

EMERSON, RALPH WALDO

1803–1882

Philosopher and Author

Ralph Waldo Emerson was the founder of a distinct American intellectual tradition and a key figure in the antebellum (pre-Civil War) transcendentalist movement. He espoused an ideal of manliness rooted in scholarly activity, self-knowledge, intellectual dissent, and individual autonomy, a concept that grew out of early-nineteenth-century ideas about manhood. However, although Emerson's celebration of individual autonomy suited the surging individualism engendered by the antebellum market revolution and the egalitarian spirit of Jacksonian democracy, he initially eschewed the emerging entrepreneurial model of manhood promoted by proponents of capitalist development.

In making his career choice, Emerson shunned more traditional pursuits that would have been fitting outlets for his eloquence, such as the pulpit, the press, or politics. In 1832 he abandoned a secure position as Unitarian minister at Boston's Second Church and, intent on a holistic pursuit of truth, chose the vocation of a scholar. In his lectures and essays, Emerson advocated self-knowledge and self-reliance (trusting one's own mind and seeking spiritual self-sovereignty) as quintessential manly virtues.

Emerson and the transcendentalists regarded intuition and self-knowledge as higher sources of truth than the intellect. They believed that emotion, intuition, and spirituality could guide the mind beyond the limits of pure intellect toward a transcendent form of reason. Emerson's notion of transcendental consciousness offered a new public male identity that sought to counteract the allegedly emasculating effects of the antebellum market revolution.

Seeking to redefine manliness, Emerson initially charged that the marketplace debased male self-sufficiency, and he embraced agrarian values as an alternative. He developed this theme in his essay *Nature* (1836), emphasizing it more strongly after the financial panic of 1837 and throughout the 1840s. In his famous essay "Self-Reliance" (1841), Emerson continued to advocate dissent, nonconformity, introspection, and self-knowledge as elements of the path toward truth and self-realization. This model of manhood greatly influenced Henry David Thoreau's experimental retreat to *Walden Pond* in 1845.

Ultimately, however, Emerson's insistence on self-reliant struggle as the means to build manhood generated a definition of male identity grounded in liberal marketplace economics, largely unfettered by government regulation. In his book, *The Conduct of Life* (1860), Emerson developed his earlier notion

of innate individual potential into a celebration of an unfettered individualism that would be advantageous in a liberal marketplace. After 1860, Emerson emerged as an apologist for the concept of the "self-made man." This transition in Emerson's thinking about manhood anticipated new concepts of manhood that appeared after the Civil War—concepts that rejected reformist ideals of finding self-fulfillment through the moral and ethical betterment of society, and instead embraced self-discipline, professional pragmatism, and an active life.

Emerson's ideal of manhood was part of a liberal tradition in the United States that emerged in the aftermath of the American Revolution. This liberal tradition often obscured social and class conflict and used an inclusive rhetoric of manly republican virtue and independence that shrouded its elitist motives and intentions. Emerson's ideas about manhood reflected the ambivalence of middle-class men toward the spiritual and economic effects of capitalist development.

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RELATED ENTRIES

Agrarianism; American Revolution; Capitalism; Civil War; Market Revolution; Middle-Class Manhood; Reform Movements; Religion and Spirituality; Republicanism; Self-Control; Self-Made Man; Thoreau, Henry David

—*Thomas Winter*

EMOTION

Although men are capable of the same emotional range as women, emotional expression has been distinctly gendered in Western society, particularly in the United States. In Western concepts of masculinity, emotional control has been considered central to manhood and necessary to social order, while emotion has been framed as an explosive “natural” force that can be rendered uncontrollable by feminine influences. Therefore, attempts to determine allowable expressions of emotion have characterized debates on manhood since the times of the Greek philosopher Aristotle. Although firm control of one’s emotion has usually been considered essential to manliness, occasional violent outbursts have been tolerated as expected and forgivable releases from the emotional restraints imposed on men.

European Roots and Colonial America

American attitudes toward emotion have followed the ideals of European masculinity, though those ideals became modified somewhat through the influences of a conquest mentality and an American Protestant ethic. American settlement was driven by an ideology of triumphant masculinity, grounded in reason, exclusion, and extermination. Those excluded—particularly women, Catholics, and Native Americans—were often associated with a “feminine” emotionalism.

The roots of the European masculine ideal can be traced to Greek philosophical debates over the relation between emotion and masculinity. Stoic philosophers devalued emotion, while Aristotle argued that such emotions as pity and empathetic recognition among men could create the cooperation necessary to political citizenship. Some of Shakespeare’s plays suggest that a similar debate occurred in early modern England. Hamlet, for example, denounces the man who is “passion’s slave,” yet he envies the Player who can weep for Hecuba. In *Macbeth*, when Malcolm urges Macduff to put aside his feelings, Macduff exclaims that he “must feel it as a man.” These works reflect the tension between the masculine duty to control emotions and a suspicion toward men incapable of honest feelings.

The sixteenth-century Protestant Reformation and the eighteenth-century Age of Reason further codified the gendering of emotional expression as feminine and emotional control as masculine. Early Protestants viewed human beings as innately evil, and emotions were seen as dangerous forces contrary to divine order. Viewing women as weaker than men, and thus less able than men to control these forces, they held men responsible for maintaining strict emotional control. Influential eighteenth-century philosophers such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Immanuel Kant, and John Stuart Mill also disdained women and emotionally expressive men. They considered masculine self-control and self-discipline the only social safeguards against the forces of nature.

Other currents, meanwhile, encouraged a different relation between manhood and emotion. Early European settlers brought to colonial America not only a strict Protestant code and a mistrust of emotion, but also family practices that generated among men an emotional domestic involvement. Stern patriarchal control and emotional reserve were required for the effective religious and secular education of children; however, with survival based on the interdependent working of family members, patriarchal control was tempered by warmer connections. Eighteenth-century Enlightenment thought further promoted open expressions of male tenderness by emphasizing not only reason but also a “cult of sensibility” that criticized anger and tyranny and encouraged affection.

Nineteenth-Century America

Nineteenth-century developments again tended to associate emotion largely with women. Market capitalism and industrialization encouraged many Americans—especially middle-class Americans—to define men as rational, calculating, amoral, and aggressively competitive beings well suited to activity in a public sphere in which emotional expression was superfluous if not counterproductive. Women, on the other hand, were defined as emotional and nurturing beings ideally suited to child rearing and other activities of the domestic sphere. Phrenology, a system that sought to explain behavioral characteristics in terms of skull shape, assumed cultural prominence during this period and attempted to provide a scientific basis for this perceived difference between masculinity and femininity.

Popular notions of child rearing likewise stressed that fathers should display male emotional reserve and encourage appropriate emotional development in their sons. Fathers tended to express approval and disapproval rather than affection and anger, believing that emotional restraint was essential