

Ralph Waldo Emerson's Literary Style - An analysis

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Abstract

Ralph Waldo Emerson's writing deals with number of subjects ranging from poetry, history, art, education, politics ,society, reform, and to lives of individual men – within the scope of the Transcendental framework as a poet and speaker. The qualities of Emerson writings raise many complex questions about his development as a writer. But his success lies in his attitude connecting his intellectual strategies with rhetorical ability. The present paper deals with abstract ideas and high philosophy of Emerson writing. He maintained clarity, straightforwardness, and meticulous progression of ideas from lower concept to the higher ones. The expression of emotional intensity is controlled, meticulous, and laborious.

Key words: Literary style of Emerson, Emerson's Literary Style- an Analysis, An Analysis of Emerson's Literary Style

Introduction

Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882), pioneering the Reformation Movement puts forth many ideas on divinity, equality of all human beings and moral and ethical upliftment of the American people. He was the most famous writer of his age in America. He laid down milestones in poetry and essay-writing.

He delivered several lectures concerning his contemporary social condition and advocated social reformation strongly. His philosophy prepared a strong ground for the transcendental movement.

Emerson made one of the best writers by his rich expression and keen observation. Although, his keen observation was based on obscure and complex concepts, development of new ideas and clarity. He enlightened the people of America with new ideas and concepts with metaphor and analogy. He moves his ideas from the perceptions of an individual to the broad generalization that bends the readers.

Emerson still remains fresh, nearly a century and a half after his demise and he was widely read and extensively quoted among American writers. His great ideas and dynamism of style captured the focus of the then audience, moved the readers of present, and continued to impress future generations as well. He expresses his idealistic philosophical thoughts on God by the sheer force of conviction: man, and nature that touch upon the emotional chord of every audience and reader. Throughout his career he dealt with number of subjects ranging from poetry, history, art, education, politics ,society, reform, and to lives of individual men – within the scope of the Transcendental framework as a poet and speaker. Garland Tudor mentions his views as,

“He planted a subject in his mind, and waited for thoughts and illustrations to come to it, as birds or insects to a plant or flower.

When an idea appeared he followed it, “as a boy might hunt a butterfly;” when it was captured he pinned it in his Thought book”

(Garland Marie Tudor and Mitra S. M. 1917, p. 75)

Prose Work

Literature is a highly fascinating and challenging interdisciplinary field. It is an effective tool in analyzing and appreciating the artistic values of literature in a broader spectrum, which facilitates deeper understanding of native and non-native cultures, ethics, values and life-styles. The cross-cultural or cross-national analysis helps to transcend the narrowness, provinciality of nation and general literature. Literary study attempts to study indigenous and multicultural themes, modes conventions and use of tales and myths.

As a prose writer, Emerson captures the attention of readers to marvel at his mental faculty for extraordinary insight and brilliant expression. Emerson’s writings deal with abstract ideas and high philosophy; nevertheless he maintains clarity, straightforwardness, and meticulous progression of ideas from lower concept to the higher ones.

He extensively makes use of metaphors and analogies to elucidate his thought pregnant concepts. He also moves the individual perceptions to a broader generalization that sweeps along the readers-mind. Emerson always makes an impression in the reader's mind that he/she is listening to his spoken words rather than the written word. His phraseology and formation of argument frequently produce such an effect. This impact is reinforced by his tendency of altering the common words into exclusively creative phraseology combined with quotes and maxims.

(i) Rhetorical style

His rhetorical style reaches its culmination of language with sensation and emotion. Indeed, Emerson's writings need to be assessed with the yardstick that of an Orator rather than a writer. This owes much to his public speaking experience as speaker, for he revised his writings after his lectures. The qualities of Emerson writings raise many complex questions about his development as a writer. He has taken up varying subjects unrelated to each other in succession assuming different themes from earlier journals. But his success lies in his attitude connecting his intellectual strategies with rhetorical ability. As Francis Bacon unfinished essays, meaning the essays that "never ended," Emerson's writings are suggestive to the fact that they are unsystematic and fragmented in style. Some of his essays display a surprising effect that he speaks about the final idea of the essay in the opening paragraph itself. For example in the introduction of 'Nature' he says,

"Our age is retrospective. It builds the sepulchers of the fathers. It writes biographies, histories, and criticism. The foregoing generations beheld God and nature face to face; we through their eyes. Why should we not also enjoy an original relation to the Universe?... Embosomed for a season in nature, whose floods of life stream around and through us, and invite us by the power they supply; to action proportioned to nature, why should we grope among the dry bones of the past, or put the living generation into masquerade out of its faded wardrobe? (Whicher, Stephen E. et al. 1964, P. 7)

