
A STUDY OF THE INDIVIDUALISM ACCOUNTS ON AMERICAN LITERATURE THROUGH READER RESPONSE CRITICISM

Didik Murwantono

Universitas Islam Sultan Agung

Email: didik.m@unissula.ac.id

ABSTRACT

This study is by no means a comprehensive account of individualism or more accurately, individualism, in America. It is intended to be more suggestive than comprehensive though it is characterized by more summery than controversy. Many ideas as well as some of the highlights of American manifestations of individualism and modes of individualistic thought and philosophy have been added. What follows, then, is merely a look at some of the high-water marks of literary American individualism and an attempt to offer some cursory explanations for this American phenomenon in theory and practice. This study was under an exploratory qualitative method supported by an interdisciplinary approach of American Studies. Reader-Response criticism is used to make perspective and interpretation without a doubt. The sample was 28 students taking the American Society and literature course at the Universitas Islam Sultan Agung Semarang. The completion of this research shows the students have creativity and freedom to express their innovation in learning American literature. The cornerstone of individual conscience has to be their credos for changing into a better life through the social, political, economic, and moral autonomy of each individual.

Keywords: *American Literature; Individualism; Reader Response; Transcendentalism*

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INTRODUCTION

Individualism lies at the very core of American culture. Hence the most important thing to understand about Americans is probably their devotion to individualism. The stereotypic images associated with American individuality are not only abundant but

abundantly well known the world over. The American cowboy counts among the most powerful and proliferative of these images (Kleinfeld & Kleinfeld, 2004), (Yaquinto, 2020), (Kimmel & Gardiner, 2017) He is most frequently depicted as the only human in a vast landscape. He is a loner, a free soul, a man

who finds his strength in the solitude of vast stretches of uninhabited countryside. In some cowboy films, his rugged individualism and go-it-alone approach allow them to overcome the odds and not only survive but triumph. His victory is portrayed not only as a personal one but also as a practical and moral victory for all of society and ideals, such as justice and humanity.

Consequently, what is the meaning of American individualism? Some scholars give different perspectives and interpretations about the definition of individualism. Most Americans said it tends to any responsibility by themselves. American children are trained from very early in their lives to consider themselves as separate individuals who are responsible for their own situations in life and their own destinies. They are not trained to see themselves as members of a close-knit, interdependent family, religious group, tribe, nation, or any other collectively (Althen, 1998).

At root, the ideal of individualism regards each individual as a moral, political, and economic primary, meaning that each person in a civil society is by right an independent and sovereign being and that he or she should be free to choose his or her associations voluntarily and not have obligations or duties imposed by society without consent (Daniels, 2011). Moreover, Emerson's "Self-Reliance", has given a great contribution to depicting the American cultural identity that is still held by most American nowadays. It is individualism.

Definitions of individualism are also influenced by some eras as the spirit of the age. In short, there is any distinctive characteristic of the definition in line with the changing era. It was as Renaissance era (Martin, 2004), for example, connected with a philosophy called

humanism (Cohen & Kim, 2020). Included in this worldview was support for the idea of the central role and dignity of the individual; the development of all of the human faculties, especially the artistic ones, and not merely the intellectual ones (Kohl, 1992).

Recently, the term individualism is associated with some issues considered representative of individualism itself in America. In America, each individual has the freedom to take a part in his life. He is free to decide what to do now and in the future. American government or constitution guarantees its people without interference. They are free to speak, get material wealth, and profess a religion. This means **individual freedom**.

As for the historical data, before the Civil War of the 1860s, the American ideal of the free individual was the frontiersman and small farmer. It then developed in a different setting like entering the wilderness for getting gold. There they were to be individuals, who were responsible for themselves. The frontier mythology is an integral part of scholarly writing on the West, where the dichotomy of wilderness and civilization had been considered the key to the genre. Besides, Frederick Jackson Turner's "the Wilderness" was the most famous one (Stiglegger, 2022).

