Friendship

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF RALPH WALDO EMERSON

The writer, philosopher, preacher, and orator Ralph Waldo Emerson was born to a religious family in Boston just after the turn of the 19th century. His father was a Unitarian minister and his mother was a religious Anglican. After studies at the Boston Latin School, Harvard College (where Emerson matriculated at the tender age of 14), and the Harvard Divinity School, Emerson followed his father's footsteps and was ordained as a minister in 1829. After only three years, however, shaken by his wife's premature death from tuberculosis, Emerson quit the church and traveled to Europe, where he encountered many of the great poets and philosophers of the day, most notably Coleridge, Wordsworth, and Carlyle. He returned to Massachusetts in 1834 and settled in Concord, where he got to work on the writings that would make him famous. His first book, *Nature*, was published in 1836, in which he sang of a mystical philosophy of nature that he would continue to unfold for the rest of his career. That philosophy became one of the central tenets of the movement known as Transcendentalism. In 1841 and 1844 he collected his scattered essays—some of which had been published in *The Dial*, a Transcendentalist journal Emerson founded with Margaret Fuller—into two "series." "Friendship" was published in the first. Although never a wealthy man, Emerson was able to support himself and his family (he remarried in 1835 and had four children) through his writing and career as a speaker. After a period of failing health, Emerson died in 1882.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Emerson's life spanned the 19th century. In his writing and lecturing, Emerson reacted against the rationalist tradition of 18th century Enlightenment philosophy, which believed that the truth about nature is uncovered through scientific investigation. Instead, he proposed a metaphysical approach to the world in which all truth is discovered through subjective intuition. This is the core of the philosophy that came be known as Transcendentalism. Emerson was a member of the Unitarian Church, a distinctly American branch of Protestantism that emphasizes the unity of God (as opposed to the Trinity) and the omnipresence of the divine in the world. To the extent that he was able, Emerson also drew on Eastern philosophies and religions, such as Buddhism, Hinduism, and Confucianism, in his thinking about the nature of the individual and his or her relation to other people and to the world. By his death in 1882, Emerson had witnessed the expansion of American industry, westward expansion, the European revolutions of 1848, the American Civil War and the Reconstruction that followed, all of which spurred his interest in the relationship of the individual's life to society and to history.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

"Friendship" explores many of the themes that Emerson considered in his other essays, most notably those concerning the relationship of individual to society such as "Self-Reliance," "History," and "Experience." In order to think through these problems, Emerson draws upon a long tradition of writing on the nature of love and friendship that goes all the way back to Plato's *Symposium*, continued through Cicero's *De Amicitia* (*On Friendship*) and into the Renaissance in texts like Michel de Montaigne's essay "De l'amitié" ("On friendship"). In turn, his thinking on solitude, social life, and how to balance the two influenced Henry David Thoreau's thinking in *Walden* (1854) and other members of the Transcendentalist movement, and remains a source of inspiration for American writers and thinkers to this day.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** Friendship
- **When Written:** 1841
- **Where Written:** Concord, Massachusetts
- **When Published:** 1841
- **Literary Period:** American Transcendentalism, American Romanticism
- **Genre:** Philosophical Essay
- **Point of View:** First Person

EXTRA CREDIT

Thoreau's Landlord. Thoreau's famous cabin on Walden Pond was built on land Emerson owned, making Emerson not only a literary inspiration for Thoreau's work, but also effectively its sponsor.

Pride and Prejudice. Emerson was not a fan of Jane Austen's novels. "I am at a loss to understand why people hold Miss Austen's novels at so high a rate," he wrote. "Never was life so pinched and so narrow…Suicide is more respectable."

PLOT SUMMARY

Emerson's "Friendship" is a philosophical essay about the ideal form of human interaction. The essay contrasts the superficial relationships that people tend to define as friendships with the

profound connections that truly deserve the name. As in his essay "Self-Reliance," Emerson proclaims in "Friendship" that most human interactions are a distraction from what is meaningful in life, yet at the same time the essayist offers a model of friendship that builds and enhances solitude, and helps "dignify" the "drudgery" of mundane life with "the rhyme or reason" of philosophy.

Like many of Emerson's essays, "Friendship" begins with a long poetic epigraph that summarizes the essence of the work to come. Declaring that a drop of "manly blood" weighs more than the "surging sea," the speaker of the poem explains that as the "world uncertain comes and goes," the "lover," or friend, stays constant. The speaker describes how, even though his friend was gone, his "unexhausted kindliness" continued to improve his life. The speaker addresses his friend, telling him that "all things through thee take nobler form"—that his friendship filters the way he sees the world. The speaker goes so far as to suggest that the "fountains of my hidden life"—his spiritual life—"[a]re through thy friendship fair." This epitaph summarizes Emerson's theory of friendship as a deep and constant relationship in the midst of the flux of the social and natural world, a relationship that, due to mutual admiration and respect, enhances and even "dignifies" the lives of both friends. Each friend should be a model or ideal of thought and behavior for the other.

In the essay that follows, Emerson insists that there is an unspoken sympathy that brings people together: a basic human connection that can unite even complete strangers and make them feel "affection" for one another. The relationships one forms with other people not only bring pleasure, but also inspire one to act well—so as to give a good first impression, for example—and even to think well, such as when a scholar thinks through a problem in a letter to a friend.

Friendships cannot be made—this "affection" cannot be forced. Friends are people who recognize in one another the presence of the "Deity" that animates nature. This means that one may find friends in unlikely places, and also that friendship will not necessarily take the shape that most people expect. The laws of friendship are "austere and eternal," and friends should not be overly close, Emerson writes. There is an "infinite remoteness" that separates people from the world and from others; friendship is about profound communion of souls, not about the petty pleasures that defined the kind of high society of which Emerson was an uncomfortable member.

True friendship requires "sincerity"—complete honesty, such as one practices when entirely alone—and "tenderness," a basic and real affinity between two people, not motivated by mere politeness or any ulterior motive such as social advancement. True friendship is therefore uncommon, requiring a "rare mean betwixt likeness and unlikeness" that allows people to at once feel a spontaneous affinity as well as a respect, even fear, for a friend as a formidable, independent, and fundamentally equal individual. Friends may enjoy deep conversation, in which there is "an absolute running of two souls into one," while also remaining strangers "in a thousand particulars." Just as a **gemstone** must be held at a distance to be fully appreciated, so must a friend remain at a distance to be appreciated and admired as an individual whose life is as big and complex as one's own, a true companion in life, rather than a source of pleasure or profit. Emerson compares his friends to books that he reads deeply and then puts away, only consulting them from time to time: an alternation between solitude and company with true friends allows him to benefit from the company of great souls while also living his own life to the fullest. He closes the essay by declaring that friendship is "entireness, a total magnanimity and trust," and encourages the reader to recognize true friendship as something that will "deify both" oneself and one's friend.

CHARACTERS

Ralph Waldo Emerson – In "Friendship," Ralph Waldo Emerson writes in the first person, imbuing the essay with his own personal views and advice for the reader. Emerson was a well-known preacher, orator, and writer, as well as the leader of a group of New England intellectuals who became known as the Transcendentalists. Emerson and his fellow Transcendentalists (most notably Henry David Thoreau) disdained what they saw as the superficial distractions of society, preferring the quiet, reflective solitude they found in nature and in their studies. Yet, as "Friendship" makes clear, Emerson also hungered for authentic human connection, and, somewhat paradoxically, saw in every social interaction the potential to encounter a great soul. Although he regarded most gatherings as a waste of time, Emerson prized the deep communion of souls possible in conversation and dialogue, whether in person or in the written forms of the letter and essay (a genre of writing that, like a letter, can be written as a conversation with an active reader). In "Friendship," Emerson acknowledges that it is impossible to ever really acknowledge another person as a true individual—one cannot conceive of others as being as fully independent, autonomous, or unpredictable as oneself. He also grants that a friend is partially constructed through one's imagination. This is why a friend must be kept at some distance, so that intimate personal knowledge does not deflate one's ideal picture of the friend, or allow one to feel so comfortable with a friend as to forget that he or she is in fact independent, and not just a familiar part of one's world. Although Emerson famously argues in "Self-Reliance" and other works that real life is lived in solitude and utter independence, he is hopeful throughout "Friendship," and particularly at its conclusion, that true friendship can dignify each friend, and help one access eternal truths even in the mundane activities and experiences of daily experience.

