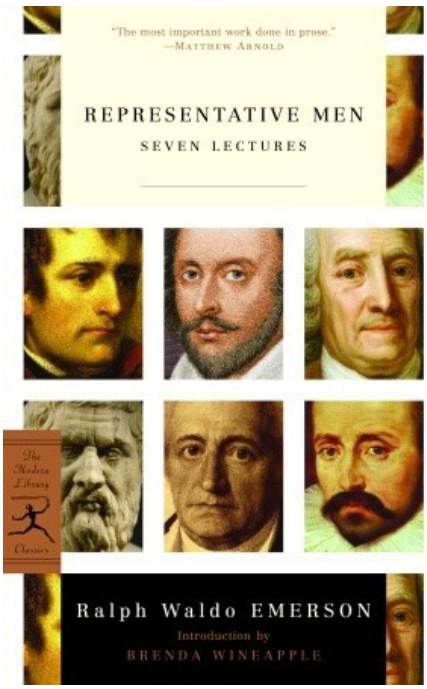

Representative Men: Seven Lectures

Ralph Waldo Emerson , Brenda Wineapple (Introduction)

Representative Men: Seven Lectures

Ralph Waldo Emerson , Brenda Wineapple (Introduction)

Representative Men: Seven Lectures Ralph Waldo Emerson , Brenda Wineapple (Introduction)
Introduction by Brenda Wineapple

In 1845 Ralph Waldo Emerson began a series of lectures and writings in which he limned six figures who embodied the principles and aspirations of a still-young American republic. Emerson offers timeless meditations on the value of individual greatness, reconnecting readers with the everyday virtues of his “Representative Men”: Plato, in whose writings are contained “the culture of nations”; Emanuel Swedenborg, a “rich discoverer” who strove to unite the scientific and spiritual planes; Michel de Montaigne, “the frankest and honestest of all writers”; William Shakespeare, who “wrote the text of modern life”; Napoleon Bonaparte, who had the “virtues and vices” of common men writ large; and Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, who “in conversation, in calamity…finds new materials.”

This Modern Library Paperback Classic reflects the author’s corrections for an 1876 reprinting.

Representative Men: Seven Lectures Details

Date	:	Published June 8th 2004 by Modern Library (first published 1850)
ISBN	:	9780812970050
Author	:	Ralph Waldo Emerson , Brenda Wineapple (Introduction)
Format	:	Paperback 192 pages
Genre	:	Philosophy, History, Biography, Writing, Essays, Classics, Nonfiction, Literature, American, Education

From Reader Review Representative Men: Seven Lectures for online ebook

Patdmac7 says

This is only from the Napoleon essay:

Few men have any next; they live from hand to mouth, without plan, and are ever at the end of their line, and after each action wait for an impulse from abroad.

"Incidents ought not to govern policy," he {Napoleon} said, "but policy, incidents."

"To be hurried away by every event is to have no political system at all." NB

He saw only the object: the obstacle must give way.

Having decided what was to be done, he did that with might and main. He put out all his strength. He risked every thing and spared nothing, neither ammunition, nor money, nor troops, nor generals, nor himself.

He fought sixty battles. He had never enough. Each victory was a new weapon.

He felt, with every wise man, that as much life is needed for conservation as for creation. We are always in peril, always in a bad plight, just on the edge of destruction and only to be saved by invention and courage.

"As to moral courage, I have rarely met with the two-o'clock-in-the-morning kind: I mean unprepared courage; that which is necessary on an unexpected occasion, and which, in spite of the most unforeseen events, leaves full freedom of judgment and decision": and he did not hesitate to declare that he was himself eminently endowed with this two-o'clock-in-the-morning courage, and that he had met with few persons equal to himself in this respect.

His instructions to his secretary at the Tuileries are worth remembering. "During the night, enter my chamber as seldom as possible. Do not awake me when you have any good news to communicate; with that there is no hurry. But when you bring bad news, rouse me instantly, for then there is not a moment to be lost." It was a whimsical economy of the same kind which dictated his practice, when general in Italy, in regard to his burdensome correspondence. He directed Bourrienne to leave all letters unopened for three weeks, and then observed with satisfaction how large a part of the correspondence had thus disposed of itself and no longer required an answer.

n the social interests, he knew the meaning and value of labor, and threw himself naturally on that side. I like an incident mentioned by one of his biographers at St. Helena. "When walking with Mrs. Balcombe, some servants, carrying heavy boxes, passed by on the road, and Mrs. Balcombe desired them, in rather an angry tone, to keep back. Napoleon interfered, saying 'Respect the burden, Madam.'"

"Neither is my blood ditchwater."

Like every superior person, he undoubtedly felt a desire for men and compeers, and a wish to measure his power with other masters, and an impatience of fools and underlings.