In the 19th, Ralph Waldo Emerson popularized the famous essay entitled "**Self-Reliance**". He developed a doctrine of what he called self-reliance, which meant to marry inner self-knowledge and self-trust with pursuits of self-culture (Plotica, 2018). Americans believe that individuals must learn to rely on themselves or risk losing freedom. To be in the mainstream of American life-to have power and/or respect—individuals

must be seen as self-reliant. Self-reliance pushes everyone to jump into competition.

In simple, **competition** may take the form of rivalry between individuals within a group, competitive efforts of social groups to gain their objectives, racial rivalries, or a contest of culture and institutions for pre-eminence. The competitive effort may be expended to achieve sheer existence and survival, or it may be devoted to a struggle for prestige. Today, the struggle for diverse identities testifies to the triumph of individualism (Davydov, 2022). And competition is seen by most Americans as encouraging hard work.

Hard work is the price of material wealth. American people claim that material wealth can be obtained through hard work only. To get it, they try to expand from one place to another place. Hard work has been both necessary and rewarding for most Americans throughout their history. Because of this, they have come to see material possessions as the natural reward for their hard work. Most Americans believe that if a person works hard, it is possible to have a good standard of living (Jon, 1997).

This research was methodologically descriptive qualitative research by gathering the data qualitatively and presenting them descriptively (Rudy & Adhitya, 2022, p. 338). Therefore, qualitative research is most suitable for addressing 'why' questions to explain and understand issues or 'how' questions that describe processes or behaviors (Cooper et al., 2012). A major characteristic of qualitative research is to get a descriptive focus. The data are collected in the form of words or pictures, rather than numbers. The written result of the research contains a quotation from the data to illustrate and substantiate to presentation. The

primary data of this research were from American literature related to individualism and some samples of 28 students at the Faculty of Language and Social Science, Universitas Islam Sultan Agung. Meanwhile, some books, articles, essays, newspapers, websites, and other theoretical writings concerning the topic of analysis or research were used as secondary data (Adhitya, Rosmawati & Fainnayla, 2022, p. 69).

Since this research is a product of American Studies, it follows the characteristics of American Studies which has the mainstream as an interdisciplinary study (Smith, 1980). Furthermore, Individualism is a phenomenon in American society. It is not only an American intellectual mind but also a hemispheric mind. Therefore, this research also uses a 'trans-national' approach from John Carlos Rowe. He states that "the multicultural and multi-ethnic US cannot be understood adequately without considering its transnational sources, hemispheric interests, and global relations" (Rowe, 2012).

To get a better understanding of it, the Reader-Response approach is used to learn by demystifying literature and connecting it to individual experience (Collective, 2020), (Singh, 2020). Reader-Response criticism does not provide us with a unified body of theory or a single methodological approach for textual analysis. But believing that a literary work's interpretation is created when a reader and a text interact or transact, these critics assert that the proper study of textual analysis must consider both the reader and the text, not simply a text in isolation (Bressier, 1999). Then the researcher analyzed those scripts using the relevant theories that the researcher made before. In addition, the method of analyzing the

data is Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) (Warren, 2020).

DISCUSSION

American Literature class was initiated six years ago at the Faculty of Language and Communication Science, Universitas Islam Sultan Agung Semarang. I was very impressed when my students gave an analysis of American literature about Emerson's "Self-Reliance" and Whitman's "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry". The students with their background and foresight explored the individualism values related to their lives as follows:

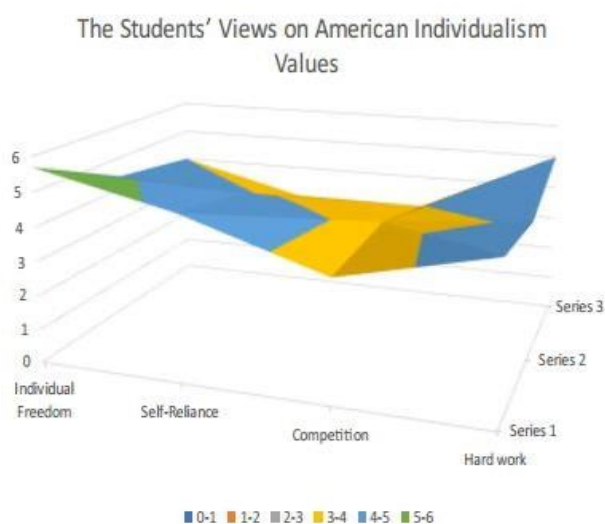


Figure 1. Students' accounts of American Individualism

American individualism leads to students' preferences and behaviors. If individualism is broadly defined as the process leading to a behavioral change in an individual through experience, then it will not be wrong to state that instructing students about value individualism. Figure 1 showed that the students highlighted individual freedom with the highest rank.

Such kinds of literature teaching programs aiming to raise students as independent individuals who involve being active in the teaching-learning process without being under control of the others should be designed around these skills. Here the main duty of a lecturer is only to be a facilitator. By now, he can facilitate their students to be students' actuaries.

Lecturers firstly should give the purposes of learning as well as the definition of it. The students with their curiosity will embrace the course through their experiences. In addition, they will inevitably forge strong connections with the plots, themes, and ideological assumptions of literature and will become active learners that embrace critical thinking.

The study of American literature is amenable to student-centered activities that offer opportunities for debate, discussion, and interpretation. Therefore, the choice of texts and activities is crucial because these selections will make the difference between passive reading and active involvement with a literary text. Hence, the PjBL (Project-Based Learning) combined with ML (Multiple Literacies) method is the right choice. It involves a dynamic classroom approach. The students can acquire deeper knowledge through active exploration of real-world challenges and problems. Moreover, it also engages all students in sense-making and supports students to solve problems, to think critically, to develop creativity and to improve innovatively (Miller & Krajcik, 2019).

The lecturer is an important facilitator and guide when it comes to offering a choice of texts and ways to interpret them. He or she

must plan and prepare to involve students in lessons and encourage them to express their viewpoints. And American literature has the power to create opinions and individual meanings for students; hence, they will typically be the ones to initiate and sustain activities based on the literary themes that resonate with them. This will help students become active classroom participants and will lead to autonomous learning.

Individualism in Philosophy

Individualism in philosophy perspective tends to political philosophy dealing with liberalism. Liberalism encompasses political, social, and economic doctrines that emphasize individual freedom, limited government intervention, gradual social process, and a free market economy (Rohmann, 1999). As a political philosophy, it is a basic principle that individual liberty is an ultimate value for human beings. The primacy of this basic freedom determines the individual position in every social and political arrangement.

Liberty is an essential attribute for human beings in the state of nature. Liberals believe that, first, humans are naturally in a state of nature/freedom (nothingness). Locke had on eliciting a meme that assumed individuals had the freedom and the capacity for ‘figuring it out on their own so to speak, using their own mind, which he redefined as consciousness. This has been deemed the democratization of mind as it displayed Locke’s confidence in individuals’ ability to acquire knowledge and construct meaningful identities from the intellectual materials made available to their minds through sensation and reflection (Heath, 2019).

Second, as freedom and equality are normatively basic, any limitation of them

should be based on rational justifications. As rationality in modern liberal tradition is an individual attribute that is essential to the concept of justice, political authorities, and laws that limit the liberty of citizens must be justified rationally, such as by social contract. The principle of equality arises as an extension of Kant’s categorical imperative regarding punishment. It is to the imperative itself, however, that he turns for his ultimate justification of juridical punishment as a requirement of natural law (Sarver, 1997).

Classical contract theories have an original aim to legitimate political obligations and to show that acceptance of obligations could be justified by rational individuals. In Hobbesian tradition, it is argued that persons are primarily self-interested, and by their rational assessment, they will find the best strategy to maximize their self-interests that, then, it will lead them to give consent to governmental authority. For Hobbes, the central issue was how to control violence and the internecine strife that attended man in his natural state. In this setting, the social contract rested on the individual’s renouncing those capacities he possessed in the State of Nature (Shaw, 2006).