The Friend – Throughout "Friendship," Emerson speaks of an ideal friend, someone with whom a true connection may be established. This friend carries within him or her some aspect of the "Deity" that Emerson feels he also carries, and when the two meet, these two instances of the "Deity" recognize one another. One may find the ideal friend in any sort of person, in any station, at any time. Therefore the ideal friend cannot be made, only met, and the friendship that develops unfolds organically, independent of the will of either person. This means not only that friendship often takes longer to develop than one may like, but also that friends may come and go, just like **leaves**, which grow and then fall away. Emerson grants that, just as one always only ever knows an appearance of the world, rather than the world itself, one never makes direct contact with another person, just with one's subjective impression of that person. Accordingly, one's friend is at least in part an idealized construction. This is one reason why the friend must always be appreciated at a distance, the way one appreciates the luster of a **gemstone**. Friends must never become too intimate, for this intimate knowledge is a kind of distraction, Emerson writes, from the true activity of friends, which is communion of souls in conversation, a kind of unrestricted flowing together of souls that occurs in one-on-one written or spoken dialogue. That is to say, the true friend is someone with whom one can act as if one were alone.

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.

TRUE FRIENDSHIP

The primary topic of Emerson's essay is, as the title suggests, the nature of friendship. Emerson takes pains to differentiate true friendship from more superficial kinds of human relationships. In "Friendship," Emerson emphasizes that meaningful friendship can neither be forced nor shallow. Instead, true friendship emerges by chance, when two compatible individuals form a relationship in which they can be entirely honest and authentic with each other, and through which they can bring meaning and dignity into one another's lives.

Emerson insists that friends are encountered, not made. Who can and cannot become friends has nothing to do with the will or desire to form a connection, but with qualities inherent in both individuals. Emerson writes that "My friends have come to me unsought." "The great God" gives them; Emerson does not intentionally make friends. Hence it is the "Deity" in Emerson and in his friend that "cancels the thick walls of individual character relation, age, sex, circumstance" and unites them. Friends are "self-elected," rather than chosen, in that, regardless of how much one wants to befriend them, the potential friend must carry within him or her the "Deity." A friend therefore cannot be intentionally made. Indeed, most efforts to form friendships are failures. Most normal friendships "hurry to short and poor conclusions, because we have made them a texture of wine and dreams, instead of the tough fiber of the human heart." That is to say, people often choose friends for superficial reasons—like pleasure or fame—and not because of a real connection. Normally people "snatch at the slowest fruit in the whole garden of God," and instead of matching with an equal, "Almost all people descend to meet" in such a way that the "flower and aroma of the flower of each of the beautiful natures disappears as they approach each other." Instead of actively seeking to make friends, therefore, Emerson merely remains open to the chance that he might encounter a true friend as he moves through the world. The result is that every encounter is potentially life-changing, because friendship is determined by divine forces beyond human knowledge and control.

Emerson notes that people change when they enter "actual society," altering their thought and action to suit those around them. But a precondition for friendship is that each individual be fully independent. Friendship is, in a way, a kind of solitary coexistence. Emerson writes that "There must be very two, before there can be very one." That is, friendship only occurs between two entirely independent individuals who respect and even fear one another, but nonetheless recognize the "deep identity"—the shared presence of the Deity—that unites them. One is "real and equal" with such a true friend, rather than dishonest or hypocritical, as people can easily become when they are in the company of people to whom they lack a meaningful connection. With a true friend, Emerson writes, "I may think aloud." A true friend is someone with whom one can be entirely sincere, unfiltered, and natural—just as one would be in solitude. In addition to being sincere, a true friend is someone with whom one shares "tenderness," a kind of basic human connection that is simple and solid.

True friendship is not solely defined by being able to share the intimate details of one's day-to-day life with another person—friends instead dignify one another's lives by forming a community based on a more profound human connection. The path to friendship is not through visiting a friend's house or getting to know his or her family. Emerson asks, rhetorically, "Are you the friend of your friend's buttons, or of his thought?" Instead, friendships emerges in conversation and through letters, which reveals a friend's soul, rather than the superficial trappings of his or her life. That said, friendship does not consist of fancy or fine things, either, such as banquet dinners or dancing or other forms of merriment. It may occur in a very "strict and homely" form, and in people from unexpected

classes of society. Instead of being something that one practices now and then, true friendship lasts and affects "all the relations and passages of life and death." Friends, whether they are present in person or only in one's mind, "dignify to each other the daily needs and offices of man's life," and through the pleasure of true human connection, "add rhyme and reason to what was drudgery" through conversation and sympathy. Rather than merely serving as a shallow companion or a listening ear, a true friend actively improves and enriches an individual's life.

True friendship, according to Emerson, fundamentally changes a person's life in some ways, but does not change it at all in others. If friendship occurs between two "formidable natures," who both harbor the "Deity" and respect one another, friendship can remake the world of each person, enhancing the mundane and solitary experience of life, and dignifying "drudgery" through conversation, reflection, and a sense of deep, but not overly intimate, community. At the same time, however, friendship requires that each person be independent, and behave with the other as he or she would act, think, and feel) in solitude. The paradoxical result is that true friendship emerges when two people are essentially alone together, living independently alongside one another.

CHANGE AND THE LAWS OF NATURE

Emerson's insists throughout "Friendship" that true friendship is part of nature, governed by the same forces that animate the natural world. The chief law of nature, and accordingly of friendship, is change—change that is much slower and more meaningful than the rapid formation and disappearance of superficial human connections. True friendship unfolds at the much slower pace of geologic and biological time. Just like the renewal of plants, or the alternation of electric charge, the soul is renewed and enhanced through alternation between friendship and solitude. Because the world is perceived through the soul, friendship also changes the world as it is perceived by an individual.

As opposed to the rapid formation and constant change that characterize normal friendships, true friendships are formed slowly and gradually, over the longer time scale of the divine forces that animate nature. Thus, true and meaningful friendships are more solid and constant than shallow acquaintanceships. Friendship requires "a long probation," for, Emerson writes, people should not "desecrate noble and beautiful souls by intruding on them" through "rash personal relations." There is a risk that through overhasty connection, a soul may actually be compromised. The pace of true friendship is the pace of nature. Instead of the rapid pace at which normal friends are made, a true friend must respect the *naturlangsamkeit*—literally, the "slowness of nature"—of geological time. Throughout the essay, Emerson draws upon the imagery of the natural world to describe the nature of friendship, showing that friendship is part of nature, not just human experience, and is governed by natural laws rather than human choices. Emerson writes that friendship occurs according to the pace of nature, "which hardens the ruby in a million years, and works in duration, in which the Alps and Andes come and go as rainbows." Whereas much of human life is rapid and fleeting, friendship develops slowly, and is a way in which humans participate in a natural order that is beyond the scope of human knowledge and will.

According to Emerson, the human soul is part of nature, and governed by nature's tendency to change. Due to this natural fluidity of the soul, friendships inevitably change over time—sometimes the soul prefers company, sometimes solitude, sometimes one particular friend, sometimes another. The coming and going of friends is like the growth of **leaves** throughout the changing seasons. The soul "puts forth friends as the tree puts forth leaves, and presently, by the germination of new buds, extrudes the old leaf." Because the soul changes, friends also change. For, Emerson writes, other people are part of the world he experiences. "Thou art not Being, as Truth is, as Justice is," Emerson writes to his friend. Like all things, even true friends come and go. In fact, "The law of nature is alternation for evermore." Just as positive and electric charges attract their opposites, the soul surrounds itself with friends only enter into "a grander self-acquaintance or solitude; and it goes alone for a season, that it may exalt its conversation or society." In other words, the alternation between solitude and society is productive and necessary, as are the regenerating cycles that animate nature.

As the soul naturally changes over time, one's perceptions of the world and the people within it are modified. Thus, Emerson argues that true friends should be kept at a distance so that one can get to know them for who they truly are, not who one perceives the friend to be at any given moment. The affection that forms the basis of friendship changes the world, as a person perceives it. "The earth is metamorphosed" when one encounters a person with whom one feels deep connection. Similarly, one partially constructs one's friends, interacting with a certain idea of who the friend is. "Fancy enhances," Emerson writes, and people admire what they want to admire in their friends. When one gets to know someone better, what one admires in another person may change—or one may cease to admire that person altogether. Emerson suggests that this is one reason why there needs to be distance between friends—if one gets to know someone too intimately, not as another autonomous self in the world, but as merely another person, friendship will no longer be possible. Emerson compares the qualities of a person to "the hues of the opal, the light of the diamond," which "are not to be seen, if the eye is too near." Just as one must have some distance from a **gemstone** in order to appreciate its luster, so must one preserve distance between oneself and another in order to fully appreciate the other

person.

Friendship ties directly into Emerson's characteristically Transcendentalist view of nature as teeming with growth and change and, at the same time, animated at a deep level by an unchanging divinity. The two contrary elements—change and constancy—come together in friendship, which unfolds on a geologic timescale according to natural laws beyond human control. Friendship allows people to escape the rapid pace of life to consider reality, and their lives, from the perspective of the divine. Friendship can therefore transform the superficial aspects of human life from mere "drudgery" with the "rhyme and reason" of philosophy.

