

Before You Read

from Self-Reliance

Make the Connection

As citizens of a bold, young nation, Americans have always taken tremendous pride in their personal liberty. Emerson nourished this individualistic creed with his essay "Self-Reliance." What associations do you make with the word *self-reliance*? How does *self-reliance* differ from *selfishness* and *self-centeredness*?

Literary Focus Figures of Speech

Emerson said he was "born a poet" who sang "for the most part in prose." One sign of his poetic nature is the way he uses figures of speech in his philosophical arguments. **Figures of speech** are imaginative comparisons of things that are basically unlike. Emerson often compares abstract ideas to ordinary things or events—such as when he says, "Society is a joint-stock company." Here Emerson compares society to a business where the shareholders or owners are held personally liable.

A **figure of speech** is a word or phrase that describes one thing in terms of another, very different thing. Figures of speech are not meant to be taken literally. The most common figures of speech are **simile**, **metaphor**, **personification**, and **symbol**.

For more on *Figure of Speech*, see the *Handbook of Literary and Historical Terms*.

Reading Skills Understanding Figures of Speech

In a good figure of speech, a characteristic of one thing helps us see the other, unlike thing in a new, imaginative way. Some of Emerson's figures of speech are difficult and require re-reading and analysis. When you come across a figure of speech—especially a complex one—ask yourself, "What do these two things have in common?" and "Why has the writer chosen this particular comparison?"

Vocabulary Development

conviction (kən·vik'shən) *n.*: fixed or strong belief.

imparted (im·pärt'id) *v.*: revealed.

manifest (man'ə·fəst') *adj.*: plain; clear.

transcendent (tran·sen'dənt) *adj.*:
excelling; surpassing.

integrity (in·teg'rə·tē) *n.*: sound moral principles; honesty.

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Vocabulary
Practice

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Ralph Waldo
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SKILLS FOCUS

Literary Skills

Understand
figures of
speech.

Reading Skills

Interpret
difficult figures
of speech.