Meanwhile, Kantian tradition argues that rationality requires respect for persons, which in turn requires that moral principles be such that they can be justified to each person. Thus, individuals are not taken to be motivated by self-interest but rather by a commitment to publicly justify the standards of morality to which each will be held (Cudd & Eftekhari, 2021).

The Renaissance era was also associated with the development of American individualism. It was a cultural, social, or

political rebirth referring to the historical period in Europe around the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries that followed the period known as the Middle Ages. During that time there was a break with the dominance of the Roman Catholic Church and the rebirth of interest in classical Greek and Roman art forms.

The easiest place to draw a quick terminus of originating literary depictions of American Individualism is with the writings of Benjamin Franklin. As a true Renaissance man, Franklin was quintessentially an individualist. The witty aphorisms proffered in his widely successful journal, *Poor Richard's Almanac*, admonish the reader to industry, thrift, self-sufficiency, and personal virtue: "Early to bed and early to rise makes a man healthy, wealthy, and wise"; "Would you live with ease, / Do what you ought, and not what you please"; "God helps them that help themselves". There were several cultural and geographical factors at the time of Franklin's Autobiography that lent the American character to greater receptivity to individualist ideas and breaking away from the communal pressures of the old Puritan influence.

Individualism had also flourished during the Age of Reason, or the Enlightenment. It is the name given to an intellectual and philosophical movement that developed in eighteenth-century Europe and is characterized by its belief that reason, and not superstition or the authority of unexamined tradition, can solve all of the problems of humanity. Enlightenment thinkers rejected the idea that religion can be a source of truth and believed instead that the application of reason to the evidence of the senses is the sole source of the truth. This attitude toward God and religion, characteristic of much Enlightenment thought,

is called deism. In fact, Enlightenment's declaration of itself as "the Age of Reason" is predicated precisely upon the assumption that reason could only come about as a result of the maturity in a white Europe (Eze, 2002).

Thomas Jefferson was a distinguished figure in that period. The spirit of individualism is rooted in the radically humanistic view that each man is free and has an equal right to any other man. Individualism in this period was known as rational individualism for its affirmation of reason in one's life. Thomas Jefferson as quoted by Allan Nevins and Henry S. Commager (1986) wrote:

A certain unalienable rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness, That to secure these rights, Government are instituted among men, deriving their just power from the consent of the governed that whenever any form of government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the people to alter or to abolish such principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness. (p. 85)

Meanwhile, Romanticism has any correlation with American individualism. It referred to a style of art and a way of thinking, and to the historical period during which the style developed in Europe, the mid-eighteenth to the mid-nineteenth centuries. Many romantic ideas were derived from the works of the Swiss-born French philosopher Jean Jacques Rousseau (pp. 1712-1778). He contrasted nature, which he believed to be pure, innocent, and virtuous, with society, which he felt encouraged deceit, hypocrisy, and the reign of self-interest needed to maintain an unequal distribution of wealth. In the state of nature, a person's genius can flower and his or

her childlike innocence reveals the creative self free of hypocrisy. The American writer Henry David Thoreau and Ralph Waldo Emerson can be considered romantic writers and thinkers.

Individualism in American Literature by Reader Response Criticism

The following paragraphs sketch the analysis of American literature both Emerson's "Self-Reliance" and Whitman's "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry" by Reader Response Criticism. "What Emerson means when he said "whose would be a man must be a nonconformist" (p. 1162). Self-reliance itself has a meaning identical to the idea of individualism. At the beginning of the essay, Emerson stated that our soul always hears something, which is original, not conventional, whatever the subject is. Therefore, we have to speak of what we, not what other people think. "to believe your own thought". In that address, Emerson would urge his audience to throw off the shackles of tradition and conformity. Emerson says "to believe that what is true for you in your private heart is true for all men, that is genius" (p. 1160).

