world. He concludes the essay with a call to action, imploring the individual read and write history from a “broader and deeper” perspective in order to contextualize their life’s meaning within the spiritual unity that links everyone and everything over time.



## CHARACTERS

**Ralph Waldo Emerson** – The author and narrator of the essay. A prominent figure of American Transcendentalism, Emerson was a reverend, philosopher, and lecturer in addition to writing poems and essays. Held in high esteem as a wise philosophical and spiritual thinker, he was nicknamed “The Sage of Concord” and “The Buddha of the West” by his contemporaries. Emerson is considered by many to be one of the most important writers of the nineteenth century, and heavily influenced other well-known transcendentalist writers such as Henry David Thoreau and Walt Whitman. In “History,” Emerson’s voice is firmly grounded in the principles of transcendentalism, advocating for intuition over reason and subjectivity over empiricism in the study of history. Like other transcendentalist thinkers, Emerson’s perspective throughout the essay is rooted in his deep reverence for God, the individual, nature, and beauty. As a man of deep Christian faith and graduate of the Harvard Divinity School, Emerson approaches the topic of history through a spiritual lens, arguing that history is the record of the universal mind and spirit that unifies all human beings with God, nature, and each other. Emerson’s central tenet of “History” is rejoicing in the inherent worth of every individual that persists across time.

**The Individual** – The audience of the essay. The individual is a single member of the eternal collective of human beings, united with all other people through a universal mind and spirit. Emerson imparts responsibility onto the individual to bring forth the essay’s call to action—that is, to read and write history deeply, broadly, and personally for a more holistic and spiritually-grounded understanding of the self and of humanity.

## TERMS

**Annals** – A historical record of the events in a particular year.

**Civil History** – The history of the state and its people.

**Transcendentalism** – An American philosophical movement in the early-to-mid-nineteenth century. Transcendentalist thinkers and writers valued spiritual unity, intuition, nature, and

the individual.

**Transmigration** – The exchange of a soul from one body into another after death.



## THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.



### UNITY

Like other transcendentalist writers, Emerson believes that the individual is intrinsically united with God, nature, and their fellow man. In “History,” he explains that the past is a record of the “universal mind”—the thoughts, ideas, and experiences that are inherent to all people and connect them across time. According to Emerson, history is a cycle in which every individual discovers these same ingrained principles through their own personal experiences. Studying history allows the individual to better understand and contextualize themselves within the universal human experience, which Emerson suggests is the source of each person's worth.

For Emerson, the common experiences of all people throughout history is what unites them, and that unity, in turn, is what gives meaning to human endeavors. He believes that no individual can be understood without considering the broader context of human history and that different people, communities, and civilizations reflect the same underlying principles applied to variable circumstances. For example, Emerson observes that the same struggle of freedom versus security manifests among different groups of people as well as within the individual. Emerson illustrates this idea by stating that “the creation of a thousand forests is in one acorn.” Although individuals are complicated on the surface, each person can be reduced to the core of what unites us as humans—a divine spark of love, truth, and wisdom. The individual recognizes themselves in the experiences and expressions of others, reflecting a “chain of affinity” wherein every man passes through the same universal cycles of discovery and development.

Emerson further defines unity as a participatory effort, suggesting that in order to properly form one's identity and make sense of the world, each individual must actively relate their private lives to the universal human experience. He suggests that personal identity is not merely a reflection or extension of history, but that history *itself* is inherently biographical. When people study historical events or excavate artifacts, they are actually digging into the true nature of

themselves and recognizing the same virtues, flaws, and motivations that are inherent to all people.

Emerson argues that every individual has “parallel miniature experiences of his own” that are an active embodiment of the universal human experience, rather than an imitation of a disconnected past. He illustrates this idea with the example of a young child who represses his behavior and speech in order to be obedient. The adult can draw on the core emotion of this simple childhood experience to relate himself to grand historical narratives of oppression and tyranny. Emerson believes that each person inevitably repeats the same steps in their private lives that have timelessly unified all humans in their struggles and achievements. History not a dead relic of the past—it lives within each individual. Humanity's unifying principle truths are awakened in all of us through personal experience.

In Emerson's view, history is as deeply personal as it is universal. Drawing on the German idealist philosophy that influenced transcendentalism, Emerson argues that history is not objective. People can know very little of the true nature of things and therefore cannot rely on facts alone. This can also be interpreted as a rejection of the Enlightenment's emphasis on rationality and empiricism. Emerson believes that each individual must instead rely on the “universal mind” that unites all people under a singular moral consciousness. Emerson concludes the essay with a call to action for a reformation of how we write annals (historical records). Rather than focusing on what sets people apart, Emerson ultimately advocates for a “broader and deeper” perspective that expresses the universal nature of humanity.



### SPIRITUALITY

Emerson believes that history is not only a record of the “universal mind,” but also of the “universal nature” of the singular spirit that is present in all things. Human beings are not merely united intellectually and emotionally through common experiences, but spiritually through a divine “spark of light” that exists in all individuals. Throughout “History” Emerson argues that just as the mind connects people with each other, the soul connects people with the transcendent—that is, with God, nature, and the cosmos. Human history is, therefore, inextricably tied to the comprehensive history of the universe itself. Emerson argues that in order to understand history properly, it should be studied through a subjective spiritual perspective rather than an objective empirical one.

Early on in the essay, Emerson makes the point that spirituality, rather than intellectualism, is the key to understanding human history. While people are connected mentally, this is only because a divine spiritual presence endows all humans with the same ingrained principles and moral framework that dictate their behavior. Emerson cites several specific examples of

historical figures—Asdrubal, Caesar Borgia, Solomon, Alcibiades, and Catiline—whose stories are “as much an illustration of the mind’s powers and deprivations as what has befallen us.” These tragic and flawed individuals reflect not merely the common life experiences of human beings, but the underlying universal nature that is ubiquitous to the human spirit. For example, the Roman senator Catiline’s conspiracy to overthrow the Republic reflects humanity’s inherent spiritual inclinations toward defiance, rebellion, and betrayal. Emerson believes that by recognizing the presence of this universal human spirit throughout history, individuals can “[remedy] the defect of our too great nearness to ourselves” and better understand their own vices and virtues reflected in others.