SOLITUDE VS. SOCIETY

In "Friendship," Emerson argues—somewhat paradoxically—that friendship both requires and promotes the productive solitude of each friend. Friendship is based on spontaneous "affection," a human feeling of connection that occurs when two appropriately matched individuals encounter one another. Yet each individual must remain essentially separate from the other, an independent person who regards his or her friend as equally independent and autonomous. Emerson suggests that the ideal interaction between two friends is therefore conversation, in person or through writing, since this allows souls to commune without compromising their autonomy.

Emerson suggests that there is an unspoken human sympathy that unites the "whole human family." This affection has major effects on a person and the way he or she perceives the world. People are bound together through "kindness," which Emerson calls an "element of love" that pervades human society like "a fine ether." Even though people do not perceive this element, it becomes visible in the brief encounters in which people feel a sudden sympathy with those whom they encounter. The product of these encounters is a "cordial exhilaration," which, whether it be intense, as in love, or mild, as in "the lowest degree of good-will," provides the "sweetness" of life. The result of affection is not simply pleasure. "Our intellectual and active powers" are improved through the feeling. This is exemplified by the fact that a scholar often composes a letter to a friend when trying to think through an intellectual problem: the solitary activity of writing is made easier through imagined dialogue. Emerson argues throughout his work that each individual has a subjective experience of the world. This subjective version of reality is altered through friendship. The "jets of affection" Emerson feels for others "make a young world" again, making life feel exciting. "The earth is metamorphosed" by the presence of a stranger for whom one feels mutual "affection." Through the pleasure of affection, and through the philosophical insights derived from conversation, friends change the way an individual experiences the world.

Despite the affection that undergirds friendships, Emerson suggests that friendship also contains a certain level of distance. For Emerson, this distance plays out in two ways: first, unless there is this fundamental connection, two people will not become friends. And second, even if two people do share such a connection and manage to become friends, they must remain fundamentally estranged from another in order to have a true friendship. "No arrangements, no introductions, no consuetudes or habits of society" could make a friendship when there is no spontaneous connection between two people. When two people feel affection for one another, and when there is an "uprise in nature" in each of them, they meet, Emerson writes, "as water with water." Yet even though their souls may mix in these encounters, they do not develop the kind of intimacy many people confuse for friendship. Instead, the two friends are "two large, formidable natures, mutually beheld, mutually feared." Each person must be possessed of Emerson's trademark self-reliance. Although, according to Emerson's philosophy, it is impossible for one person to truly understand that another person is a self just as complex and independent as himself or herself, a true friendship allows one to get as close as possible to comprehending this notion. The effect is that each friend "treats its object as a god, that it may dignify both" through recognizing and appreciating itself in the other.

Friendship, therefore, is a kind of collective solitude, a community between two strangers that is that is most truly realized in conversation or letter-writing, when the fundamental divide between each friend is overcome in an exchange of ideas and sympathy. This is why the exchange of thoughts through written or spoken conversation is the signal event of a true friendship. It is possible only between two people, and requires "an absolute running of two souls into one." Each person has "mutual respect" for the other because "each stands for the whole world." That is, each person sees a version of him or herself in the other: an autonomous self. A friend, then, is "a sort of paradox in nature." A person who can only ever be certain of his or her own existence "behold[s] now the semblance of my being" in the "foreign form" or a friend. Seeing one's friend as a true equal to oneself is the challenge of friendship, but also the source of the insight and unique kind of community it provides.

Emerson's ideal of friendship depends upon the dynamic tension between "affection," which brings people together in moments of deep and pleasurable community, and mutual respect and admiration of the people it unites, which depends upon a fundamental separation between each person. People alternate between solitude and society in order to more fully appreciate each state, but a kind of bridge between the two is achieved in conversation in person, or through letters. For in conversation, two friends can freely speak their minds, thinking and acting with the other as they would think and act with themselves, but improved, strengthened, and dignified by the

regard of the other. It's no wonder, then, that Emerson himself writes in the essay form, in which the reader is always held in mind, and the solitary act of writing becomes an implicit dialogue.

SYMBOLS

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

THE GEMSTONE

Emerson writes that, like the way one admires a gemstone, a friend must remain at a distance in order to be fully appreciate. A friend must always be independent, must stand "for the whole world" in the same way that Emerson, according to his theory of experience, contains the whole world within himself. He compares the friend to a gemstone: "hues of the opal, the light of the diamond" cannot be seen if they are too close to the eye. In the same way, the qualities of a friend are invisible when the friend is physically or psychologically too close. It is often best, therefore, to engage with a friend through a letter, or through intense but infrequent one-on-one conversation, rather than constant but superficial engagement. That way, the friend remains an integral whole in and of his or herself, like the singular beauty of a gem, and can be appreciated for all of his or her qualities.

LEAVES

Emerson compares the way a friend may come and go to the seasonal lifecycle of leaves. The soul "puts forth" friends—that is, forms friendships with people whom one encounters—organically, just as a tree naturally produces leaves. The soul also loses friends, when it changes or when the friend changes; in the same way, the tree "extrudes the leaf" when "new buds" germinate. The comparison of friends to leaves serves not merely as an illustration, but also helps advance Emerson's argument that friendship is regulated by the forces of nature, not by the human will, and itself should be seen as part of the natural dynamics of the world, not merely part of human society. The image has further resonance in literary history, recalling the famous comparison by Glaukos in the *Iliad* of the generations of humans to leaves that flourish and then fall from the branches of trees.

QUOTES

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

Friendship Quotes

A ruddy drop of manly blood
The surging sea outweighs,
The world uncertain comes and goes,
The lover rooted stays.
I fancied he was fled,
And, after many a year,
Glowed unexhausted kingliness
Like daily sunrise there.
My careful heart was free again,—
O friend, my bosom said,
Through thee alone the sky is arched,
Through thee the rose is red,
All things through thee take nobler form,
And look beyond the earth,
And is the mill-round of our fate
A sun-path in thy worth.
Me too thy nobleness has taught
To master my despair;
The fountains of my hidden life
Are through thy friendship fair.

Related Characters: Ralph Waldo Emerson (speaker), The Friend

Related Themes:

Page Number: 39

Explanation and Analysis

Emerson begins this essay, as he begins many others, with a long poetic epigraph. The poem functions as a summary of the essay to come, compressing Emerson's ideas and arguments into dense poetic language. Throughout the essay, in keeping with the Transcendentalist elevation of the intuitive over the rational, Emerson makes use of poetry as well as prose to make his arguments.

The speaker of the poem states that a drop of "manly blood" weighs more than the "surging sea," containing within its tiny form as much as the whole ocean. Just as the drop retains its integrity in the ocean, a "lover," or friend, stays constant even as the world changes. The speaker states that the friend's kindliness "glowed [...] like daily sunrise" even though the friend was absent. It is unclear whether the friend returned, but in either case the friendship made the speaker's heart "free again." Later in the essay, Emerson will argue that friendship largely takes place in the mind, and that friends do not and sometimes should not be in one another's physical company to get the benefits of friendship. This line can therefore be interpreted to mean that

friendship helps to make an individual's life more meaningful and joyful, regardless (or even *because*) of the distance between friends.

The speaker then addresses his friend, engaging in a kind of conversation in the second-person point of view. The speaker praises his friend for helping him structure the world as he perceives it, just as Emerson will describe later that his world is "metamorphosed" because of the way the friend acts on his soul. Friendship also allows the speaker to see reality in a "nobler" light, and to see beyond mundane reality to the "mill-round of our fate." The poem concludes by stating that the "fountains" of the speaker's internal life spring from the friend, creating a full circle with the water imagery with which the epigraph opened.

> My friends have come to me unsought. The great God gave them to me. By oldest right, the divine affinity of virtue with itself, I find them, or rather not I, but the Deity in me and in them divides and cancels the thick walls of individual character, relation, age, sex, circumstance, at which he usually connives, and now makes many, one.

Related Characters: Ralph Waldo Emerson (speaker), The Friend

Related Themes:

Page Number: 41

Explanation and Analysis

Emerson makes the point that friendships are not made, but simply happen, and that the "Deity" or divine presence in every individual unites everyone. He insists throughout the essay that friendship is governed by forces beyond the scope of human will, namely the laws of nature, which according to Transcendentalism reflect the will of God. Emerson conceives as friendship as emerging from the fortuitous encounter of two compatible souls, resulting in a "divine affinity" between the "Deity" present in each. It is through the shared presence of the Deity that the barriers between individuals are broken down, and two individuals are fused into one.

