

Suggested Answers to the Discussion Questions in Part 5

Ralph Waldo Emerson, from *Self-Reliance*

Structure and Technique

1. *Emerson begins his second paragraph with “Trust thyself: every heart vibrates to that iron string.” What does he mean by this? Why do you think he placed it this early in the essay?*

Answer: Emerson wants his readers to truly look within themselves and trust that they have a purpose. By doing this, they can trust that their opinions and feelings are valid and sacred. He places this idea early in the essay because the rest of the essay continues to support it.

2. *Emerson uses several metaphors in his essay. Find one that you identify with and explain your connection.*

Answer: This question will elicit varying responses. Strong answers will demonstrate an understanding of the metaphor and a good connection to it. Possible metaphors might include “imitation is suicide” or “a foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds.” For the first metaphor, students might make the connection of losing their identity in high school because they started dressing and talking like someone else, instead of being true to themselves.

3. *Emerson ends his essay by listing important historical figures who were misunderstood. What is his purpose in ending on such an important note?*

Answer: His essay explains to the reader that sometimes being true to the inner self means going against society and suffering society's displeasure. By listing figures like Jesus and Newton, he demonstrates to his reader that being misunderstood or disliked by society is not necessarily a bad thing. In fact, it can be a great thing.

4. *A title can offer interesting insights into an essay, especially if the title acquires unexpected meanings. Before reading this essay, what did you think the title *Self-Reliance* might refer to? What additional meaning have you gleaned after reading the essay?*

Answer: This question will elicit varying responses. At first some readers may have thought that self-reliance referred to living alone or being self-centered. After reading the essay, some of their new meanings may include being authentic to themselves, trusting their own judgment, or retaining their individuality.

Critical Reading and Discussion

1. *What does Emerson mean by “envy is ignorance . . . imitation is suicide”?*

Answer: Emerson is promoting the idea of being true to oneself. If a person envies another or imitates another, he or she is not being authentic to his or her individuality, which can result in losing oneself.

2. *Emerson states that “the only right is what is after my constitution; the only wrong what is against it.” Do you think he means that people can be totally selfish and do whatever they want? Explain your answer.*

Answer: Nowhere in Emerson’s essay does he state or imply that a self-centered attitude that completely disregards—or hurts—others is acceptable. His focus is on being true to a person’s own ideals and judgment and not conforming just because the majority agrees.

3. *In paragraph 4, Emerson says “it is easy in the world to live after the world’s opinion; it is easy in solitude to live after our own.” What does he mean by this? What is his purpose in making this statement?*

Answer: He is pointing out that agreeing with the opinions of others is not challenging, nor is living in isolation. His purpose is to show that the sign of a great person is to live among others with his or her own true opinions intact.

4. *What does Emerson say is a consequence of being a non conformist, and why does he feel this consequence shouldn’t put you off?*

Answer: (Paragraph 5) The world “whips you with displeasure” and won’t make it easy on you. However, as ideas change, so will the “world’s reactions” because ideas change as quickly as the wind blows.

Dick Gregory, “Shame”

Structure and Technique

1. *In paragraphs 1 and 2, Gregory mentions several steps he took to impress Helene Tucker. What were they? Why does he include them in his essay?*

Answer: To impress Helene, Gregory brushed his hair, got a handkerchief, washed his socks and shirt every night, shoveled the snow off her walk, tried to make friends with her mother and aunts, and left money on her stoop. He describes those steps in detail because, besides demonstrating his devotion to Helene, they give a clear picture of Gregory’s poverty.

2. *A metaphor is a suggested comparison. What metaphor does Gregory use in paragraph 5, and what is its purpose? What metaphor does he use in the second sentence of paragraph 7, and what does it mean?*

Answer: In paragraph 5, Gregory uses the metaphor that he was pregnant to suggest the effects poverty had on him—it gave him strange tastes, which pregnant women get. It also filled him (as pregnancy fills someone), but with negative things: poverty, dirt, “smells that made people turn away,” and so on.

In the second sentence of paragraph 7, Gregory uses the metaphor of a flying eagle to represent the movement of money. (A picture of an eagle is engraved on one side of a quarter.)

3. *In narrating the incidents in the classroom and in the restaurant, Gregory chooses to provide actual dialogue rather than merely to tell what happened. Why?*

Answer: By using the exact words spoken by Helene, the teacher, and himself, Gregory gives a very clear picture of what happened and allows the reader to “experience” it, rather than simply hear a general summary. The dialogue between Helene and the teacher shows Helene as an ideal little student who received approval from the teacher. The dialogue between Gregory and the teacher, however, clearly demonstrates Gregory’s eagerness to impress Helene and his unsuccessful, embarrassing attempt to gain the teacher’s approval. If Gregory had merely described what had happened, we would have a much less vivid impression of the characters involved.

4. *At the end of the essay, Gregory shifts his focus from the classroom to the scene involving the wino at the restaurant. What is the connection between this closing scene and the rest of the essay?*

Answer: In the body of the essay, Gregory is narrating a time when he was shamed publicly and no one came to his defense. In the closing scene, Gregory realizes that he has done the same thing—that he, too, has witnessed a person being shamed without assisting him. He feels a new kind of “shame,” that of having failed to help another man in need.

Critical Reading and Discussion

1. *When Gregory writes, “I never learned hate at home, or shame. I had to go to school for that” (paragraph 1), he is using irony—an inconsistency between what is expected and what actually occurs. What does he mean by these two statements? What is the effect of his irony?*

Answer: Gregory means that although his home life was one of poverty and want, his home was not a place of inhumane values, such as hatred and shame. But at school, which on its surface was a more positive place, he was made to feel hatred and shame. The ironic statement intrigues the reader and makes him or her want to know more about what Gregory means.