"When soldiers have been baptized in the fire of a battlefield, they have all one rank in my eyes."

We can not, in the universal imbecility, indecision and indolence of men, sufficiently congratulate ourselves on this strong and ready actor, who took occasion by the beard, and showed us how much may be accomplished by the mere force of such virtues as all men possess in less degrees; namely, by punctuality, by personal attention, by courage and thoroughness.

The lesson he teaches is that which vigor always teaches;- that there is always room for it. To what heaps of cowardly doubts is not that man's life an answer.

When he appeared it was the belief of all military men that there could be nothing new in war; as it is the belief of men to-day that nothing new can be undertaken in politics, or in church, or in letters, or in trade, or in farming, or in our social manners and customs; and as it is at all times the belief of society that the world is used up. But Bonaparte knew better than society; and moreover knew that he knew better. I think all men know better than they do; know that the institutions we so volubly commend are go-carts and baubles; but they dare not trust their presentiments. Bonaparte relied on his own sense, and did not care a bean for other people's.

"In all battles a moment occurs when the bravest troops, after having made the greatest efforts, feel inclined to run. That terror proceeds from a want of confidence in their own courage, and it only requires a slight opportunity, a pretence, to restore confidence to them. The art is, to give rise to the opportunity and to invent the pretence. At Arcola I won the battle with twenty-five horsemen. I seized that moment of lassitude, gave every man a trumpet, and gained the day with this handful. You see that two armies are two bodies which meet and endeavor to frighten each other; a moment of panic occurs, and that moment must be turned to advantage. When a man has been present in many actions, he distinguishes that moment without difficulty: it is as easy as casting up an addition."

"Believe me," he said to the last, "we had better leave off all these remedies: life is a fortress which neither you nor I know any thing about. Why throw obstacles in the way of its defence? Its own means are superior to all the apparatus of your laboratories. Corvisart candidly agreed with me that all your filthy mixtures are good for nothing. Medicine is a collection of uncertain prescriptions, the results of which, taken collectively, are more fatal than useful to mankind. Water, air and cleanliness are the chief articles in my pharmacopoeia."

He was the agitator, the destroyer of prescription, the internal improver, the liberal, the radical, the inventor of means, the opener of doors and markets, the subverter of monopoly and abuse. Of course the rich and aristocratic did not like him.

But that is the fatal quality which we discover in our pursuit of wealth, that it is treacherous, and is bought by the breaking or weakening of the sentiments...

"A great reputation is a great noise: the more there is made, the farther off it is heard. Laws, institutions, monuments, nations, all fall; but the noise continues, and resounds in after ages."

"There are two levers for moving men,- interest and fear. Love is a silly infatuation, depend upon it. Friendship is but a name. ... For my part I know very well that I have no true friends. As long as I continue to be what I am, I may have as many pretended friends as I please." NB

The democrat is a young conservative; the conservative is an old democrat.

Every experiment, by multitudes or by individuals, that has a sensual and selfish aim, will fail.

Eric says

Emerson can annoy me at times, but when he's in full cry, his ecstatic professions of readerly adventure and speculative gusto are difficult to dislike. He writes the marching songs of America's thinking men; and like Whitman's

I have witness'd the true lightning—I have witness'd my cities electric;
I have lived to behold man burst forth, and warlike America rise...

and

All the past we leave behind;
We debouch upon a newer, mightier world, varied world,
Fresh and strong the world we seize, world of labor and the march, Pioneers! O pioneers!

his essays are calls to experiment, and the literary phrasing of 19th century America's feeling of maturing strength and explorative vigor. I think it's fascinating to witness different levels of a society processing a set of ideas in various ways, to various ends. The pioneer is a poetic symbol of spiritual youth, innocence and freshness, and he is an actual man who will have his God-given plot, ancient forests and Indians be damned. I'm very interested to read more about Emerson's opposition to the Mexican War and other of the political and imperial—-as opposed to the spiritual and intellectual—-consequences of America's energetic bursting forth.

Talking about Plato, Emerson shows his affinities with Eastern monism; this made me want to go back and re-read that chapter in *The Pound Era* in which Hugh Kenner pictures China, "with centuries-long deliberation" writing, through Emerson and others, "the macro-history of western thought." The essay on Swedenborg--unreal, unread Swedenborg, who perhaps persists for the contemporary reader in "Swedenborgian," a word always adhering to Henry James Sr.--was very tedious until Emerson brought out his big rhetorical guns and began pummeling his subject's elaborate demonologies and interstitial soul-rankings; this rant contains ferocious poetry, and it also made me feel better about never getting very far in Merrill's *The Changing Light of Sandover*.