It is important to note that, because friendship is a matter of fate, not of will, it can occur between two people from radically different social groups. Emerson here and elsewhere makes very clear his desire for authentic human connection wherever he finds it, and suggests that he is in fact more likely to find it among unaffected people than the upper-class, highly-educated crowd he would encounter at Boston social gatherings.

> I cannot deny it, O friend, that the vast shadow of the Phenomenal includes thee also in its pied and painted immensity,—thee, also, compared with whom all else is shadow. Thou art not Being, as Truth is, as Justice is,—thou art not my soul, but a picture and effigy of that.

Related Characters: Ralph Waldo Emerson (speaker), The Friend

Related Themes:

Page Number: 42

Explanation and Analysis

Here Emerson acknowledges that, no matter how true and authentic a friendship, other people will only ever be experienced as part of that phenomenal realm, as a kind of object. Emerson believes that each person experiences his or her own subjective version of the world, and that people can only ever experience the "Phenomenal" and not reality itself. (This philosophy is articulated most clearly in his essay "Experience.") Each individual is the center of his or her own world, and it is impossible truly to understand that other people exist as the centers of their own worlds. A friend is like anything else in experience: transient and unreal in comparison to the stable metaphysical ideals of "Being," "Truth," and "Justice." These ethereal entities are reminiscent of Platonic forms, immortal and unchangeable ideals that exist in heaven. Emerson invokes another Platonic trope when he refers to a friend as a mere "picture and effigy" of his own soul: a poor imitation of the truth, like the imitations Plato derides in the *Republic*.

> Our friendships hurry to short and poor conclusions, because we have made them a texture of wine and dreams, instead of the tough fiber of the human heart. The laws of friendship are austere and eternal, of one web with the laws of nature and of morals. But we have aimed at a swift and petty benefit, to suck a sudden sweetness. We snatch at the slowest fruit in the whole garden of God, which many summers and many winters must ripen....Almost all people descend to meet. All association must be a compromise, and, what is worse, the very flower and aroma of the flower of each of the beautiful natures disappears as they approach each other. What a perpetual disappointment is actual society, even of the virtuous and the gifted!

Related Characters: Ralph Waldo Emerson (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 42-3

Explanation and Analysis

Emerson contrasts popular misconceptions about friendship with what he regards as its true form. Most people rush friendships, basing them not on the "tough fiber" that comes through long association and true connection, but rather the less durable stuff of "wine and dreams." People want pleasure through friendship, but in reality friendship is governed by the same "austere and eternal" laws that govern the natural world, beyond the scope of human control. Emerson's image of friendship as a kind of "fruit" that is often picked too early conveys the idea of the natural timescale. It also has Christian overtones, recalling the unlawful picking of the Fruit of Knowledge in the Garden of Eden. The language of sin continues when Emerson writes that most people "descend" to form relationships with others, making a "compromise" that does them a kind of damage. "Actual society"—the relationships that most people have most of the time—pales in comparison to true friendship as Emerson describes it, which involves not descent but elevation, not debasement but dignity.

> A friend is a person with whom I may be sincere. Before him I may think aloud. I am arrived at last in the presence of a man so real and equal, that I may drop even those undermost garments of dissimulation, courtesy, and second thought, which men never put off, and may deal with him with the simplicity and wholeness with which one chemical atom meets another. Sincerity is the luxury allowed, like diadems and authority, only to the highest rank, *that* being permitted to speak truth, as having none about it to court or conform unto. Every man alone is sincere. At the entrance of a second person, hypocrisy begins.

Related Characters: Ralph Waldo Emerson (speaker), The Friend

Related Themes:

Page Number: 44

Explanation and Analysis

Emerson argues that there are two ingredients necessary for true friendship: one is tenderness, a genuine human affection between each person. The other, described here, is sincerity, or honesty. It is essential that friends act and think with one another the same way they would act and think on their own, without any concern for other people. Emerson compares his ideal interaction to meeting of "one chemical atom" with another, a bond formed between two entirely independent units. It is not easy, Emerson suggests: sincerity is only permitted to "the highest rank" of people, determined not according to social status but according to the ability to be authentic with a friend. This genuine interaction can only occur one-on-one, when two individuals are alone together. When a "second"—that is, an observing person, rather than a friend—enters, social considerations dictate action and thought, corrupting each individual's independence. Later, Emerson will argue that the ideal way for friends to interact with one another is through individual conversation, in person or through letters. According to the standard that he establishes, Emerson's own essays are a kind of conversation with the reader, in which he is open and sincere with him or her. Reading "Friendship" could be thus considered as the beginning of a kind of meaningful relationship between Emerson and his audience.

> A friend, therefore, is a sort of paradox in nature. I who alone am, I who see nothing in nature whose existence I can affirm with equal evidence to my own, behold now the semblance of my being, in all its height, variety, and curiosity, reiterated in a foreign form; so that a friend may well be reckoned the masterpiece of nature.

Related Characters: Ralph Waldo Emerson (speaker), The Friend

Related Themes:

Page Number: 45

Explanation and Analysis

Emerson believes that it is almost impossible for an individual truly to understand that a person he or she encounters is just as independent and complex as he or she is. (He describes this philosophy at length in his essay "Experience.") Emerson gets close, however, with a friend, who is "the semblance of my being"—totally equal to Emerson—just in a "foreign form." The friend is simultaneously the same and different, and as such not just another object in one's experience of the world but a special, almost frightening "masterpiece" that is as independent and creative as the one who perceives him or her. Emerson therefore expresses a kind of optimism in his ideal of friendship: he has faith that humans can in fact treat each other ethically as equals, and not just as objects.

> Friendship requires that rare mean betwixt likeness and unlikeness, that piques each with the presence of power and of consent in the other party. Let me be alone to the end of the world, rather than that my friend should overstep, by a word or a look, his real sympathy. I am equally balked by antagonism and by compliance. Let him not cease an instant to be himself. The only joy I have in his being mine, is that the *not mine* is *mine*. I hate, where I looked for a manly furtherance, or at least a manly resistance, to find a mush of concession. Better be a nettle in the side of your friend than his echo. The condition which high friendship demands is ability to do without it. That high office requires great and sublime parts. There must be very two, before there can be very one. Let it be an alliance of two large, formidable natures, mutually beheld, mutually feared, before yet they recognize the deep identity which beneath these disparities unites them.

Related Characters: Ralph Waldo Emerson (speaker), The Friend

Related Themes:

Page Number: 47

Explanation and Analysis

Emerson argues that friends must be both similar and different from each other, drawing on the seemingly paradoxical arguments that are central to Emerson's ideal of friendship throughout the essay. Earlier in the essay, Emerson argues that friends must feel a deep affinity for one another but should always maintain some distance. They must both carry the "Deity" within them, and must both be authentic and open. But they must also maintain resolutely independent and self-reliant. Just as he preaches in his essay of this title, "Self-Reliance," Emerson insists that friends must above all be honest with one another, never yielding in their "manly" autonomy. It is better to be annoying, Emerson writes, than to be an "echo." This is because what is significant about friendship is the way it allows two people to experience each other not simply as objects in their experience, but as truly independent subjects of equal autonomy, as "great and sublime" individuals, "formidable" and "mutually feared," yet united by a "deep identity." If friends were simply to echo one another's beliefs, and strive to be ask like each other as possible, their relationship would be something less substantial, less meaningful, and less philosophically enlightening than true friendship.

> Treat your friend as a spectacle. Of course he has merits that are not yours, and that you cannot honor, if you must needs hold him close to your person. Stand aside; give those merits room; let them mount and expand. Are you the friend of your friend's buttons, or of his thought? To a great heart he will still be a stranger in a thousand particulars, that he may come near in the holiest ground. Leave it to girls and boys to regard a friend as property, and to suck a short and all-confounding pleasure, instead of the noblest benefit.

Related Characters: Ralph Waldo Emerson (speaker), The Friend

Related Themes:

Page Number: 47

Explanation and Analysis

Friends must feel a special bond, a deep "affinity" between their souls, Emerson argues at the beginning of the essay.

Here, however, he clarifies that while this bond does involve a kind of closeness and intimacy, it is deep and spiritual—not mundane or shallow. A friend must be observed, a "spectacle" watched from a slight remove, rather than directly interacted with. In order to be appreciated as an independent equal, a friend must have "room" to be him or herself. Emerson asks, rhetorically, whether one should be a friend to a person's "buttons"—the trivial details of his or her life—or to his or her thought, obviously implying that an intellectual or philosophical connection is more substantial than one based on the more superficial aspects of life. A true friend may be intellectually very close while also being a "stranger in a thousand particulars," such as his home, family, and trivial likes and dislikes.