2. *What are Gregory’s feelings about his teacher? What were your feelings about her as you read this essay? What could the teacher have done or said that would not have made Gregory feel ashamed?*

Answer: Gregory seems sad and resentful that the teacher did not understand why he misbehaved in class and that she assumed he was stupid and a troublemaker. But he also badly wanted her approval, as is seen by the Community Chest incident and the fact that he got a “big thrill” out of being chosen to clean the blackboard. Students’ suggestions about the teacher will vary. One possibility: She could have merely thanked Gregory in class and then spoken to him privately later if she doubted that he could contribute to Community Chest.

3. *Gregory shows how a childhood incident taught him shame. What other important lessons does Gregory learn in this essay? Explain.*

Answer: From paragraph 3, in which Gregory talks about his accomplishments later in life, we can conclude that he learned he could boost his self-esteem through his own efforts. Paragraph 5 shows that from his own experiences, he

learned that children who are hungry and poor may feel invisible and so behave in ways that attract attention. From his experience with the wino, he learned that, to feel good about himself, he would have to start standing up for other people who were shamed.

4. *At the end of his essay, Gregory says, “I waited too long to help another man.” Why do you think he waited so long to assist the wino? What are some reasons people do not always help others who are in need (for example, ignoring a homeless person seated on the sidewalk)?*

Answer: Gregory probably had many reasons for not helping the wino sooner: embarrassment at drawing attention to himself, reluctance to part with his hard-earned money, not wanting to get into trouble with Mr. Williams, not knowing the wino and thus feeling the affair wasn’t his business, and so on. People have similar reasons for not helping others in need. In addition, people who ignore a homeless man may feel that the man’s problems—maybe including substance abuse or mental illness—are so big and deep-rooted that they are not qualified to help him in any effective way.

Roger Wilkins, “I Became Her Target”

Structure and Technique

1. *Which pattern of development—comparison, narration, or description—does Wilkins use in most of his essay? Explain.*

Answer: Wilkins primarily uses narration. Although description is woven throughout, he is generally telling the story of his family’s move to Grand Rapids and a series of events that occurred there.

2. *Which kind of transition signal—addition, time, or space—does Wilkins use to move his essay smoothly from one event to the next? Find at least four different words that are examples of this signal.*

Answer: Wilkins uses time signals, including “before” (paragraph 2), “later” (7), “after” (8), “final” (12), and “afterward” (12). Time signals are often used in narratives to clarify the time relationships between events.

3. *In the first paragraph, Wilkins chooses to provide some historical background for his story. Why do you think he chose the specific details mentioned there? What might have been lost if these details had been excluded from the essay?*

Answer: The historical events Wilkins lists provide helpful context for the story he is about to tell. By telling readers that he is writing about the World War II era, when the symbolic beginning of the civil rights movement was more than ten years away, he helps readers understand how unusual it was in those days for a single black student to enroll in a formerly all-white school. If Wilkins had not included the details and readers had assumed the story happened more recently, they would have been surprised to read of an all-white school where blacks were considered a novelty.

4. *A title can offer interesting insights into an essay, especially if the title acquires unexpected meanings. Before reading this essay, what did you think the title “I Became Her Target” might refer to? What additional meanings do you think Wilkins intended?*

Answer: The first impression most readers are likely to get of the title is that someone “targeted” Wilkins in an unpleasant way, as in “targeted for criticism.” Wilkins’s real meaning seems to be twofold: that Miss Bean made him a “target” for her attention because she wanted to force other students to recognize him as a colleague, and later he became the literal “target” of the eraser she threw.

Critical Reading and Discussion

1. *What does Wilkins mean by the term nonstandard person (paragraph 3)? Do you think he later felt more like a “standard” person? Why or why not?*

Answer: At first, it seemed that “standard” in the Grand Rapids school could only mean white. As a nonwhite student, Wilkins was made to feel less than normal, adequate, or accepted. By saying in paragraph 12 that he became “just another kid in school,” Wilkins indicates that he came to feel more “standard.”

2. *Wilkins mentions several ways Miss Bean treated him differently from the way he was treated by the other teachers at Creston. How did her approach differ from theirs? What does this approach reveal about Miss Bean—as a teacher and as a person?*

Answer: Unlike Wilkins’s other teachers, who chose to ease him in by ignoring him for a while, Miss Bean made him talk in class immediately. She also asked him questions that required him to do his own thinking, not merely give the “correct” answer. Her approach reveals that she was an effective teacher: she realized that if she did not take the lead, the other students would isolate Wilkins. Also, she knew the value of encouraging students to think for themselves and express their own opinions. In addition, her approach reveals that she was a sensitive person, concerned about Wilkins’s success in his new school.

3. *Wilkins says that initially he was Miss Bean’s “incipient teacher’s pet” (paragraph 6). But how did Miss Bean’s behavior toward him go beyond mere favoritism? In what way did her treatment of Wilkins affect how his peers regarded him?*

Answer: Through her attention to Wilkins, Miss Bean was inviting him to demonstrate to the class that he was an intelligent, normal kid. By forcing him to give answers, to “clean up [another student’s] mess,” and to present his opinions, she made it more likely that other students would see him as a person rather than as a “dark presence.”

4. *In paragraph 7, Wilkins says, “Miss Bean became the first teacher ever to require me to think.” Before Miss Bean’s class, what do you suspect Wilkins—and his classmates—were being taught to do in school? Describe a teacher who gave*