Emerson argues that this universal human nature is what “gives worth to particular men and things,” as it embodies the divinity and spiritual oneness of man with the rest of the universe. All events in human history, then, have an underlying spiritual meaning. Emerson believes that “all laws derive hence their ultimate reason; all express more or less distantly some command of this supreme, illimitable essence,” meaning that all governments and bodies of law throughout history have been developed to control the good and evil sides of human nature.

Because all individuals share one soul, all the “great moments of history” happened as much “for us” in the present as they did for people in the past, since time cannot break the deep interconnected human nature that all people share. Emerson goes on to say that “property also holds of the soul, covers great spiritual facts, and instinctively we at first hold to it with swords and laws, and wide and complex combinations.” While the material world of everyday life may seem divorced from the metaphysical realm, Emerson argues that the same God-given spirit is alive in all things, giving them historical significance and meaning worthy of being defended and upheld.

In order to fully comprehend this deep interconnected value that all things possess, Emerson believes that people must study history spiritually rather than empirically. Further developing his point that history allows individuals to see their strengths and shortcomings reflected in others, Emerson argues that people should not give into the tendency to approach the past as a “problem” that they solve from a distance. He points out that individuals tend to view history as a “wild, savage and preposterous There or Then” that sharply contrasts with “the Here and the Now.” Instead, says Emerson, people should make an effort to embrace the similarities between themselves and people who lived in the past, as recognizing the “spark of light” in everyone and everything allows the individual to see the true divine nature of the universe. According to Emerson, souls “transmigrate” from one being to another, implying that physical and temporal boundaries between people are essentially irrelevant. He therefore advocates for focusing on intuitive spiritual truths (such as love) over hard empirical facts when studying history.

Emerson’s high esteem of deep spiritual awareness is ultimately reflective of his transcendentalist values. The transcendentalists held an ambivalent view of the Unitarian movement of Christianity that prevailed in nineteenth century Boston. While they resonated with the core conviction of God’s omnipresence, they sought a deeper and more visceral spiritual experience than the increasing rationalism and intellectualism of the church. Emerson applies this idea specifically to history in order to advocate for a broader understanding of the past that emphasizes spiritual meaning over names and dates. In doing so, he believes that individuals can overcome their selfish tendencies and become more spiritually sound in their connections with God, nature, and their fellow human beings.



## CREATION AND NATURE

Expanding on the themes of unity and spirituality, Emerson illustrates the inherent affiliation between the divine human soul and nature, and

how that connection inevitably manifests in the creations—fine art, architecture, and literature—that individuals make. In Emerson’s view, nature is “an endless combination and repetition of a very few laws,” serving as an outward manifestation of the internal universal spirit that unites all things. He argues that artists have a proclivity—whether deliberate or subconscious—to echo the sublime beauty of nature in their creations. Art therefore serves as a historical marker of man’s eternal reverence for and unity with nature.

Emerson believes that the proper way to comprehend humankind’s progression through history is through nature and its manifestations in human creations. He questions why “upborne and surrounded as we are by this all-creating nature ... should we be such hard pedants, and magnify a few forms?” Emerson believes that nature is an “all-creating” force that is inherently divine and inseparable from God, and that people should therefore look inward to their spiritual connection with natural world for answers rather than relying on rigid facts and empirical data. True genius, according to Emerson, lies in the ability to perceive the inherent similarities (rather than the differences) of all living things, past and present. He argues that “the identity of history is equally intrinsic, the diversity equally obvious” to that of nature, and that the “simplicity of cause” at the center of all things can best be understood by viewing historical pieces of art and architecture or by reading timeless works of great literature.

At several points throughout “History,” Emerson utilizes the symbol of a **Gothic cathedral** to exemplify the unity of natural beauty with humanity’s spiritual inclinations. He observes that great feats of architecture such as this seem to “done by us, and not done by us,” reflecting art’s paradoxical ability to both resonate with the human soul and to transcend it. Emerson specifically observes the likeness the Gothic church shares with nature, arguing that it “plainly originated in a rude adaptation of

the forest trees.” He also notes that the Gothic church is a culmination of man’s ever-developing interactions with the natural world throughout history, and that its construction embodies “a blossoming in stone subdued by the insatiable demand of harmony in man.” This image speaks to Emerson’s broader observation that art serves as an encapsulation of the eternal unity of human beings with their surroundings in the natural world.

Deepening his argument that art is a timeless representation of man’s unity with nature, Emerson points out that “nature is full of a sublime family likeness throughout her works; and delights in startling us with resemblances in the most unexpected quarters.” He believes that humanity’s universal connection with nature and its inevitable representation in art allows the individual to experience an eternal connection with the creator and other viewers of a great work. Emerson recounts a painter who told him that “nobody could draw a tree without becoming a tree,” illustrating the fact that great artists are those who perceive and successfully convey the intrinsic connection between human beings and the rest of the natural world.

Emerson goes on to relate the relationship between man-made creations and nature back to history, arguing that individuals are “not less strictly implicated” in natural history than in “the civil and metaphysical history of man.” Human history is inextricably linked with natural history, argues Emerson, noting that great historical figures such as Columbus and Newton relied on their relationship with the natural world in order to make their discoveries. Emerson ultimately believes that since art and literature are an ongoing record of humanity’s unity with nature, studying these great works is the most effective means of deepening and understanding that connection.

demand of harmony in man,” representing the innate unity between nature’s unbridled beauty and man’s intrinsic desire for order and harmony.



## QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Dover Thrift Editions edition of *Self-Reliance and Other Essays* published in 1993.

