

ABSTRACT

MICHAEL WOCHER. "What would you say you do here?": Emerson's Critique of Modern Labor. (Under the direction of Dr. Anne Baker.)

The work of Ralph Waldo Emerson, most notably in his essays, presents readers with a problem. While his writing retains the ability to inspire readers through its originality and singular, quotable aphorisms, it is also sometimes challenges readers with its complexity and contradictions. In addition, Emerson's use of religious and metaphysical diction makes it sometimes difficult for modern, secular readers to fully embrace his writing. Today many readers – even literary scholars – value Emerson for his influence on other writers or see him as a nineteenth-century self-help writer, rather than a modern source of wisdom. In this essay, I join Emerson scholars like Lawrence Buell and others who endeavor to recuperate Emerson from this interpretation and answer the question: *what good does Emerson do us?*

Acknowledging the challenges of Emerson's writing, this paper examines an Emersonian theme relevant to contemporary life: modern labor. Using the framework and terms of Karl Marx's early, humanistic writing to inform Emerson's own model of human nature and divided labor, I argue that Emerson's critique of modern labor reveals a theme that has critical importance for present-day individuals. While other scholars note the similarity between the ideas of these writers, this essay is distinctive in its application of Marxist terms to explain Emerson's concepts. I begin with Emerson's "The American Scholar" which presents evidence for a strong resemblance between Emerson's ideas and Marx's creative definition of human nature that results in a similar diagnosis regarding the source and symptoms of modern labor. Continuing with Emerson's "Gifts," and "Commodity," examined through the lens of Marx's terminology, Emerson's critique of modern labor, and

its consequences, provides insight into the ways in which modern individuals fail to live their best lives.

Considering Emerson's essays, along with a brief consideration of Emerson's own historical economic influences, I present evidence for the ways in which modern individuals display a desire for the kind of reform Emerson argues for. Ultimately, Emerson's critique provides a way for modern readers to engage with him on a topic that is relevant to their lives.