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### AVATAR and Emerson's Works

James Cameron's *Avatar* (2009) incorporates several key ideas found in Ralph Waldo Emerson's "Self-Reliance" and *Nature*. Specifically, Cameron's film embraces Emerson's understanding of self-reliance, and nature. "Self-Reliance" shows that God is within every living thing, people are destined to fulfill their own uniqueness to be successful, and people are meant to have one body and mind. *Nature* gives the ideas of commodity, beauty, language, and discipline and shows how these elements relate to nature.

Since Emerson struggled with the Unitarian beliefs, he followed his own beliefs. Eventually those ideas became Emerson's own religion of self-reliance. He took some of the same ideas Unitarians followed for example, God's spirit within everything, and the lack of predestination or Holy Trinity. Emerson included his own thoughts about Jesus in the religion. Emerson did not see Jesus as the perfect man; in fact he saw many flaws in Jesus. Emerson thought the perfect man would also appreciate art, and have a bit of humor.

The other aspect about Jesus Unitarians think of is how everyone is supposed to follow his teachings and the kind of person he was. Emerson regarded this as a mock of Jesus. "Imitation is suicide" (Lauter, 1747); when you try to become someone else, you are killing who you could be. "His theory is that everything in nature operates in harmony with divine Providence, and that by conforming oneself to social conventions, man cuts himself off from those conventions, which dictate all life" (Haijing, 1351). Emerson included the idea of everyone

being born unique and having their own special path to follow in life. People have one thing they are good at and it is up to them to find that thing and pursue it. The purpose for life is to fill your own uniqueness. Emerson's self-reliance does not believe people should try to be Jesus; instead they should do as he did and find their own individuality and place in life.

The movie Avatar is about a marine named Jake Sully who travels to a new world called Pandora. His twin brother was supposed to go to Pandora to research on the natives, the Na'vi, but he died in an accident. Since Jake was a twin, he had the same brain waves as his brother did and was able to link himself to his brother's Na'vi body. The researchers biologically created imitation Na'vi people in their lab and using machines, normal people were able to connect their brain waves to this body's brain and control it.

Civilization threatens the Na'vi and Pandora because there is an excess amount on resources under a tree the Na'vi people live in. Jake Sully gains the trust of the Na'vi by learning their ways of life and experiencing the beauty Pandora holds. He learns their secrets, traditions, and most sacred places of worship. Sully shares his knowledge with humans and eventually the humans use it against the Na'vi in war.

Emerson believed God's spirit was within everything. "Harold Bloom noted, in an article for The Times, that by "'self-reliance' Emerson meant the recognition of the God within us, rather than the worship of the Christian godhead'" (Anastas). In the movie, Jake Sully asks a colleague who Ewya is. Norm, the colleague, responds, "Who's Eywa? Only their deity! Their goddess, made up of all living things. Everything they know!" Ewya is believed to be within everything on Pandora. The Na'vi people pray to Ewya through a special bond between them and a tree they physically connect with. Emerson states, "The relations of the soul to the divine spirit are so pure that it is profane to seek to interpose helps. It must be that when God speaketh, he

should communicate not one thing, but all things..." (Lauter, 1754). In relation to Avatar, Emerson says the Na'vi are connected with God, in this case God is Ewya. The movie clearly shows the powerful bond between Ewya and the Na'vi.

The movie gives a scientific explanation to the connection of every living thing on Pandora as well as the spiritual. "Attending to the electrochemistry of Humphry Davy and the electromagnetism of Michael Faraday in the 1830s, Emerson was faced with the possibility that matter is not a physical part of a spiritual whole but rather a vigorous field of force, a pattern of electrical energy" (Wilson). Emerson's idea of electromagnetism is brought up in Avatar by one of the researchers. The scientist states there is a network larger than the brain, running all through Pandora, and Ewya is in control of it. She specifically mentions the connection is related to electromagnetism. When the Na'vi kill other creatures for food, they say a prayer and thank Ewya for what they receive. The Na'vi are connected to every living creature on Pandora through Ewya and they interpret this connection spiritually. According to researchers on Pandora, the connection exists due to an electromagnetic force. Both of Emerson's ideas are exhibited in this connection concept.