### History Quotes

●● There is one mind common to all individual men. Every man is an inlet to the same and to all of the same ... what at any time has befallen any man, he can understand.

**Related Characters:** Ralph Waldo Emerson (speaker), The Individual

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 1

### Explanation and Analysis

Emerson’s opening line introduces the central theme of unity that underscores the rest of the essay. He puts forth the idea that there is “one mind” shared by all individuals—a collective consciousness that unites humanity in common thoughts, feelings, and experiences. Emerson’s emphasis on the individual was shared by many prominent transcendentalist thinkers, who generally believed that God was omnipresent in all things and that each person was therefore inherently divine, worthy, and meaningful.

Emerson goes on to make the claim that every man has the capability to access this universal, all-encompassing mind. He believes that all events that have occurred throughout history can be understood by the individual, since each person is simply “an inlet to the same and to all of the same.” Human beings, in Emerson’s estimation, vary as individuals but share a common intellectual, emotional, and experiential source that unites all people across time and irrespective of different circumstances.

●● Universal history, the poets, the romancers, do not in their stateliest pictures—in the sacerdotal, the imperial palaces, in the triumphs of will or of genius—anywhere lose our ear, anywhere make us feel that we intrude, that this is for better men; but rather it is true, that in their grandest strokes we feel most at home.



## SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



### THE GOTHIC CATHEDRAL

The Gothic cathedral symbolizes the individual’s paradoxical tendency to view themselves as both a part of history and separate from it. Emerson believes that when an individual sees a sacred, elaborate structure like a church, they conceive of it as both “done by us, and not done by us.” It is a symbolic culmination of the complex technological, theological, and institutional developments that progressed throughout history to facilitate its construction. The Gothic cathedral also represents humanity’s connection to nature, as man designed its archway to resemble a canopy of trees in a pine grove and its stained-glass window to reflect the vivid colors of a winter sunset. Emerson observes that the church appears to be “blossoming in stone subdued by the insatiable

**Related Characters:** Ralph Waldo Emerson (speaker), The Individual

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 2

### Explanation and Analysis

Emerson is discussing the universal nature of human beings. He argues for the transcendentalist notion that a singular soul unites all things, expanding further on his previous idea that all individuals share a spark of divinity. With this notion in mind, Emerson encourages individual to view themselves as participants in the “universal history” that unites all people. He acknowledges the temptation to view well-known historical figures as superior to the ordinary everyday person, referencing the lofty achievements of “poets” and “romancers” who created “the sacerdotal, the imperial palaces ... the triumphs of will or genius.”

Alternatively, Emerson points out that people in the present day tend to feel validated rather than alienated by great works of the past, noting that the most grandiose and impressive of human achievement are those with which the individual tends to resonate. Again, Emerson emphasizes the divine essence that is present in all people.

☞ We are always coming up with the emphatic facts of history in our private experience, and verifying them here. All history becomes subjective; in other words, there is properly no history; only biography.

**Related Characters:** Ralph Waldo Emerson (speaker), The Individual

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 4

### Explanation and Analysis

Emerson continues to explore the role of the individual in both writing and reading history. He references another common philosophical principle of American Transcendentalism—that there is little that can be objectively known about reality, and that each person must therefore discover their own subjective truths about the world. The notion of historical “fact” is one that Emerson critiques throughout the essay, believing instead in personal intuition over empirical data.

Emerson makes the claim that the standard definition of

history does not really exist. Whereas most studies of the past focus on objective figures such as names, dates, and places, Emerson argues that the true value of history is found within the individual. History and biography are one and the same, according to Emerson, and the happenings of the past only become factual and relevant when an individual can relate their private experiences to those events. This is one of several points throughout the essay in which Emerson calls upon the individual to make the study of history a personalized participatory effort.

☞ Upborne and surrounded as we are by this all-creating nature, soft and fluid as a cloud or the air, why should we be such hard pedants, and magnify a few forms? Why should we make account of time, or of magnitude, or of figure? The soul knows them not, and genius, obeying its law, knows how to play with them as a young child plays with graybeard and in churches.

**Related Characters:** Ralph Waldo Emerson (speaker)

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 5

### Explanation and Analysis

This passage is the point in the essay at which Emerson expands his focus on human history to include natural history. Emerson’s transcendentalist values are evident once more, as he reveals his disenchantment with the societal norm of placing greater trust in empiricism and rationality than in nature, beauty, and intuition. He directly questions his audience, asking why people should be “hard pedants” who limit their focus to the narrow realm of facts. Emerson argues that measurements “of time, or of magnitude, or of figure,” are ultimately useless.

Emerson instead believes that the universal soul of all things should be the central focus when studying history. He makes the point that the human spirit at its core does not strictly abide by the realm of facts. Instead, the soul “knows how to play with them,” subjectively interpreting historical events with the freedom and whimsy of a childlike imagination. Emerson believes that true genius lies in spiritual acuity rather than a mastery of facts.

●● If any one will but take pains to observe the variety of actions to which he is equally inclined in certain moods of mind, and those to which he is averse, he will see how deep is the chain of affinity.

**Related Characters:** Ralph Waldo Emerson (speaker), The Individual

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 7

### Explanation and Analysis

Emerson continues his ongoing discussion of the individual's relationship to history, as well as humanity's relationship to nature. He expands further on his notion of the universal mind that unites people intellectually, emotionally, and experientially, as well as that of the universal nature that unites people spiritually. Emerson calls upon the individual to "take pains" to notice the inner truths and principles that dictate their behavioral tendencies.

Emerson believes that everyone and everything shares a singular soul, and that human beings share a common nature that unites them in their moral fabric, vices, and virtues. He argues that living things embody the same eternal patterns of nature, and that observing these similarities promotes greater spiritual awareness for the individual, as well as empathy among people. Emerson points out that studying historical works of art and literature will allow the individual to notice "certain moods of mind" that they are prone or averse to, and thereby come to recognize the "chain of affinity" that connects all things.