(ii) Aphoristic style

Emerson brings in the essence of the whole essay in the opening that profusely runs into a number of pages. Often Emerson resembles Francis Bacon to maintain aphoristic style in his writing. There are brevity-of-expressions like aphoristic nature, which have a citable quality. He shines in this sort of writing. Several examples can be quoted from his writings to illustrate his style. For instance he quotes, “to be great is to be misunderstood.” Here Emerson wants to convey that many world personalities as Jesus and Galileo were misunderstood for their original thinking. To him, man learns more from self-consciousness than from pulpit or lecture-rooms. In another context he holds, “Man is dwarf of God,” further he writes “man is God in ruins.” He repeatedly emphasizes that “man is God – only lesser in degree.” In ‘History’ he observes, “There is one mind common to all individual men.”

Here Emerson conveys that the human mind is capable of accessing the universal consciousness in which the history of experiences can be revisited. He again writes, “A man is the whole encyclopedia of facts,” because the human mind wrote the history, and is now capable of reading it again. “Man is the will and Woman the sentiment” is another aphoristic statement he writes, ‘On Woman.’ The force of sentiment, for Emerson, is an expression of mankind's intuitive power and divinity, which is one of the basic principles of transcendentalism.

(iii) Use of Analogy

This power is manifested for women, itself in marriage, art, and education. The use of “Analogy” to explain the intended meaning through parallelism is another technique of prose writers. Emerson uses plenty of analogy to explain his abstract ideas in his essays. His use of analogy helps him in two ways; to explain the far-fetched ideas, and to bring in the readability to text. In his essay ‘The Poet’ he employs an analogy to explain the need for openness of his mind to nature. He writes:

As the traveler who has lost his way, throws his reins on his horse's neck, and trusts the instinct of the animal to find his road, so must we do with the divine animal that carries us through this world. For if in any manner we can stimulate this instinct, new passages are opened for us into nature, the mind flows into and through things hardest and highest, and the metamorphosis is possible. (Whicher, Stephen E. et al. 1964, P. 460)

Emerson again brings out successive analogies to insist that man must make use of nature for his benefit. Thus, he writes,

Adam called his house, heaven and earth; Caesar called his house, Rome; you perhaps call yours, a cobbler's trade, a hundred acres of plowed land or a scholar's garret...Build, therefore, your own world. As fast as you confirm your life to the pure idea in your mind, that will unfold its great proportions. (Whicher, Stephen E. et al. 1964, P. 48)

(iv) Reiteration scheme

Emerson's use of "reiteration scheme" is another characteristic of his prose works. This technique is used in "rhetoric" as a powerful tool to reinforce the ideas. The rhythm of sentences creates the magic effect on listeners, which Emerson uses whenever it is needed. In 'American Scholar' he writes,

"We will walk on our own feet; we will work with our own hands; we will speak our own minds" (Whicher, Stephen E. *et al.* 1964, P. 71).

In 'Nature' he employs reiteration, Nature, in its ministry to man, is not only the material, but is also the process and the result... The wind sows the seed; the sun evaporates the sea; the wind blows the vapor to the field; the ice, on the other side of the planet, condenses rain on this, the rain feeds the plant; the plant feeds the animal; and thus the endless circulation of the divine charity nourishes man. (Whicher, Stephen E. et al. 1964, P. 12)

The above sentences produce the artistic meter to rhetoric that attracts the reader or listener. He also makes use of "Paradoxes" in rhetoric and essays. Paradoxes offer ample ground for forwarding argument and counter-argument for discussion. In 'Self Reliance' he paradoxically forwards a discussion:

The civilized man has built a coach, but has lost the use of his feet. He is supposed on crutches, but lacks so much support of muscle. He has a fine Geneva watch, but he fails of the skill to tell the hour by the sun. A Greenwich nautical almanac he has... the man in the

street does not know a star in the sky... His note-books impair his memory, his libraries overload his wit. (Whicher, Stephen E. *et al.* 1964, P. 280)

Here, Emerson wants to say that man has lost his insight by depending upon institutions. In another context, he explains the nature of common man. He says,

“We are a mob. Man does not stand in awe of man, not is his genius admonished to stay at home... but it goes abroad to beg for a cup of water from the urns of other men” (Whicher, Stephen E. *et al.* 1964,P. 272).