Emerson's other idea of self-reliance talks about imitation. "He encourages the readers to free themselves from the constraints of conformity and give themselves back to their nature" (Haijing, 1351). He thought people had their own uniqueness. In order to be successful, these people must find what they are good at and pursue whatever it may be. In Emerson's essay, "Self-Reliance" he gives the idea people are born neutral, there is no original sin. Emerson does not believe in the Christian theology about Jesus, God, and the Holy Spirit. Most Christians think Jesus died for humanity's sins, but according to Emerson Jesus lived to show mankind how they

should be living. Basically, humans exist to find their uniqueness and build great character. Jesus is a great example because he fulfills his duty in life (setting the example for mankind).

Jake Sully fulfills his duty in life by realizing what is important to him and how to save that. Throughout the movie, Sully is torn between the Na'vi life and his human life. He is supposed to help the military take down the Na'vi people and their home; instead he chooses to permanently become a Na'vi being and fights with the Na'vi to protect their home. He finds his own uniqueness and becomes successful by leading the Na'vi to victory.

Another aspect in self-reliance is constitution, the belief you are given one body and one mind. Emerson understood constitution as taking what one is given and finding the quirk that makes someone unique. People cannot change who they are, what they look like, or how they think. This ties into his idea of uniqueness. People cannot change who they are because there is something these people are meant to do. In Avatar Jake Sully has two bodies, human and Na'vi, but controls both with one mind. It seems to contradict Emerson's idea of self-reliance, however Jake Sully becomes one person. In the end, he gives up his human body and becomes one person, a true Na'vi. Ewya, the spirit within everything, passes through Jake and fully changes him.

His other work, *Nature* talks about the relation between different aspects in nature like commodity, beauty, language, and discipline. "He celebrates nature, its depths and atmospheres, its varieties of possible encounters and its horizons of possibility" (Friedman, 29). Each aspect relates to nature and science in some form. There is the idea where nature is divine and God is within nature, but there is a scientific explanation about the workings of nature.

Commodity talks about the necessities in nature and what helps people survive. Water, food, shelter, etc are several things humans need to thrive. "Chapter II, 'Commodity,' deals with 'those advantages which our senses owe to nature,' in which Emerson sees nature not only as

material substance but as process and result as well...” (Francis, 44-45). During Avatar, Jake Sully becomes lost in Pandora for a day/night. He learns to fend for himself and use the resources in nature to survive. He makes fire and a place to sleep in for the night. Sully applies nature in the form of survival.

As Jake Sully first encounters Pandora beyond the human’s camp, he calls it beautiful. When he spends the night out in the wild, he comes across different elements in Pandora’s nature. “As we analyze the three separate aspects, we see that they are delight, virtue, and intellect. Returning then to the observation of the first paragraph, we see how the eye should see these three aspects of beauty simultaneously in cosmic harmony” (Francis, 46). The quote talks about three aspects Emerson believes are always a part of beauty. In Avatar, Jake Sully finds the delight part when he is in awe over Pandora’s nature upon arrival. The second characteristic of beauty is virtue. “Nature works together with the spiritual element in man to enhance the nobility of virtuous and heroic human actions” (“Thoreau”). In Avatar, Jake Sully shows an admiration for the nature of Pandora. In order to preserve the beauty and nature, he fights the humans and heroically wins. The last part involving beauty is intellect. This is interpreted by how the Na’vi people gain knowledge through nature. They can connect with trees in nature and learn things from their ancestors and even pray to them.

The language portion of nature refers to words giving meaning, or a connection to the natural world. “At times, Emerson situates the individual against nature, suggesting that nature coheres and has meaning only in relation to the functioning of human Reason” (Friedman, 40). The high-class Na’vi people speak English, like head warriors, chiefs, or healers. The lower-class people only know their native tongue. Jake Sully firsts uses the high-class Na’vi people to communicate with the others for him, but eventually he learns the language. Sully also learns

how to communicate with every living thing on Pandora by connecting to them through Ewya. This is how he learns to mount his flying banshee, and a horse-like creature.

The last idea in *Nature* is discipline. "All of nature serves to educate man through both the rational, logical 'Understanding' and the intuitive, mystical 'Reason'" ("Thoreau"). In these terms, discipline would be when Jake Sully learns about Ewya and all of the bonds through Ewya in Pandora. He realizes there is a network and connection throughout every living creature in nature.

Every part of "Self-Reliance" and *Nature* by Emerson can be found in James Cameron's *Avatar*. "Self-Reliance" talks about God's spirit within every living creature, success by fulfilling one's own destiny, and constitution, or the idea of one body and mind. *Nature* refers to the four aspects found in nature, commodity, beauty, language, and discipline. Jake Sully, Ewya, and every living creature on Pandora exhibits the ideas found in Emerson's works.

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