> Let him be to thee forever a sort of beautiful enemy, untamable, devoutly revered, and not a trivial conveniency to be soon outgrown and cast aside. The hues of the opal, the light of the diamond, are not to be seen, if the eye is too near. To my friend I write a letter, and from him I receive a letter. That seems to you a little. It suffices me. It is a spiritual gift worthy of him to give, and of me to receive. It profanes nobody. In these warm lines the heart will trust itself, as it will not to the tongue, and pour out the prophecy of a godlier existence than all the annals of heroism have yet made good.

Related Characters: Ralph Waldo Emerson (speaker), The Friend

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 48

Explanation and Analysis

Continuing his emphasis on the distance and difference that must be preserved between friends, Emerson paradoxically refers to the ideal friend as "a sort of beautiful enemy," always unpredictable and, in his or her utter independence, slightly feared. Emerson likens this integral (and perhaps impenetrable) unity to a gemstones, whose qualities can only be appreciated from a slight remove, as a total whole. This is one of the reasons that Emerson is content to engage with friends through letters, rather than direct personal interaction: correspondence gives him the distance necessary, he feels, to truly appreciate the person he is writing to. Furthermore, it is easier to be sincere in writing, when there is no risk of being overheard. A friend writing to a friend has the potential to "pour out the prophecy of a godlier existence" than has ever been written in poetry. It could be argued that Emerson considers his own essays to be an example of this "prophecy," like letters written to the reader.

> The higher the style we demand of friendship, of course the less easy to establish it with flesh and blood. We walk alone in the world. Friends, such as we desire, are dreams and gables. But a sublime hope cheers ever the faithful heart, that elsewhere, in other regions of the universal power, souls are now acting, enduring, and daring, which can love us, and which we can love.

Related Characters: Ralph Waldo Emerson (speaker), The Friend

Related Themes:

Page Number: 49

Explanation and Analysis

Emerson provides a realistic view of friends—although true friendships are meaningful and beneficial, the individual is ultimately "alone in the world." Although Emerson has mostly been optimistic throughout the essay, here he voices a note of skepticism: the ideal of true friendship he has described is, after all, an ideal, something rare and difficult to achieve in an imperfect world. If one's standard for friendship is this high, then one will inevitably feel lonely in the world. The friends that Emerson urges people to seek are "dreams and gables," more often fantasies than realities. But, in the same way that a religious person remains faithful despite doubt, Emerson is confident that he will maintain hope because the potential rewards of ideal friendship are so great.

> The essence of friendship is entireness, a total magnanimity and trust. It must not surmise or provide for infirmity. It treats its object as a god, that it may deify both.

Related Characters: Ralph Waldo Emerson (speaker), The Friend

Related Themes:

Page Number: 50

Explanation and Analysis

Previously, Emerson defined the essence of friendship as sincerity and tenderness. Here, he adds the ideal of "entireness," presumably of the two people involved, who, through complete "magnanimity and trust," allow each other to be completely themselves, completely independent and autonomous. A friend is therefore like a god to his or her friend: at complete liberty to do or think anything. Because a friend is a reflection of oneself, a version of oneself in a foreign body, a person effectively deifies him or herself when that person deifies a friend. By respecting another person, one respects oneself; by appreciating the qualities of a friend, a person may better appreciate those same qualities in him or herself.

Emerson's discussion of the dynamics of interpersonal relationships recalls Hegel's discussion in *The Phenomenology of Spirit* of what he calls the "master-slave dialectic," by which people are always in a struggle for dominance with others. Emerson is much more hopeful, seeing in the encounter of two equals not a struggle, but the potential for dignity and respect.

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.

FRIENDSHIP

Emerson's essay begins with a long poem. The speaker of the poem contrasts a "ruddy drop of manly blood" with the "surging sea," and elaborates on this image by explaining that, while the "world uncertain" always changes, the "lover rooted stays." The speaker, using the first person, says that he thought his friend had gone, but in reality the "kindliness" remained "unexhausted". The effect of rediscovering this kindness is that the speaker's heart was "free again." The speaker addresses the friend directly, telling him how "the sky is arched" and "the rose is red" by virtue of his friendship. The friend has the effect of giving reality a "nobler form," and the speaker compares the worth of the friend to that of the "sun-path." He says that he has learned to "master despair" from the friend, and in general that the "fountains of my hidden life" come from the friendship.

Emerson frequently prefaces his essays with epigraphs. The poem here serves as a summary of the essay to come, compressing into rich images the ideas that he will discuss in the prose that follows. A philosophical essay—as opposed to more formal writing with strict conventions—can incorporate all a variety of evidence to make its arguments, including poetry. This poem's imagery of the social world as a kind of water, in which an individual is like a drop, recalls imagery from Eastern philosophy, in which the community of souls is sometimes figured as a kind of ocean.

The essay proper begins by stating that there is much unspoken "kindness" in human relations. Despite the selfishness that one finds everywhere, "the whole human family" is "bathed" with love. One encounters many people—in church, in the street, and so on—with whom one has an instant connection, and whose presence is comforting. "Read the language of these wandering eye-beams," Emerson urges. Even though one may have never met another person before, "the heart knoweth" that there is some link.

Transcendentalists insist on the importance of intuition, and here Emerson praises the purely intuitive, affective connection that people often feel with one another. Here he also exhibits egalitarian views, insisting that he often feels sympathy for random people around him. His metaphor of eye contact as a kind of "language" embodies the way Emerson seeks to combine the intuitive and the philosophical: Emerson's own prose is a "language" of this kind.

The result of these chance connections is a "certain cordial exhilaration." Emerson notes that in both poetry and common language, people use the metaphor of fire to describe the effect of these encounters. These connections, whether resulting in passionate love or mere "good-will," constitute the "sweetness of life."

Emerson frequently makes points through imagery and metaphor: he is interested in the ways in which poetry and poetic language communicate philosophical truths. It is striking here that, although he famously insists on the importance of solitude (most notably in "Self-Reliance"), here he describes human interaction as the source of life's "sweetness." There is perhaps something condescending in this word, "sweetness" being pleasant but ultimately fleeting and less important than the weightier, more meaningful elements of true friendship.

Emerson states that "our intellectual and active powers" are improved through the "affection" felt for others. The scholar, who works in isolation, is only able to begin writing when he writes a letter to a friend. The act of writing the letter brings forth thoughts and ways of expressing them. Emerson describes the sense of excitement that comes with the visit of any stranger in one's home. The visit encourages the hosts to clean their house and to behave well, because the visitor "stands to us for humanity." People perform for the unknown stranger. But as soon as the stranger becomes known in all of his "partialities, his definitions, his defects"—as soon as the stranger is no longer a stranger—the interaction is normal again. There is no more "communication of the soul," just regular human interaction.

Here, Emerson makes the interesting argument that solitary intellectual work—the work of a writer and philosopher like himself, and of his acolytes, most notably Henry David Thoreau—is enhanced through friendship. As he will argue throughout the essay, friendship is as much about one's imagination of a friend as actual interaction, and here Emerson describes the value of writing for a friend as a way of stimulating creativity. Emerson's own essay style is a closely related to the letter form. Michel de Montaigne, the inventor of the essay genre and a major inspiration for Emerson, famously wrote in his essay "On Friendship" that he would have written letters if his best friend was not dead. The essay, according to Montaigne, was the next best thing. Emerson suggests, therefore, that his own writing style is partially a product of friendship. Here is one of Emerson's central paradoxes: an advocate of solitude is also an advocate of deep connection with other people.

Emerson asks what could be as pleasant as "these jets of affection" which "make a young world" for him. When one feels affection for another, "the earth is metamorphosed": bad things like winter, night, tragedy, boredom, and even obligations seem to disappear. Instead, one is overcome with "the forms all radiant of beloved persons." One's soul tolerate a thousand years of solitude, Emerson says, if it knew that it would rejoin its friend someday.

As mentioned in the epigraph, Emerson argues that one's perspective of the world is affected by one's friendships. Emerson believes that each person experiences his or her own subjective version of the world (a philosophy articulated in his essay "Experience"), and accordingly the feelings generated through particular friendships affect the way the world seems to each individual.

Emerson tells the reader that he "awoke this morning" with gratitude for his friends. This is a cause for thanking God, who presents these "gifts" to Emerson. In general, Emerson disapproves of society and prefers solitude, but he declares that he is nonetheless sensitive to "the wise, the lovely, and the noble-minded" when he encounters them.

Emerson repeatedly insists on the pleasure derived from friendship and the gratitude he has for his friends. Because he thinks that friends cannot be made, only encountered, Emerson ultimately credits God for his friendships.

Whoever of these chance people who "hears me, who understands me," becomes Emerson's "possession for all time." Using these different people, one weaves "social threads of our own, a new web of relations." A person ends up creating a "world of our own creation," instead of inhabiting the "traditionary globe."