In these lines, Emerson is not only sarcastic but also contemplative of human nature. He ends the argument, “I like the silent church before the service begins, better than any preaching” (Whicher, Stephen E. *et al.* 1964, P. 272). Again in ‘New England Reformers’ his paradox is finely displayed; he says, “Remember that no society can ever be as large as one man” Whicher, Stephen E. *et al.* 1964, P. 398). He also mixes up pun with paradox, for example he says, “There’s a traitor in the house! But at last it appears that he is the true man, and I am the traitor” (Whicher, Stephen E. *et al.* 1964, P. 607). In another place he says, “It is one thing to visit the pyramids, and another to wish to live there” (Whicher, Stephen E. *et al.* 1964, P. 228). “Emerson the essayist was a condensation of Emerson the lecturer” (Cameron, Kenneth Walter. 1976. P. 29: 31). “He was a follower of none, an original borrower from all” Hooper, Franklin Henry. 1937, P. 393).

He made his illustrations from near and far. Aeschylus transformed to a cow, the Doric temple in which Dorian dwelt, Prometheus is the Jesus of old mythology, and the fable of Sphinx are some of the allusions and many more found in his volumes. As an able writer, Emerson brings out the abstract ideas with strangely astounding concrete facts of life. His narratives are purposely provocative; sometimes pragmatically simple, sometimes intentionally complex, and yet other times obscurely fragmented.

Poetical work

It is seen that Emerson’s poetical themes are the condensed forms of his speeches and prose writings. The charm of emotional strength in his poetry is similar to the modulation movement of his essays. Similarly, the critics also widely differ in evaluating his technical success as a poet.

Emerson's poetry is considered as a mode of literature, particularly suited to express his transcendental insight and divinity of man. To Emerson, poetry is the vehicle of ideas, which can act more like a correspondence to the reader's mind than mere pleasure giving. In his essay 'The Poet' Emerson writes:

For it is not meters, but a meter-making argument that makes a poem, - a thought so passionate and alive that like the spirit of a plant or an animal it has an architecture of its own, and adorns nature with a new thing. The thought and the form are equal in the order of time, but in the order of genesis the thought is prior to the form. (Whicher, Stephen E. et al. 1964, P. 450)

In other words, the origin of poem begins with the feeling of idea rather than the form of poetic work. And through the loveliness of poem, the essential spiritual impetus is revealed.

Emerson is an observer of flashing thoughts.

While writing to Carlyle later he feels, (I am a) "half a bard". His biographers feel that Emerson had "the vision" but lacked "the faculty divine." Many times he failed to convert his vision into music. In his two volumes of poems, he wrote a good number of poems with insight, and profound ideas. Some of his verses are remarkable with surprising splendor and sensation. The poems like 'The Rhodora,' 'The Snow storm,' 'Terminus,' 'Ode to Beauty,' 'The Concord Ode,' and 'Threnody' are some of the worthy poems of penetrating truth, but they lack perfection in metrical form. The presence of incompatible images, the dominance of intellectual display over emotional aspect, and inconsistent flow of verses - largely characterize his poetical works.

Wendell Holmes observes:

Full of poetical feeling, and with a strong desire for poetical expression, Emerson experienced a difficulty in the mechanical part of metrical composition. His muse picked her way as his speech did in conversation and in lecturing. He made desperate work now and then with rhyme and rhythm, showing that though a born poet he was not a born singer. (Holmes, Oliver Wendell, 1899 P. 243)

Emerson's philosophical-genius overpowers his faculty of perception more than his emotional quotient of poetic expression. That is the reason why Emerson stands out as a speaker and a writer rather than a poet.

'The Sphinx', is the first poem in volume of Emerson's poetry. The poem illustrates the poet's inability for poetic expression. It resembles the traditional poems of expressing helplessness to write or deficiency of inspiration. Just like Coleridge's poem 'Dejection: An Ode', Emerson attempts the threshold piece 'The Sphinx.' The poem is both ironic and paradoxical that the Sphinx asks to solve the riddles, which are answered by the poet at the end. It is implicitly expressed that the Sphinx and the Poet are one and the same; who asks his own question to be answered by himself; "I am thy spirit, yoke fellow of thine eye I am eyebeam" (Emerson, Ralph Waldo, 2007, P. 5)

The Sphinx' offers a perfect example of this variant. Poems like 'Xenophanes,' 'Alphonso of Castile,' 'To J.W,' and 'Hamatreya' are verses inscrutable, obscure for many readers. Their titles have less relevance to the subjects. For example, by 'Merlin,' Emerson does not primarily mean the magician of Arthurian, but Welsh bard, who was rarely known. And titles like 'Ghaselle,' 'Saadi,' and 'Hafiz' refer to Persian poetry. These are the poems that the readers cannot understand without proper background of the subject; otherwise they get misled.