●● In like manner, all public facts are to be individualized, all private facts are to be generalized. Then at once History becomes fluid and true, and Biography deep and sublime.

**Related Characters:** Ralph Waldo Emerson (speaker), The Individual

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 9

### Explanation and Analysis

Emerson adds additional depth and complexity to his argument that history and biography are inextricably linked. This passage suggests that history is not only biographical, but that an individual's personal life has inherent historical significance. Individuals should not only apply historical to

themselves, but also make an effort to contextualize the private events of their lives within the broader scope of human history.

Emerson draws on a point he makes early on in the essay, arguing that an individual's meaning is derived from their connection to the universal nature of all living things. This idea harkens back to transcendentalist thought, wherein every individual possesses a divine connection to God and nature that endows them with inherent worth. Here, Emerson makes the claim that the reciprocal relationship between broad human history and personal biography is what gives each their respective significance and meaning, with history becoming "fluid and true" and biography becoming "deep and sublime" when studied in tandem.

●● What is the foundation of that interest all men feel in Greek history, letters, art, and poetry, in all its periods, from the Heroic or Homeric age down to the domestic life of the Athenians and Spartans, four or five centuries later? What but this, that every man passes personally through a Grecian period.

**Related Characters:** Ralph Waldo Emerson (speaker), The Individual

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 10

### Explanation and Analysis

Emerson adds specificity to his prior claim that history is inherently biographical. He suggests that the individual's private experiences are not merely abstractly or indirectly related to the past—rather, every person passes through parallel experiences that directly reflect the underlying principles of specific historical time periods. He argues that man's interest in certain well-known periods in history (Greek antiquity, for example) reflects a gravitation toward the common experiences of human beings. This example is a testament to the idea of the universal human mind of human beings that Emerson references earlier on in the essay, which he believes unites people across time on the basis of shared thoughts, feelings, and experiences.

This passage relates directly back to the transcendentalist view of the individual as a small-scale embodiment of humanity's universal nature. The unifying spirit of all things is the driving force behind the common experiences of humanity, and what manifests "a Grecian period" and other

parallel spans of discovery and development within all people. As a result, Emerson believes that manmade creations such as “history, letters, art, and poetry” will inevitably hold deep personal meaning and universal significance for every individual.

universal human nature, as Emerson believes that the wisdom of “a prophet out of the deeps of antiquity” does not impart new knowledge onto the individual, but merely personally awakens the spiritual truths already present in the shared soul of humanity.

●● When the voice of a prophet out of the deeps of antiquity merely echoes to him a sentiment of his infancy, a prayer of his youth, he then pierces to the truth through all the confusion of tradition and the caricature of institutions.

●● The advancing man discovers how deep a property he has in literature,—in all fable as well as in all history. He finds that the poet was no odd fellow who described strange and impossible situations, but that universal man wrote by his pen a confession true for one and true for all.

**Related Characters:** Ralph Waldo Emerson (speaker), The Individual

**Related Themes:**  

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 11

### Explanation and Analysis

This passage is one of Emerson’s most explicit critiques of modern society that appears in the essay. Transcendentalist thinkers were generally disenchanted with many elements of Western culture that they believed were corrupted by institutions such as organized religion. The presence of genuine divinity in man, argues Emerson, is meaningful in that it bridges the gap between the physical and metaphysical realms. In the same section, he invokes the recurring images of the Gothic cathedral, emphasizing that the structure embodies the unification of the earthly and the divine.

Emerson calls upon the individual to study history, arguing that doing so will allow each person to access the deep universal truths that are often obscured behind “the confusion of tradition and the caricature of institutions.” This notion highlights the idea of the unifying force of

**Related Characters:** Ralph Waldo Emerson (speaker), The Individual

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 12

### Explanation and Analysis

At this stage in the essay, Emerson incorporates the study of literature into his discussion of history. He believes that human creation is what allows people to capture and make sense of the divinity of the spirit that unifies all things. This idea reflects the transcendentalist valuation of natural beauty as sublime and noble, as it reflects the underlying omnipresence of God in all things.

Emerson argues that the art form of literature is key in making sense of history. He ascribes equal value to “all fable” as well as “all history,” as he believes that abstract human expression is equally valuable to historical facts. Emerson reiterates his earlier point that the wisest and most intelligent “geniuses” are not masters of objective fact, but rather possess a heightened spiritual awareness that allows them to awaken universal human experiences such as love or suffering through their creative and intellectual works.



## SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

## HISTORY

Emerson begins the essay by arguing that every individual has access to the “universal mind”—a collective consciousness of thoughts, feelings, and experiences that are intrinsic to all human beings. The universal mind is how the individual can understand “all that is or can be done.”

Emerson defines history as the record of this universal mind, arguing that man can only be understood in the full context of human history. He believes that distinct historical entities—peoples, nations, governments—are simply the result of individuals with the same universal mind experiencing different external circumstances.

Expanding on the notion that the universal mind *writes* history, Emerson argues that it must also *read* history. Since all experiences are universal, individuals can make sense of history through the perspective of their own lives. Emerson suggests that “the hours of our life” in the present and “centuries of time” in the past can be used to mutually explain one another, and that individual experiences are as universal as they are private. He emphasizes that a reader must *become* the historical figures he reads about in order to understand humanity. For example, studying flawed historical figures such as Solomon, Alcibiades, and Catiline (ancient leaders who sinned or committed crimes), allows the individual to make sense of the same vices and virtues that exist within themselves. Emerson believes that by contextualizing history personally rather than distantly, men can see their own realities reflected in others and therefore come to recognize the “universal nature” of all things.