Emerson's grapple with Montaigne makes one realize why Nietzsche valued him, Emerson, so highly. He sinuously navigates the biggest issue in philosophy--not suicide, as we thought years ago when Camus-reading teenagers, but the subversion of our ideals by our actions, by the dark ironies that abound; and ideals as free products of dreams, but also hostages to stomachs and nerves. The essay on Shakespeare as the eternal, the unsurpassable type of "Poet" is wonderful, if not quite as intense as "The Poet," the essay that lit Whitman's fire. Emerson calls Napoleon the representative man of the 19th century, the "incarnate Democrat," agent and attorney of the middle classes but, preacher-like, warns that the energies liberated from the old feudal forms should bear spiritual and intellectual as well as capitalistic fruit, else

Our riches will leave us sick; there will be bitterness in our laughter; and our wine will burn our mouth.

The essay on Goethe is weak, though its long first paragraph

Nature will be reported. All things are engaged in writing their history. The planet, the pebble, goes attended by its shadow. The rolling rock leaves its scratches on the mountain; the river, its channel in the soil; the animal, its bones in the stratum; the fern and leaf their modest epitaph in the coal.

is a pearl of the dynamic, incantatory style that marks the American Renaissance. A young society entering a New World of experience backed by Shakespeare and the King James Bible is not a backwater of literary English, but its marvel-making frontier.

Jennifer Rabchuk says

Short but sweet biographies of influential men in the history of the Christian church.

Jen says

Really enjoyed the chapter on Michel de Montaigne.

Michael Huang says

I don't know if it's partly because of the audiobook format (I did the libravox version, which even in the best of circumstances can be flat and uninspiring), but this book feels scatter brained. A lot of subjective opinion s paired with random facts about these men.

Illiterate says

I would have liked more Plato & Co., less Emerson.

Stephanie K says

I am not too far into this yet, but there is a lot of good, deep and truthful stuff in here. It is inspiring!

Carlo says

not sure if this is the book I read. Published in 1892 by Henry Altimus Begins with Uses of Great men?

Chris says

Emerson's "Representative Men" is a selection of exemplars from history that more or less became the typification in Emerson's mind of the kind of giants that have gone before and trailblazed a way to truth and understanding within western civilization. Included in the essays are discussions on the contributions of (in order of my favorites) Montaigne (representative of skeptics), Shakespeare (of poets), Plato (of philosophers), Goethe (of writers), Napoleon (of 'leaders of the people' [my words:]), and Swedenborg (of mystics).

Emerson's discussions became a bit too thick at times with his own spin towards new ways of thinking about these categories of leaders. Emerson is fresh enough without belaboring the exposition to the point of confusing the reader with the superior genius of each character. If you have ever read Emerson you know that you will always come away with a new way of understanding an old concept. He has a way of brushing off the old truths, making them shine, and even purifying them so you have a better concentration, and possibly more, of them than ever before. He makes you turn over the dumb rock in your hand to reveal a speaking jewel. But there is such a thing as too much newness. It is said that for communication to take place, there has to be a balance of the familiar with the novel. Emerson is heavy on novelty, always, but especially in this book, and he overdoes it a bit at points for my taste. But Emerson was writing to people that included those who, I'm sure, were a bit more intelligent than myself. And taking into account the fact that Emerson himself was more intelligent than I, I have to conclude that though the book was a bit too 'orotund' and convoluted at points for myself, yet it may only seem that way because I am several rungs down from his cognitive level of functioning. I heartily enjoy even his abstruse ramblings that go over my head, and I can even appreciate it's value when I get nearly nothing out of it. I have faith that some are picking up what I'm dropping. It's true Emerson-ian style, and I take the good with the 'less-good'.

What Emerson does best in this book is persuade me to pick up works by all the authors he descants on EXCEPT for Swedenborg. Emerson appeared to betray his distaste for the final turn of Swedenborg's literary career for which he became notorious in religious spheres. His discourse on Napoleaon was favorable as far as his early career and his practical genius, but he confesses Napoleon's moral self to be debased, and ineffective in respect towards any lasting benefits. As for the rest, he makes you feel like they truly understood the common man and even wrote to raise 'plebian' ideas to a more celestial atmosphere. Emerson seems to imply, "What's theirs is ours, and they help us to see that they don't own their thoughts as original; but they share their ideas as born from the collective human consciousness of which each of our own minds are a part and contributor." Emerson writes at the end of the book, "The world is young: the former great men call to us affectionately. We too must write Bibles, to unite again the heavens and the earthly world."

Emerson brings down high truth to my level, and he helps me to identify other 'representative men' who have done that as well, and maybe better. We honor truth, says Emerson, not by plating glass over it in the prestigious halls of academia, but rather we 'honor every truth by use'.