Many occasions the readers pass through such difficulty in figuring out the themes of poems. Sometimes, Emerson implicitly helps the readers by giving them a second title to the poem or beginning the poem with self questioning. In many places, there is inconsistency in the poems; as who is speaking to whom. The tonal variations often confuse the readers for clarity. It is frequently perplexing whether the characters speak or the poet himself speaks. Strangely, Emerson leaves these variations without any reconciliation. Meanwhile, Emerson also employs a strategy that the "natural objects" speak in poetic voice with direct force. For example in 'Hamatreya', the earth speaks at the end of the poem. Other than 'The Sphinx', Emerson also uses the "argumentative type of word exchange" in other poems. 'Fable' is such a poem that forms a quarrel between a squirrel and a mountain. It exhibits the comic nature of dialogue culminating in a surprising pun. The squirrel defended its own equivalent value to the mountain claims.

'Brahma' is a notable poem of Emerson for its blend of Eastern and Western thoughts. It portrays the opposing images in succession. Here the poet assumes the perception of 'Brahma, the divinity that pervades everywhere. The poem poses that everything exists in the same plane of consciousness. In the supreme consciousness of Brahman, the slayer and the victim, the shadow and sunlight, the shame and fame, the doubter and doubt are reconciled. It is no surprise that Emerson extensively makes use of images in his poetical work.

Emerson, characteristically a naturalist, expresses his abstract ideas in clear images and metaphors. Probably water, fire, light, sky, birds, rose, sun, and woods are the most recurring metaphors in his poems. The fluidity of water, the flames of fire, the luminance of light, the vastness of sky, the songs of birds, the fragment of rose, the power of sun, and the beauty of woods might have fascinated him. As a poet, whose themes are all encompassing wholeness, appreciation of individual capacity, and love for nature, Emerson seeks his poetic themes in nature more willingly than in human history.

Analytically speaking, Emerson's prose works stand as incisive documents, showcasing vivid expressions, directness, and careful progression of ideas. The aphoristic style of narration amplifies the readability. Despite (Emerson's) abstruse concepts, the narratives elucidate them through analogy and metaphor. The phraseology and structure frequently suggest the touch of spoken language rather than written words. Far-fetched references from the remote past to Emerson's time are spread all over the essays. Occasionally they are marked with unsystematic and fragmented elements. In short, the prose works of Emerson are still afresh, invigorating, conducive and stand next to the stylistic features of Francis Bacon.

The poems of Emerson are remarkable in spirit and philosophy. Yet unlike his Essays, the poems suffer lack of vision and appeal. The themes are mostly the transcendental aspects manifested in prose works. The expression of emotional intensity is controlled, meticulous, and laborious. The rhyming patterns, meters, tonal variations are often inconsistent that diminishes the readability. The images are often repeated, which reduce the luster. Even to modern readers the poems are complex in structure and incomprehensible in themes.

Conclusion

Emerson encouraged the making of American literary contents with “American Style” in every aspect. In the Phi Beta Kappa address he called for “literary independence of the United States” and urged Americans to create writing styles of their own and free from European Influences. Emerson’s influence on American literature was immense not in terms of quantity or quality, but it was mainly due to the direction and (intellectual) ambiance he gave to his fellow writers.

Emerson admired the limitless source of beauty, strength, and nobility hidden within each individual. Critics of his day accused him for being over enthusiastic for individualism, but Emerson glided over the human sufferings with the optimism of self-reliance.

“Nature” and “Spirit” are the recurring themes in the works of the poet. The analysis at length discussed his engagement with Nature and Spirit. ‘Nature’ is the greatest sensation and fascination for him and Nature also symbolizes the meaning and the evidence for a high spiritual world. Emerson loved to be called a naturalist, for he believed that man can draw the immense source of inspiration from Nature.

On the concept of Spirit or Soul, Emerson holds the view that there is “Universal Mind” behind every other mind. In other words, each thing appears as the reflection of the Universe every creature is the modification of others. This unity is traced in Indian Vedanta, which Emerson drank deep down from the Upanishads. To Emerson He argues that the “moral sentiment is the essence of all religions” (Whicher, Stephen E. et al. 1964, P. 76).

Emerson’s Poems are remarkable in spirit and philosophy. Yet unlike his Essays, the poem suffers from a lack of vision and appeal. The themes are mostly the transcendental aspects manifested in prose works. The expression of emotional intensity is controlled, meticulous, and laborious. The rhyming patterns, meters, tonal variations are often inconsistent that diminishes the readability. The images are often repeated, which reduce the luster. Even to modern readers the poems are complex in structure and incomprehensible in themes.

The poet has achieved mastery over his work of art by demonstrating his acumen in using choice of words, rhythm, images, structure, syntax, cohesion, and perfection. Above all, his voices appeal to even modern readers, as they emerge from the fountain of intuition and inspiration. And in every respect, he touches the heart of readers, thrill their senses, and awaken the wisdom.

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