Emerson believes that each person experiences his or her subjective version of the world—a "world of our own creation." Friends influence this subjective perspective and are influenced by it in turn. Emerson "possesses" his friends insofar as his friends are an essential part of him and his worldview, woven into his "web of social relations."

Emerson has found his friends through chance. God gave them, he writes. The "Deity" in Emerson finds the Deity in others, and in this encounter the "thick walls" of each person break down and a unity emerges. Emerson thanks his "excellent lovers" who "carry out the world," making Emerson's world and thoughts larger and deeper. He compares these expansive thoughts to the "new poetry of the first Bard,—poetry without stop, [...] poetry still flowing, Apollo and the Muses chanting still." He states that he is not afraid that this expanded mental and spiritual life will go away, since his relation to his friends is "pure" and because "the Genius of my life" is "thus social" that the "affinity" that binds Emerson to his friends will attach him to "whomsoever is as noble as these men and women."

Friendship is determined, according to Emerson, by an objective and inherent compatibility between people, determined not by will or choice, but by fate. If two people both carry some aspect of the "Deity"—by which Emerson presumably means the divine forces that animate nature and human beings—they experience a kind of fusing of souls. Emerson experiences this oneness with others in the expansion of his thoughts, which are inspired by a "Genius" that is "social."

Emerson admits that he is very sensitive to the "affections" that he feels for others. Every new person is "a great event" that excites him so much that he loses sleep. He has often been mistaken about who will actually become a friend, getting worked up about a relationship that "yields no fruit" in the form of thought or action. He states that he must feel as much pride in his friend's achievements and virtues as if they were his own. People overestimate their friends; everything that belongs to a friend, one's "fancy enhances." Even "our own thought sounds new and larger from his mouth."

While Emerson is a great advocate of solitude and praises the advantages of isolation, he also preaches an openness to others, any of whom could become a friend. At the same time as he insists on his openness and excitement for new friendships, however, Emerson admits one's perception of a friend is at least partially constructed by oneself: people tend to enhance their friends' good qualities while ignoring their bad qualities.

But friendship, like the heart, has expansions and compressions. Even though Emerson feels so strongly about his friends, he is simultaneously aware that much of friendship is "too good to be believed." The lover knows that his beloved is partially a product of his imagination, and even in the "golden hour of friendship" Emerson feels traces of suspicion about the qualities he admires in his friends, questioning whether he himself endows them with these qualities. In general, "the soul" does not respect others as much as it respects itself, and Emerson insists that there is an "infinite remoteness" that separates all people.

Emerson's comparison of the dynamics of friendship to the movement of the heart—expressed here in scientific terms—is an effective metaphor on multiple levels. The heart is a symbol of friendship, as well as a symbol of perpetual movement and change. Emerson's movement from singing the praises of friendship at the beginning of the essay to now questioning whether friendship is a construct of his imagination suggests that friendship is something fluid that ebbs and flows, rather than a constant state.

Emerson asks whether, through considering the way in which friends are partially constructed, he should be afraid of undermining the "metaphysical foundation of this Elysian temple" of friendship. He responds by writing that he is not afraid "to know them [his friends] for what they are." According to Emerson, "their essence is no less appealing than their appearance," even if it requires "finer organs for its apprehension." He draws a comparison to the roots and stems of a plant, which though most people do not attend to, are "not unsightly to science."

In his essay "Experience" Emerson laments the fact that true human connection is impossible: an individual can only ever experience their subjective impressions of another person. In "Friendship," however, Emerson is not disturbed by the way in which others are partially constructed, largely because true friendship, to him, is about unifying spiritual truths that exist above and beyond each individual subject. The difficulty of perceiving and imagining the autonomy of the friend—truly understanding that one's friend is as complex as oneself—is precisely what makes friendship so interesting and philosophically stimulating.

Apologizing for bringing forth an "Egyptian skull at our banquet"—an unpleasant fact in the midst of these pleasant reflections—Emerson states that a "man who stands united with his thought" has a high opinion of himself. He has achieved a "universal success," since his consciousness will always be more valuable to him than any worldly riches; he will always have something worth more than anyone else. "I cannot make your consciousness tantamount to mine," he admits. He compares his consciousness to a dazzling star, and that of another to a planet with its "faint, moon-like ray." A person can be rich with "purple cloaks," but Emerson will not like him unless he is "a poor Greek like me."

Here Emerson describes the essential challenge of social interaction: it is almost impossible, he argues, really to treat another person as an equal. Other people are always the objects of one's perception, never really subjects who can be fully understood. Trying to grasp that another person is as independent as oneself is like trying to imagine infinity: it is simply an impossible feat for a human mind.

Emerson addresses the reader, telling him or her that the "vast shadow of the Phenomenal includes thee also in its pied and painted immensity." The reader is not a "Being, as Truth is, as Justice is," not a soul like Emerson's, but rather "a picture and effigy of that." The other has come recently and will soon depart. Emerson suggests that a friend should be thought of as a **leaf** that grows from the tree that is his soul. Through the natural process of "germination of new buds," the tree "extrudes the old leaf" so that a new one will grow.

Addressing the reader as if he or she were there with him as a peer, Emerson states that other people will always be part of the world Emerson perceives, but never part of the metaphysical realm in which Emerson's soul moves. They are "a picture and effigy" of a soul like Emerson's. This language recalls the discussion of imitation in Plato's Republic, *in which the things of this world are described as mere shadows, or imitations, of the perfect truths that exist in the metaphysical realm. Emerson's metaphor of friends as leaves that grow from his soul—not essentially part of his soul, but projections of it—also has classical resonance: specifically, the famous metaphor of human lives as leaves that cyclically grow and then fall, made by Glaukos in the* Iliad. *The image not only resonates with one of the most famous epic poems in Western literature, but also with scientific discourse, signaling that Emerson views friendship as governed by the laws of nature, rather than individual will.*

The law of nature is "alternation for evermore." Just as an electrical charge attracts the opposite charge, the soul "environs itself with friends" so that it may experience a "grander self-acquaintance or solitude," and then isolates itself so that it may better "exalt its conversation or society." Emerson observes that this alternation can be found in all human relations, as affection draws people to others and then a sense of "isolation" recalls them back to solitude.

Again, Emerson invokes a scientific principle—in this case, the alternation of electric charge—to describe the dynamics of friendship. This serves further to emphasize that friendship is out of one's control, subject to forces that are beyond the scope of human will. Emerson also emphasizes that, just as different stages are necessary in nature's cycles, movement from social life to solitude is necessary for the human soul to flourish.

Hence, everyone spends his or her life in search of friendship. Emerson writes a fictional letter that might be addressed to a potential friend, in which he writes that he would not mind the friend's "comings or going" if he knew that the friend was really his equal. He is not wise, and it would not be difficult to be his equal, Emerson continues in the letter, but he would not presume a "perfect intelligence of me," and so the friend will be "a delicious torment."

Emerson's fictional letter recalls his earlier discussion of the scholar writing a letter to think through a problem. Emerson does not simply describe the letter he might write, but goes so far as to address and format it, as if he were providing the reader with a practical model to follow.

The letter concluded, Emerson writes that these "uneasy pleasures and fine pains" are not real friendship and should be avoided. They can be used to weave "cobweb, and not cloth." Most friendships are short-lived and unproductive because they are woven of "a texture of wine and dreams," instead of the "tough fiber of the human heart." The "laws of friendship" are "austere and eternal," like the eternal laws of nature.

"Friendship" is partially a polemic (a rhetorical argument), since Emerson consistently argues that what most people regard as friendship is not really worthy of the name, but instead a superficial kind of interaction. His imagery of weaving here suggests that friendship is something complex, and with many parts. It also implies a link between friendship and writing, which since antiquity has been compared to weaving, furthering Emerson's point that deep connections with other helps to foster an individual's intellectual and creative development.

Humans tend to search for the "petty benefit" and "sudden sweetness" of an easy friendship, picking "the slowest fruit in the whole garden of God." Most people search for friends out of an "adulterate passion," and as a result most people "descend to meet." Association is a compromise, and cancels out what is interesting about each of the individuals (what Emerson compares to the "aroma of the flower of each of the beautiful natures") rather than adding up to a whole greater than the sum of its parts. "Actual society," as opposed to ideal friendship, is a disappointment, unpredictable and unreliable. In such an imperfect relation, both parties are relieved to be alone again.

Although Emerson praised the "sweetness" he experienced through human connection at the beginning of the essay, here he suggests that people who are motivated by the search for pleasure alone will not form true friendships. The imagery of the "fruit" in the "garden of God" recalls the Garden of Eden, and suggests that false friendships have something sinful about them. The imagery of the garden is closely related to Emerson's metaphor of the individual as a "flower," a feature of God's garden. The flower imagery is also reminiscent of the leaves metaphor Emerson employs to describes the natural transitions and passages of friendships.