Emerson also courageously points out that in every man, there is a unique power, which enables him to face his destiny. Man has to do his own best else this power will lose its strength, and he will have no peace nor can he achieve any success. A man is a being to whom God has given the ability or inherent strength to trust himself. "Trust thyself: every heart vibrates to that iron string" (p. 1161). If a man realizes this and develops self-trust, he will have a new power. On the other hand, if a man is always governed by society in his every action, he becomes weak, turns into a dependent person, as well, and will never be

satisfied with himself. Emerson writes "Society everywhere is in a conspiracy against the manhood of every one of its members" (p. 1162).

A man can keep his genuine thought as long as he is in solitude, but it slips away as soon as he enters society. To become a real man, one must be a nonconformist, "whose would be a man must be a nonconformist." (p. 1162). The most important thing in the world is the integrity of one's own mind. If the man absolves himself and promises to himself that he will be good, he will then have the suffrage of the world.

As for conformists, Emerson says that the sacredness of traditions is useless since what the tradition explains is good and bad. The only sacred law is that of one's own nature. To do well is to go upright and be vital, and to tell and act the truth in all ways. Someone's life is for the life itself, not for the spectacle. It should be genuine and steady rather than glittering and faltering. Someone has to be himself and must go alone without any conformity to anyone else "I actually am, do not need for my own assurance or the assurance of my fellows any secondary testimony" (p. 1163).

Besides that, Emerson believes that conformity makes us false in every way. A person should have greater trust in his nature and God, than in the laws made by men or in the opinion of society. Furthermore, Emerson argues for not imitating what other people do. Insist on yourself, we can do what we like to do with our own gift since we have the whole possession of it, whereas, of other's adopted talents, we only get a partial and temporal possession. He takes as an example traveling abroad to adopt and imitate what we see and

find. It is the result of a lack of our self-reliance. Some educated Americans think that American culture is poor compared with that of ancient countries so they travel abroad to search for culture, and then imitate what they have found without realizing that their own country has a culture no less than such action, according to Emerson, really shows a lack of self-reliance.

When the Romantic movement flourished in America in the nineteenth century, some people became increasingly dissatisfied with the idea of rationalism, which dominated intellectual life in the eighteenth century. From the above discussion, it is seen that Emerson's individualism in his 'self-reliance' was influenced by romantic individualism which proclaimed that feeling and imagination were central. Individualism or self-reliance was connected with the idea that the dignity of man requires that a man has to insist on himself and never imitate others.

Having pointed out Emerson's man idea in his 'self-reliance'. It concludes that he believes in individualism or non-conformity absolutely. He has a strong belief that a man has to trust himself since he has his power, mind, and originality of thought. It is very interesting to compare Emerson's "Self-Reliance" and Whitman's "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry". Both of them are from the Romantic era and their work supports each other. But in Whitman's work, his poem contains a wider meaning about individualism in dealing with society. He stresses the idea of personality. An individual does not stand alone. An individual has to be a member of society. This membership involves both the rights and duties that accompany freedom. Whitman wants to identify the principle of equality and

individuality. He admits his self-identify clearly in section 7:

Closer yet I approach you
What thought you have now, I had as
much of you-I lasid in my stores in
advance
I consider'd long and seriously of you
before you born
Who was to know what should come
home to me
Who knows but I am enjoying this
Who knows, for all the distance, but I am
as good as looking at you now, for all you
can not see me

He also stresses to breakdown resistance to friendship in section 6:

It is upon alone the dark patches fall
The dark threw its patches down upon me
also
...
I too knitted the old knot of contrariety
Blabb'd, blush'd, resented, lied, stole,
grudg'd
Had guile, anger, lust, hot wishes I dared
to speak