*Emerson introduces the image of a “universal mind” to illustrate the relationship between two core transcendentalist beliefs—the oneness of all people and the inherent value of the individual. While human beings are united by their common experiences, it is the individual who makes unique use of this collective consciousness.*



*Emerson applies the broad transcendentalist notion of unity specifically to the study of history, claiming that all individuals are connected to one another irrespective of time, distance, or superficial differences. History is individually significant and meaningful because each person is inherently linked to every idea that has ever been thought up, every emotion that has ever been felt, and every experience that has ever been had.*



*By asserting that the universal mind must write as well as read the past, Emerson characterizes the study of history as an active, participatory experience rather than a series of passive lessons. Although human history is the collective effort of all people, Emerson calls the individual to action, arguing that it is each person’s responsibility to directly relate themselves to the events and people they read about. He specifically cites flawed historical figures who individuals may be hesitant to identify with in order to challenge his readers’ perceptions of themselves and others. Emerson believes that, by “becoming” the people who have lived before them (by actively relating to and empathizing with their experiences), the individual gains insight and wisdom about themselves and the spiritual “universal nature” that unites everyone and everything.*



This universal nature, Emerson argues, is what “gives worth to particular men and things.” Similar to his idea of the universal mind, the universal nature is an omnipresent spirit or soul that unites all people and things as one. Emerson believes that “this supreme, illimitable essence” is what motivates all human endeavors and is ultimately what gives life its meaning. Since the same universal nature lives within all individuals, significant historical moments happened as much “for us” in the present as they did for people in the past.

According to Emerson, the universal nature allows humanity to aspire to a collective ideal, which he likens to the literary archetype of the wise man. There are divine morals and values that are intrinsic to the universal human spirit, and individuals therefore admire and seek to embody the same character of the “unattained but attainable self.” Emerson believes that, throughout history, human expression and art has served as a form of high praise for the wise man ideal.

Having outlined his argument that history is an ongoing record of the universal human mind and nature, Emerson implores the individual to “read history actively and not passively” by viewing their own life as the source material and historical texts as commentary. In doing so, individuals will realize that their lives are just as meaningful and important as those of well-known historical figures.

Emerson believes that since history encompasses the universal mind, the individual can relate any historical event to some aspect of their personal life. He urges men not to feel intimidated by the grandiosity of kingdoms, empires, or nations, since mankind’s creations derive from the same human spirit that all individuals possess. “Poetry and annals are alike,” says Emerson, meaning that history is open to personal interpretation beyond objective facts.

Building on the idea that historical facts are subjective, Emerson believes that all history is essentially biography. He suggests that each individual is living their own personal representation of the same timeless human experience, and that it is up to the individual to deem a piece of history as fact only once they have lived their version of it.

*Whereas the “universal mind” unites people intellectually, emotionally, and experientially, the “universal nature” is what unites them spiritually. Emerson’s belief that all beings share a singular soul was common among transcendentalist thinkers. Individuals are not solitary, meaningless creatures, but rather derive their worth from the unifying spirit present in all things. He applies this idea to history by suggesting that all great discoveries and achievements have resonated not just in the time period in which they occurred, but in the universal spirit that transcends time.*



*Emerson deepens his notion of humanity’s “universal nature” by suggesting that the soul shared by all of humanity contains core underlying principles, morals, and desires. He uses the universal archetype of the wise man to exemplify this idea; individuals are only able to recognize and admire this character because they each have this ideal ingrained within them on a spiritual level.*



*Emerson repeats his call upon the individual to take responsibility. He foresees that his audience may be tempted to view history as a distant grand narrative and quantify their own lives as insignificant in comparison. Instead, he encourages them to see history and their own lives as one and the same, equally important and meaningful because they are ultimately inseparable.*



*Again, Emerson urges individuals to make studying history a participatory activity. He hearkens back to the transcendentalist valuation of the individual, arguing that all of humanity’s most noble achievements originated from the same soul that inhabits every person. Emerson’s assertion that history is subjective contradicts the emphasis on objective truth and empirical data that dominated Western culture at the time.*



*Emerson makes the argument that history is subjective into a more personal idea for his audience, emphasizing that history and biography are one and the same since all experiences are universal. This position also clarifies Emerson’s stance on unity—he believes that individuals access the universal mind of humanity when they live their own personal versions of the experiences that are common to all people.*



Emerson argues that all laws are based on the universal nature of human beings, and that individuals must come to understand historical events (the French Reign of Terror or the Salem Witch Trials, for example) as participants rather than observers. He believes individuals naturally sense that they are united in spirit with all other human beings, and therefore tend to intellectually and emotionally empathize with the experiences of others.

*Emerson draws a link between the ideas of unity and spirituality. He believes that individuals are connected in their thoughts, feelings, and experiences, and that the universal spirit in all beings is what facilitates this connection. He deepens his ongoing challenge for the individual to actively study history, intentionally using examples such as the French Reign of Terror and the Salem Witch trials that are likely off-putting and emotionally challenging for his audience to “participate” in. But, as a transcendentalist, Emerson believes that the intrinsic unity between individuals allows them to identify with different people and experiences, no matter how distant or detached from their own lives those events may seem.*



Emerson goes on to explore the motivations behind studying history and excavating ancient ruins such as the Egyptian Pyramids or Stonehenge. He argues that curiosity toward history is generally rooted in man’s desire to separate himself from the mistakes, ignorance, and violence of the past. History, Emerson suggests, is a personal “problem” that each individual seeks to solve by distancing themselves from the “There or Then” and rooting themselves in the “Here and the Now.”

*Emerson presents a critique of the traditional ways people study history. Instead of seeking to understand and empathize with the subject matter they are learning about, Emerson argues that people in the “Here and the Now” tend to examine historical texts or excavate artifacts in order to make themselves feel superior to the wrongdoings of people in the “There or Then.” This, according to Emerson, is a spiritual “problem” or conundrum within the individual, as they seek to distance themselves from the shortcomings they see in other people that are a reflection of their own flawed spirit.*



But the individual, argues Emerson, also cannot help but see himself in history. In Emerson’s view, a **Gothic cathedral** represents the paradox of historical creations—they are both “done by us, and not done by us.” The individual will find it difficult to see themselves in the beauty and grandiosity of the church but is able to identify with its builder and therefore with intricate historical progression that led up to its construction. The universal nature of all people and things makes it inevitable that man will see himself in all of history.