Emerson states that he should be able to be open to any real friendship, no matter how many friends he already has. He will be unable to be happy in any friendship, he writes, if he is not "equal" to any of his friends, because the happiness he finds in his successful friendships will be a cowardly relief, his other friends not his equals but his "asylum." Emerson slightly misquotes Shakespeare's "Sonnet 25," about a valiant knight who, after a single defeat, is "from the book of honor razed quite," to illustrate his point.

Because Emerson conceives of friendship as fitting into the broader structure of nature, all of his friendships are connected. If one of Emerson's friendships is imperfect, it will damage the rest of them. Using the political language of "asylum," and invoking chivalry through his quotation of Shakespeare, Emerson suggests that genuine friendship is predicated on moral principles like honor and fairness.

The importance of being "equal" to all of one's friends justifies "bashfulness and apathy," which act as a "tough husk" against the "premature ripening" that is an imperfect friendship. "Any of the best souls" must be ripe in order to engage in friendship, respecting the slow pace of natural processes (Emerson uses the German word *naturlangsamkeit*) such as the hardening of span class="inline-symbol">gemstones. Real love, the "essence of God," is for nothing less than the "total worth of man." One should consider the "austerest worth" of someone, and trust in the "truth of his heart, in the breadth, impossible to be overturned, of his foundations," rather than anything fleeting or superficial. Emerson notes that in discussing friendship, he is treating "that select and sacred relation" that, because it is "a kind of absolute," almost defies expression in traditional language.

Friendship unfolds at the pace of nature, and cannot be rushed. Emerson encodes this idea in the image of the "husk" which protects a ripening seed. (The metaphor of the leaves also has embedded within it the idea of a natural cycle.) Emerson's employment of a German biological term once again invokes science to insist on the fact that friendship is a natural force that is not governed by human will and does not occur within normal human timeframes. The imagery of the gems recalls Emerson's comparison elsewhere of friends to gemstones who must be held at a distance in order to be appreciated properly.

True friendships should not be treated "daintily, but with roughest courage" because they are the "solidest thing" in life. This is because humans know relatively little about themselves or their fates, but they have found a certain "sincerity of joy and peace" in "this alliance with my brother's soul" that is something true and real, the "nut itself whereof all nature and all thought is but the husk and shell." Friendship is such a serious matter than whoever proposes himself as a "candidate" for the "covenant" is like an "Olympian" who will compete against the greatest champions in the world, about to enter into contest with life's great eternal antagonists, such as "Time, Want, [and] Danger." The true friend will be able to preserve his or her "beauty" against all of these forces as a result of his or her "intrinsic nobleness " and "contempt of trifles."

Emerson once again figures friendship as a "nut" or seed, which ripens according to forces beyond human control. It is a "covenant," an agreement with divine forces; to enter friendship is to enter a relationship with what is real, with the forces that govern the world that humans can never really perceive. Emerson figures friendship, somewhat unexpectedly, as a competition, not against the friend but against "Time, Want, Danger," and other destructive forces.

Emerson states that there are two equally important elements in friendship. The first is truth: a friend is a person with whom one can be "sincere," and think aloud. One abandons all manners and politeness, is totally honest, and deals with a friend "with the simplicity and wholeness with which one chemical atom meets another." Sincerity is a luxury, Emerson writes, allowed only to those who do not have any superiors to impress or flatter. Every individual is sincere individually, but starts to become hypocritical when interacting with another person, concealing his or her real thoughts with gossip, flattery, and other forms of dishonesty.

Emerson argues that friendship is characterized by being able to think and speak as honestly with another person as one would with oneself. Two "atoms" are joined through friendship, entirely independent entities that retain their integrity even when bonded to one another. In his praise of sincerity, Emerson voices a familiar contempt for the general tendency of shallow social interactions, a theme that runs throughout his work and that of other Transcendentalist writers.


Emerson recalls an acquaintance who was entirely sincere with everyone. This person was at first thought to be crazy, but was able to achieve "true relations" with everyone he knew. No one lied to him or engaged in small talk. This is not the case with most people, however, particularly in "a false age" like the present. One must adapt one's behavior to suit almost everyone. A friend, however, is a "sane man" who "exercises not my ingenuity, but me." A friend is a "paradox in nature" because he or she is a complete equal to the individual that does not need to be carefully handled, what Emerson calls "a semblance of my being [...] reiterated in a foreign form." Interacting with a friend is so different from normal interaction that the friend seems to be "the masterpiece of nature."

Here Emerson voices a contempt for society that he describes in greater detail in his essay "Self-Reliance." He contrasts the falseness of typical social interactions with the solidity and usefulness of friendship. He emphasizes that a friend is something "paradoxical," almost impossible to truly imagine or understand: an individual as complex and independent as Emerson himself.

The second element necessary for true friendship is "tenderness," a sentiment much rarer than the normal admiration, fear, pride, hope, hatred, lust, and so on that normally bind people together. Tenderness requires that the other be pure, and is a sign that the friend is truly dear. Friendship must be based on something simple and solid, Emerson writes; it must "have feet, as well as eyes and eloquence." It must "be a little of a citizen, before it is quite a cherub." People normally regard the actions of the citizen as mundane, and the virtues of citizenship (justice, punctuality, fidelity, and pity) as lowly. But Emerson prefers the "company of plowboys and tin-peddlers" to the false friendship of "silken and perfumed amity."

Throughout the essay, Emerson emphasizes that true friendship is based on simple but profound human connection. Although friendship does put one in connection with the divine forces that govern nature, it is also something humble and mundane in addition to being sublime. Emerson, a member of New England high society, here invokes an egalitarian viewpoint when he says that he prefers genuine human connection with members of all social status to the fancy but vapid world of the elite.

Friendship is a "strict and homely" relationship, one that is meant to persist throughout all the trials and tribulations of life, not just the nice times. Indeed, friendship should dignify one's daily life, and "add rhyme and reason to what was drudgery."

Friendship can dignify the mundane through the opportunities for philosophical reflection and conversation it offers. A true friendship, then, has the ability to meaningfully enrich the lives of both individuals.

True friendship is uncommon because it requires "natures so rare and costly," perfectly suited for one another. Emerson believes that friendship cannot really exist between more than two people at once. There may be a circle of "godlike men and women" who are all friends with one another, but conversation, which is the "practice and consummation of friendship," must be one-to-one, no matter how excellent the third person may be. This conversation must happen in private, where there is no risk for "egotism," no "partialities," and no other relationships that might compromise the interaction. In a social setting, one may only speak when joining the common conversation, rather than being free to speak however one may wish. This destroys the "high freedom" of good conversation, in which there is "an absolute running of two souls into one."

Not only does friendship require compatibility between two people, it also requires specific external conditions, namely isolation from large groups. Emerson thus argues that friendship only exists between two people when they are alone together. When a third person gets involved, somebody is always watching or being watched—the total freedom of friendship disappears and true conversation becomes mere talk. Conversation is the ideal activity of friendship, the activity in which the barriers between individuals cease to exist.


An "affinity" will not spring up between any two people who are alone with each other. There must be some sort of relationship. This is why some people who are reputed to be very interesting seem quite dull when one meets them. Conversation is "an evanescent relation" that springs up between the right people at the right time. Someone who has a reputation for eloquence, but is unable to say a word to "his uncle or cousin" when called upon, is like a sundial in the shade. In the sunlight that radiates from friends, the person will become eloquent once again.

Conversation, like friendship, cannot be forced. Elsewhere in the essay, Emerson compares a friend to a gemstone that must be held at a distance in order for its "luster" to be appreciated. The image of the sundial communicates something similar: only in certain conditions will the sundial function, when light shines upon it in the right way. Friendship is much the same—it can only function properly if must be given the respect and distance it deserves.

Friendship requires a "rare mean betwixt likeness and unlikeness" of the people involved. Emerson does not want his friend to act according to anything other than his "real sympathy." "Let him not cease an instant to be himself," he writes. Indeed, the joy of friendship comes from the fact that "the *not mine* is *mine*." Emerson hates the "mush of concession," and believes that it is better to be an annoyance to a friend than to entirely yield to the friend. "High friendship" requires that each friend is able to live without the other. The "high office" of friendship demands independent people, each capable of standing alone: "there must be very two, before there can be very one," Emerson writes. The two "large, formidable natures" must nonetheless recognize "the deep identity" that unites them, in spite of their differences.