After reading this poem, there is the idea of transcendence. Whitman is one of American Romanticism's greatest names. So he was also one of the transcendentalists like Emerson in that era. Most of his writings and poets were still influenced by romanticism such as sentimentality for nature, stress over relentless change, and the domination of all by the individual. One aspect of his poem, "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry" that adheres to the American Romantics' characteristics was the idea of transcendence. Here, Walt Whitman differed from other Transcendentalists in regard to the fact that he did not take himself out of society like Thoreau, nor did he completely submit to a higher Divine Power like Emerson. The important idea of Emerson's "Self-Reliance" was the relationship between the "Soul" and the "Divine Spirit", which Emerson expressed:

The relations of the soul to the divine spirit are so pure that is profane to seek to interpose helps. It must be that when God speaketh, he should communicate not one thing, but all things; ... All things are made scared by relation to it. (p. 1168)

In this statement, Emerson emphasizes that mankind would build up a direct relationship with the Creator. No church is necessary. For Emerson, all things in nature became the center of thought. All things become sacred. All things in nature become important instruments, bridging the relationship between a human being and his Creator. In applying Emerson's suggestion, Whitman relates an incident from their own life in nature, i.e. "What gods can exceed these that clasp me by the hand, and with voices, I love call me promptly and loudly by my highest name as I approach?" (Sec. 7, line 95), which hastens his communication with God.

Furthermore, in "Self-reliance", Emerson contrasts between individual and nature. The individual has traditionally acquired knowledge of God indirectly, based on the experience of other people through religious teachings and religious ceremonies. Yet, the thing of nature, like the rose or grass, trust themselves perfectly to God. He says:

This should be plain enough. Yet see what strong intellects dare not yet her God himself, unless he speak the phraseology of I know not what David, or Jeremiah, or Paul ... If we live truly, we shall see truly. It is as easy for the strong man to be strong, as it is for the weak to be weak. When we have perception, ... When a man lives with God, his voice shall be as sweet as the murmur of the brook and the rustle of the corn.

Compared to Emerson's essay, in Whitman's poem, we find that he took the human factor and social issues into

consideration in his poetry. If we have ever read Whitman's poetry, it can be seen that Whitman's poetry can be separated into three modes of transcendence or dialogue: (1) A dialogue between the self and the external world; (2) A dialogue between the self and another; (3). A dialogue between the self and the spirit. They are illuminated in the following stanzas: "Which fuses me into you now, and pours my meaning into you?" (Stanza 8). It describes the communication between the writer and the reader. The writer and the reader to nature "Flow on, river flow with the flood-tide, and ebb with the ebb-tide!" (stanza 9). In stanza 2, "Others will enter the gates of the ferry and cross from shore to shore". He uses images of people going from shore to shore on the ferry. All of the people who take the ferry to one side will always take it back again. In this case, Whitman tried to establish a relationship with humanity regarding the circle of life and human existence. His writing style permits the inclusiveness of all human beings. Inclusiveness works because it is a poem about 'me, i.e. individualism.

CONCLUSION

Emerson's "Self Reliance" has the sole purpose is the want for people to be non-conformists. He believed that for a man to truly be a man, he was to follow his conscience and do his own thing. In teaching American literature of Emerson and Walt Whitman by LM-PjBL, the students discovered one's true selves and attain their true independence. They got the freedom for actualizing their capacities and knowledge in class. It is like an aristocrat-democratic class. They have personal responsibilities and nonconformity to be able to achieve the level of individualism. Moreover, the students could

improve the condition in which they studied by taking positive action instead of passively accepting the lecture as they came. In this case, they are the students' actuaries who can maximize their potentials in making innovative and creative in the class. They try to have the greatest freedom of action and thought. They choose their activities and make their own decisions, deciding that they do not have to be influenced by other students. It is the students' autonomy. Moreover, the students want to avoid conformity in the class and focus more on distinguishing themselves from others than on their resemblance with them. So, they prefer to see themselves as unique. The students also decide and act more on the basis of whether an action leads to personal gain rather than collective gain. It is by how they market themselves in a positive way.

Having completed teaching American literature, indicated students' positive attitude toward literature and suggested that they would continue to read American Literature in the future.

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