*Emerson believes that though individuals may try to distance themselves from history, it is inevitable that they will intuitively sense the connection they share with people across time. The Gothic cathedral is an image he uses repeatedly throughout the essay. Here, it symbolizes the interaction of human beings with their surroundings over time, as the construction of such a complex structure was only made possible through thousands of years of architectural development and progress.*



Harkening back to his reference of the archetypal wise man, Emerson states that the wisest and most intelligent men—poets, philosophers, saints—are able see the sacred universal nature of all people and things which negates any superficial variations. Though people tend to use circumstantial differences to draw distinctions between past and present, there is an undeniable common thread that unites everyone and everything across time.

*Drawing upon his transcendentalist valuation of intuitive wisdom over empirical knowledge, Emerson argues that true intelligence is a mastery of spiritual truths rather than objective facts. His veneration for metaphysical figures (such as saints) is central to American Transcendentalism and Romanticism, movements that strayed from the nineteenth century Western trend toward valuing scientific truth over religious beliefs.*



Emerson shifts his focus to nature, asking: why should people concern themselves with hard facts and figures when true meaning is to be found in natural beauty? He believes that genius is not a mastery of the hard sciences, but rather a spiritual acuity in recognizing the eternity and divinity of life that is evident at all levels of the nature. Emerson argues that although the natural world is perpetually changing, the “eternal unity” remains constant in all things.

Emerson again emphasizes that history is a reflection of the universal mind and universal nature that all human beings share. The distinct civil history, literature, architecture, and art of any given culture will inevitably reflect the same archetypal characters and experiences.

This universality is rooted in nature’s tendency to repeat the same patterns on different levels and is evident in the way that people react to art and literature. For example, Emerson draws a parallel between “the furrows of the brow” in a man and “the strata of the rock” in nature. Emerson points out that the individual’s tendency to conjure their own associations of natural beauty when viewing art is a testament to the sacred unity contained in nature.

Emerson goes on to marvel at the sublime and beautiful similarities between different elements of nature, and between life and art. He notes that there are men today who resemble ancient Greek sculptures. Just an individual can only make sense of themselves by “becoming” history, an artist must “become” an element of nature (such as a tree or a rock) in order to capture its essence. And just as history reflects the universal human mind, art reflects universal nature of all things.

Emerson believes that civil and natural history (that of art and literature) must be explained by individual history. Grand works of architecture such as the Santa Croce, the Dome of St. Peter’s, and the Strasburg **Cathedral** are merely physical depictions of the divinity that exists in the human soul. Artists, argues Emerson, are therefore indistinguishable from their work on a spiritual level.

*Like other transcendentalist thinkers, Emerson holds a deep reverence for nature. He argues that nature is sublime and all-encompassing, as its “eternal unity” connects all beings through the universal spirit. He again emphasizes his notion that true wisdom and lies in a deep understanding of the soul.*



*Emerson reemphasizes his argument that humans are connected through a shared soul and common experiences. By repeating this idea and incorporating it into his discussion of nature, he makes the point that natural history (as opposed to civil or artistic history) consists of patterns that repeat eternally and connect all beings across time.*



*Expanding his discussion of the natural patterns that connect all living things, Emerson argues that human creation (art, literature, and architecture) is the means by which people try to make sense of this universal soul. He believes that people imitate and abstract upon nature through creativity, and as a result viewing art unites people in a universal experience of the natural connection that exists among everyone and everything.*



*Emerson once again emphasizes the individual's responsibility to actively read and “become” history. He deepens the connection between art and nature by invoking his former parallel between history and the universal mind. Just as history serves as a record of humanity’s common thoughts, feelings, and experiences, human creativity serves as a record of the universal nature that unites all people.*



*Drawing on his former point that all history is inherently biographical, Emerson believes that each individual must interpret history for themselves and thus discover the subjective significance of universal human experiences. Since individuals are able to capture ideas and emotions for posterity in their creations, Emerson believes that studying art is one of the most effective ways to make sense of history. He cites well-known works of art such as the Dome of St. Peter’s in order to evoke the universal sense of awe that human beings feel when viewing great works of art.*



According to Emerson, seemingly “trivial” everyday happenings are actually gateways to the timeless essence of humanity. Ordinary individuals often bear witness to the sublime beauty and power of nature in their daily lives. For example, Emerson compares a man who watches the moon rise from the midnight clouds to an archangel presiding over the universe’s creation. He also recalls seeing lightning in the sky and likening it to Jove’s lightning bolt in ancient Greek mythology. Drawing on these instances, Emerson believes that each private experience is an archetype of a universal experience common to all human beings throughout history.

*Emerson delves deeper into his belief that the individual must make history a personal study, advocating for his audience to view their private lives as ongoing manifestations of the experiences that have been universal to humanity throughout history. He believes that seemingly mundane experiences (particularly those tied to nature) are actually the most significant because they have been a constant for humanity throughout history. Framing his argument around the individual reflects Emerson’s ties to transcendentalism, as the movement placed heavy emphasis on the inherent divinity and worth of each person.*



Emerson again cites the example of a **Gothic cathedral**, this time using it to illustrate the man’s tendency to portray the natural world through art, architecture, and other cultural artifacts. He observes how art imitates nature and vice versa, pointing out the visual similarities between a pine grove and a Saxon archway or a winter sunset and a cathedral’s stained-glass window. Emerson views the Gothic church as a symbolic union of nature and man.