Friendship is only possible when each friend is entirely independent of the other, and behave with the friend as he or she would alone. It is precisely this mutual independence that gives friendship its substance: it is the relationship between two fundamentally equal parties, rather than a relationship in which one person dominates or objectifies another. As such, one should always think for oneself, even if it is an annoyance to one's friends. This insistence on honesty and remaining independently-minded recalls Emerson's essay on "Self-Reliance."

Friendship requires a "magnanimous" person who lets nature take its course and does not meddle with fate. Friendship requires a "religious treatment." Friends are "self-elected," and must be respected. Emerson urges the reader to treat a friend "as a spectacle," allowing enough room and distance for the friend to exist independently, and to be fully appreciated. Friends should not be overly intimate: one should befriend someone's heart, not his or her "buttons." One may be very close to a "great heart" while still being "a stranger in a thousand particulars." Only children are overly close to their friends, seeking after pleasure rather than the higher benefits of true friendship.

Emerson urges the reader to treat friendship as something religious and sacred, worthy of special effort and attention. Just as in religious matters, friendship has its own rules of propriety. Intimate knowledge—knowing a friend's "buttons," the trivial details of his or her life—is a distraction from the more important intellectual and philosophical dimensions of friendship.

The "guild" of true friendship takes time to join. Personal relations with a friend should not be "rash." There is no real reason to go to a friend's house and meet his or her family. Instead, "let him [the friend] be to me a spirit," Emerson writes. Emerson wants "a message, a thought, a sincerity, a glance" from a friend, but not such mundane things as news, politics, chat, or the "neighborly conveniences" that one can get from "cheaper companions." The company of a friend should be "poetic, pure, universal, and great as nature itself." One should even "worship" the "superiorities" of one's friend, and allow him to be "forever a sort of beautiful enemy" that is never tamed and always just a bit feared.

Friendship is spiritual, intellectual, and philosophical, Emerson writes, not mundane or shallow. This is in tension with his insistence throughout the essay that friendship is made of the durable stuff of everyday life, and can occur at any time and at any place. The figure of the friend as the "beautiful enemy" is the most paradoxical expression yet of Emerson's ideal of friendship as the productive union of opposing forces.

Just like the colors of an **opal** are not visible when the eye is too close, so do the qualities of a friend require a bit of distance to be apparent. This is why letters are so meaningful, for in a letter the heart "will trust itself" in a way that does not occur in speech, and will communicate the "prophecy of a godlier existence" than has ever been recorded.

Emerson compares a friend to a gemstone, an image that communicates the total integrity of the friend as a complex individual who needs distance and respect in order to be fully appreciated. The gemstone metaphor also continues the series of images drawn from nature and science, which associate friendship with the forces beyond individual humans that structure the natural world.

One must respect the "holy laws of this fellowship," allowing the "perfect flower" to ripen instead of impatiently forcing it. This means that "we must be our own before we can be another's," so that one can speak to a friend as a self-possessed equal. In a friendship, each individual must be entirely independent and equal, "stand[ing] for the whole world."

Emerson repeats the image of the flower, modifying it slightly: earlier in the essay, an individual was compared to a flower with a particular aroma; here the friendship is compared to a flower that blooms only when it is right for it to do so. The flower of friendship only blooms once each individual is fully autonomous and self-possessed, and sees his or her friend as a "whole world," a subject rather than merely an object.

Emerson urges the reader to have "grandeur of spirit" when it comes to friendship, not saying anything to "select souls" that is foolish or thoughtless. One should "wait, and thy heart shall speak," and wait until "the necessary and everlasting" compels a certain action or statement. Friendship cannot be forced or manufactured, and "the only way to have a friend is to be one." Friendship must simply happen, and cannot be brought about through social maneuvering. A friend will elicit "the uprise of nature" in another, and the two will "meet as water with water." If this does not happen, the friendship is not meant to be. Love between friends is a "reflection of a man's own worthiness" in the eyes of the other. This is why, in history, some friends have traded names, demonstrating that each loved his or her own soul in the other.

Emerson's insistence on the "grandeur" of friendship appears to be in tension with his earlier statements on the humility of friendship. But part of his argument is that friendship enables one to find grandeur even in the humble and the mundane, to see the "necessary and everlasting" even in the aspects of life that seem fleeting. The imagery of water Emerson uses to describe the encounter between two compatible souls recalls the ocean imagery from the essay's epigraph.

Emerson acknowledges that, the higher one's expectations for friendship, the more difficult it is to actually find it in the real world. Friends are therefore "dreams and gables," but one hopes that they exist someplace in the universe. One is solitary until one meets a true friend, but this may be a good thing, since it is during this period of loneliness that one passes "the period of nonage, of follies, of blunders, and of shame." Once one has become "finished," one "shall grasp heroic hands in heroic hands." Impatience makes people enter false friendships, but by spurning these, one makes oneself available for true friendships, demonstrating that one is one of "those rare pilgrims whereof only one or two wander in nature at once," to whom most people seem like "specters and shadows."

Although Emerson has been optimistic throughout the essay, here he admits that the ideal friendship he has established is only rarely found. It is, after all, an ideal. But even the rarity of true friendship has benefits in Emerson's view, because it allows one to mature and develop before the encounter that might lead to friendship. Emerson's statement that friends seem isolated in nature, walking among "specters and shadows," has both Platonic and Christian overtones. Like Plato's philosophy of ideals, true friends will perceive the material world to be a kind of insubstantial shadow. And, like Christians, friends will form a Kingdom of Heaven on Earth, a spiritual community more real than the social or political communities most people inhabit.

Lest one worry that such an intense focus on spiritual connections will result in the loss of "genuine love," Emerson assures the reader that nature will repay whatever seems to have been lost with something greater and more valuable. Emerson encourages the reader to feel the "absolute isolation of man." People believe that "we have all in us." People travel and read only to reveal aspects of themselves. Emerson urges us to "give over this mendicancy," forswearing this search for self in others. One should even part with one's friends, in order to meet with them again on a higher level. A friend is therefore "Janus-faced," since he or she simultaneously looks backward, to the past when each individual was independent, and forward, to the coming of a "greater friend."

Emerson effectively admits that a kind of love between people will be lost in his model o of friendship, but he implies that this love is not in fact "genuine." Emerson seems to be suggesting that only after one comes to terms with the isolation of each individual will one be able to reap the benefits of true friendship. A friend is therefore "Janus-faced"—that is, simultaneously looking forward and looking backward, like the Roman god Janus—because he or she is both separate and unified with the other friend.

Emerson treats his friends like his books: he knows where they are but does not often "use" them. One must regulate one's social life based entirely on one's own feelings, rather than any external obligations. Emerson cannot stand speaking too much to a great friend, since he runs the risk of losing his own sense of self if he spends too much time with them. It would be more comfortable to abandon "this spiritual astronomy, or search of stars," and spend more time with others. But then Emerson's "mighty gods" will vanish. Emerson admits that he may feel lonely in the future, but is wary of inviting his friend to see him because he may not be able to truly connect with the friend. He has an "evanescent intercourse" with his friends, in which they "meet as though we met not and part as though we parted not."

Emerson's comparison of friends to books is striking, and conflates his ideal of friendship with his literary activity. The essay, closely related to the letter from a stylistic and formal perspective, may be the expression of a kind of friendship. If friends are like books, reading is like conversation, and so the reader of the essay is engaged in a kind of dialogue with Emerson. The metaphor of the book also communicates the fact that friends remain themselves throughout the friendship, as fixed as a text on the page.

Emerson remarks that it seems possible for a friendship to be largely one-sided. Like the sun, he can radiate his friendship without all of it having to be reflected back. Indeed, one can even educate one's friend. If the friend is "unequal," he or she will fade away, but one will still gain something from the process. True love cannot be unrequited, and "transcends the unworthy object" in order to live with "the eternal." When the unworthy friend disappears, it is as if a mask crumbles. Liberated from the false friendship, the soul's newfound independence is something to celebrate.

Because the friend is partially constructed in the mind, friendship may be largely one-sided. This would be most true for a someone writing to an imaginary friend—or writing an essay for an imagined reader, as Emerson is doing. Emerson's statement that true love "transcends" its object (that is, the friend who is beloved) in order to be with "the eternal" strongly recalls the theory of love articulated by Diotima in Plato's Symposium, *in which love becomes the means by which someone ascends to the realm of ideas.*

But, Emerson writes, one cannot reflect on friendship as he has been doing without "a sort of treachery to the relation." For, in the end, "entireness, a total magnanimity and trust" is the essence of friendship. A person treats his or her "object," or friend, as a god, in order that friendship "may deify both" friends.

Earlier in the essay, Emerson wrote that friendship occurs when two individuals possess the "Deity" within them. Here, he states that friendship itself has the effect of deifying the people between whom it occurs because it reaffirms their "entireness," the fact that each individual is has something of the divine within his or herself and is thus perfectly complete.

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