*By again referencing the symbol of the Gothic cathedral, Emerson extends the symbolism of the image to reflect the intrinsic connection between manmade creations and nature. Beauty was held as a high ideal in the transcendentalist and Romantic movements of the nineteenth century, as it signified the presence and benevolence of God in all things.*



Deepening his ongoing argument that history must be personalized, Emerson asserts that an individual’s private biography must be likewise be generalized and applied to all of humanity. He illustrates this notion by exemplifying how an archetypical human struggle—freedom versus security—has manifested in different regions, among different peoples, and even figuratively within individuals. Early Asians and Africans were simultaneously nomadic and agricultural by geographic necessity. Americans and Europeans face an ongoing cultural dilemma between progress and nationalistic tradition. And, finally, man has dual tendencies toward adventure and repose depending on his environment.

*Emerson wrote “History” in the early nineteenth century, during which practices such as slavery and imperialism violently divided groups of people along racial and cultural lines. Emerson’s belief in the inherent similarities of all individuals was therefore somewhat of a revolutionary notion, and one that defined American Transcendentalism as a counter-culture movement. He traces the struggle of freedom versus security from broad groups of people down to its manifestation in the individual in order to convey that what people think, feel, and experience in their private lives has been universal to all human beings throughout history.*



Reiterating his belief that the universal mind authors history, Emerson notes that everything the individual observes in the external world will correspond to a deep, intrinsic truth within themselves. Conversely, the individual can seek within themselves to make sense of history.

*Spiritual awareness continues to be a crucial element in Emerson’s model for studying history. He believes that the relationship between history and the individual is reciprocal—just as people can study history to make sense of themselves, spiritual introspection will allow the individual to gain a sense of empathy and connection with people who lived in the past.*



Emerson believes that man's interest in history (ancient Greek literature, art, and poetry, for example) reflects the intrinsic unity of the individual and the universal. He argues that any given historical era is paralleled by a corresponding period in the individual's personal development. Greek antiquity, for example, revered the unity of body and spirit, and embodied principles of man's universal nature such as courage, justice, and strength.

The appeal of history, says Emerson, is not an empty admiration of the ancient, but rather a recognition of what is natural and perfect in human beings. For example, the present-day individual who read Greek mythology are able to sense the "eternity of man" through an enduring love of nature and feel a kinship with their fellow man, past and present. Studying history allows the individual to incorporate the thoughts of others into their own being, erasing the boundaries of time altogether. Emerson questions why we should preoccupy ourselves with historical data such as geography or dates when the true significance of history lies in the timeless unity of all human minds and souls.

Emerson reiterates his belief that the individual experiences a historical age through a parallel "age" in their own life. An ancient prophet, for example, can ignite a personal renaissance period in the individual awaken in them what is already ingrained in their soul. Emerson argues that the reason people worship certain religious and intellectual figures is because, like the **Gothic cathedral**, they are both of man and not of man. Holy figures such as Jesus or Moses bridge the gap between the earthly and the divine, inspiring awareness in the individual of the eternal unity between themselves and others.

Emerson suggests that our private experiences are merely iterations of the universal experiences of human beings, using the example of a man who was strictly raised to be obedient. As an adult, the man will draw on the experience of his repressive childhood to understand that history is comprised of universal patterns that repeat infinitely—the tyrannized child becomes the oppressor who tyrannizes children, and thus perpetuates the cycle of history. When the individual recognizes the underlying universal principles in his own experiences, they are able to understand and sympathize with how those same principles manifested in the events of the past.

*Emerson states that people are not only connected to the past in an abstract manner, but literally. He adds further complexity to his ongoing argument that the individual has a participatory role in studying history, emphasizing that history is indistinguishable from biography. Drawing on the example of the values embodied by ancient Greek culture, Emerson illustrates his belief that all values embodied by various groups and time periods have been different manifestations of the same underlying spiritual truths of humanity.*



*Emerson continues to emphasize his argument that the study of history should be centered around recognizing people's inherent similarities rather than quantifying their differences. The essay's roots in transcendentalist thought are made obvious again, as Emerson states his belief that the intuitive spiritual connection of people across time should be the focus of history, as opposed to the rote memorization of facts and figures. He also incorporates his ongoing discussion of manmade creations and nature, arguing that art and literature (Greek mythology, for example) are abstractions on nature, and that viewing or reading great works allows people of different time periods to bond spiritually over a shared reverence for the natural world.*



*Emerson once again claims that history and biography are one and the same—an individual's private experiences are merely personal manifestations of the same universal experiences that unite all human beings. Emerson believes that individuals who are able to see their own experiences as representative of the singular human spirit will gain a true understand of humanity and its history. He draws on the symbol of the Gothic cathedral once more, this time utilizing the image to represent a unification of the material and spiritual realms.*



*Emerson's example of the man who is personally tyrannized in childhood more specifically illustrates his ongoing point that an individual's private life is a small-scale version of the common truths and principles that define the human experience. He expands on his complex theme of unity, explaining that humanity's collective consciousness is not only universal, but eternal.*



Emerson further emphasizes his point that the individual's actions are merely personal manifestations of the universal mind. History is a perpetual record of individuals progressing through the same cycles and discovering the same wisdom, time and time again. There have been many Martin Luthers, argues Emerson, in the history of the world; men throughout the ages have manifested the same spirit and displayed the same convictions in their own personal lives.

Transitioning to the topic of literature, Emerson discusses how the individual who studies works of the past will recognize the universal mind shared by all human beings. He believes that the individual will find their own biographical truths reflected in the writings of revered authors such as Homer (who wrote the oldest works of Western literature) and Chaucer (considered the father of English poetry). Like historical facts, a literary work becomes canonical wisdom only when the individual resonates with the narrative's underlying archetypical truths.

Emerson argues that the reason certain works of literature are considered great is because they express universal truths and are therefore consistently and timelessly relevant. Ancient Greek fables, for example, went on to influence the entire Western tradition of language, literature, and religion. He believes that the individual is not truly separate from other people, nor from God, and that the soul transmigrates fluidly from one being to another. Emerson declares that people should refuse to live strictly by facts, and instead embrace the universal "spark of light" that unites everyone and everything.

Expanding on this notion of honoring spiritual truths over empirical facts, Emerson states that the most abstract and emotional forms of literature are the most valuable. Poetry, for example, has the unique ability to transcend reality and inspire limitless creativity in the reader. Whether something factually exists in the material world does not matter, argues Emerson, as even fictional characters are "eternal figures" that originate from the universal mind and nature of human beings.

*As a transcendentalist thinker and former reverend, Emerson holds a deep belief in the inherent worth of the individual. He makes the case that seemingly ordinary people are no less noteworthy than well-known figures like Martin Luther. History immortalizes certain men due to chance circumstances, argues Emerson, but the underlying universal mind that motivated their actions is possessed by all people.*



*Emerson references his former point that manmade creations reflect the universal nature of human beings. He makes the point that while great works of literature (such as those written by Homer or Chaucer) may seem distant and detached from an individual's private life, they are only of high cultural value because they reflect common truths for a wide breadth of individuals.*



*Emerson reiterates his point that great works of art and literature are representative of the universal human experience. He bridges together several of the essay's key claims here, arguing that manmade creations represent the universal nature of all things and that great works of art and literature are canonical because they express universal spiritual truths. Emerson's characterization of human life as cyclical ties back to his assertion that it is also an ongoing record of the universal human mind—just as souls transmigrate and eternally live on, so do experiences.*



*Emerson again hearkens back to his roots in transcendentalist philosophy, professing his belief that an idea's factual validity does not define its worth. He uses the example of poetry to illustrate the value of abstract art forms in expressing unquantifiable truths such as beauty or love. Emerson argues that true "eternal figures" are historically relevant not because they hold empirical value, but because they resonate deeply with the universal human spirit.*



Emerson believes that although people often fail to understand the uniting spirit of all things, that universal nature speaks through human beings in the form of art, literature, religion, and other cultural facets. As a result, the individual is able to capture and articulate truths that they do not fully comprehend. For example, human beings conceived the idea of magic as an attempt to explain the scientific forces that they perceived but could not understand. Literary characters, then, often serve as allegorical representations of complex concepts such as temptation, poverty, or honesty.

*Building on his former idea that human creation is representative of natural beauty and spiritual truth, Emerson believes that creativity is the means by which humanity seeks to make sense of metaphysical concepts they do not fully comprehend. He argues that literary symbolism has a higher purpose, in that it allows the individual to better conceptualize and empathize with the most complex and universal elements of the human experience.*



Emerson points out that the history of the external world exists alongside the civil and metaphysical histories of human beings. Man is not, however, any less integrated with the history of nature than with other facets of the past. Emerson likens the human heart to the expansive roads and trade routes of ancient Rome, as it branches out to unite the individual with all of nature. He once again emphasizes that a universal nature unites everyone and everything on a metaphysical level.

*Emerson again draws several of his main points together as he explains that history encompasses the collective mind and spirit of humanity alongside the eternal existence of the natural world. He compares a more practical manmade creation—roads in ancient Rome—to the human heart, further emphasizing the idea that humanity seeks to represent and understand the sublime and divine natural world through creativity.*



Human history, argues Emerson, would not have been possible without a corresponding natural history. Man's intrinsic connection to nature has facilitated every historical event. For example, Columbus could not have charted his course without a planet to explore, and Newton could not have made his scientific discoveries without the great stretches of time that brought the celestial body into being. Emerson also mentions the individual's inherent connection to other people, stating his belief that no amount of time would allow the mind of one man could to produce the wisdom that love brings about.

*Deepening his conviction that humanity and nature have an intrinsic spiritual connection, Emerson argues that human history and natural history are similarly inseparable. This point again highlights Emerson's transcendentalist belief in the inherent oneness of all things. By studying history, the individual can come to realize the transcendent beauty of nature present in all events and recognize the constant role that universal human emotions such as love have played over time.*



Emerson restates his central argument—that a singular unifying consciousness and spirit unites the individual with all other people and things, and that history is the record of this universal soul. History is not a dead collection of facts in a book, rather it is a collection of innate truths and universal experiences that cycle through time and manifest in each individual.

*Emerson reemphasizes the idea that history is a record of both humanity's collective consciousness and the shared soul of all things. He again argues against the common paradigm of teaching history as a series of facts, instead advocating for a holistic study of the past as a cyclical series of intrinsic spiritual truths and archetypical human experiences.*



Emerson believes that human beings can ultimately know very little about objective facts because man's true faculties lie in matters of the soul. He argues that historical annals should pay proper homage to the universal mind of the human race—their spiritual wisdom, innate truths, and divine connections. Emerson concludes the essay with a call to action: people must reform their perspective when writing history to be broader and deeper. Only then, says Emerson, can the selfishness of the individual be overcome and the unity of all things, past and present, be understood.

*Bringing the essay to a close, Emerson expands his central argument to call the individual to action in reforming how history is written and studied. He invokes the transcendentalist conviction that spirituality should be a deep, visceral experience rather than a detached concept—a distinction from the rationality and empiricism of the dominant Unitarian Church. Emerson implores the individual to write historical accounts not as a collection of cold facts, but as record of the divine spark in humankind that has persisted throughout time.*





## HOW TO CITE

To cite this LitChart:

### MLA

Kunkle, Jenn. "History." *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 19 Dec 2018. Web. 21 Apr 2020.

### CHICAGO MANUAL

Kunkle, Jenn. "History." LitCharts LLC, December 19, 2018. Retrieved April 21, 2020. <https://www.litcharts.com/lit/history>.

To cite any of the quotes from *History* covered in the Quotes section of this LitChart:

### MLA

Emerson, Ralph Waldo. *History*. Dover Thrift Editions. 1993.

### CHICAGO MANUAL

Emerson, Ralph Waldo. *History*. Mineola, NY: Dover Thrift Editions. 1993.