

## **R.W. Emerson - The American Scholar**

Born: May 25, 1803

Died: April 27, 1882

Emerson is called as 'the father of American Transcendentalism.'

### **Works**

#### **Poetry collections**

1. Essays: First Series-1841
2. Essays: Second Series-1844
3. Poems -1847
4. Nature, Addresses and Lectures-1849
5. Representative Men-1850
6. English Traits -1856
7. The Conduct of Life-1860
8. May-Day and Other Pieces-1867
9. Society and Solitude-1870
10. Letters and Social Aims-1875

#### **Individual essays**

1. Nature -1836
2. Self-Reliance -Essays: First Series
3. Compensation -FirstSeries
4. The Over-Soul -FirstSeries
5. Circles -First Series
6. The Poet -Essays: SecondSeries
7. Experience -Essays: SecondSeries
8. Politics -Second Series
9. Saadi in the Atlantic Monthly-1864
10. The AmericanScholar
11. New EnglandReformers

#### About the work

Published in : 1841

Theme : an intellectual Declaration of Independence

Influence : Indian Veda, Upanisheds.

Source : **a lecture given by Emerson on August 31, 1837, to the Phi Beta Kappa Society at Cambridge, Harvard.**

**Originally titled, "An Oration Delivered before the Phi Beta Kappa Society, at Cambridge, [Massachusetts,] August 31, 1837"**

He was invited to speak in recognition of his work *Nature*,

Published in 1836

**In The American Scholar he addresses as people.**

Emerson established a new way for America's fledgling society to regard the world.

Emerson described the resources and duties of the new liberated intellectual that he himself had become.

**American culture was still heavily influenced by Europe Even Sixty years after declaring independence.** Emerson, for the first time in the country's history, **provided a visionary philosophical framework for escaping from under its iron lids and building a new, distinctly American cultural identity.**

Emerson uses Transcendentalist and Romantic views to get his points.

He says that **we are all fragments, as the hand is divided into fingers, of a greater creature.**

**An individual may live in one, the busy, divided or degenerate state.** In situation he does not possess himself but identifies with his occupation or a monotonous action; or in right state. He is elevated to Man, at one with all mankind.

According to an ancient legend in the beginning there was only one Man; then he was divided into Men. **The social state is a divided state. We have good organs but never a man. A farmer skins into the farmer instead of Man on the farm.** The attorney degenerates into a statute book, the mechanic dwindles into a machine, the sailor a rope of the ship. In such a division of labour the scholar is the custodian of intellect.

**The modern American scholar must reject old ideas and think for him or herself, to become Man Thinking rather than a mere thinker, like the victim of society, the sluggard intellect of this continent to achieve right state.** Thinking means the unveiling of an ideal form.

**Emerson begins the address with a note of hope;** he feels that there are signs that the sluggard intellect of America is being awakened and distracted from mere exertions of mechanical skill. The American men of letters should not imitate, but innovate.

**The American Scholar has an obligation, as Man Thinking, within this One Man concept, to see the world clearly.**

**The scholar's education consists of three influences: Nature, Books and Action.**

**Nature - the most important influence on the mind**

Man is not a farmer, or a professor, or an engineer, but he is all. Man is priest, and scholar, and statesman, and producer, and soldier. In the divided or social state, these functions are parcelled out to individuals. The fable implies, that the individual, to possess himself, must sometimes return from his own labor to embrace all the other laborers. This fountain of power has been so distributed to multitudes, has been so minutely subdivided and peddled out, that it is spilled into drops, and cannot be Space.

The state of society is one in which the members have suffered amputation from the trunk, and strut about so many walking monsters, – a good finger, a neck, a stomach, an elbow, but never a man.

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Nature is the foremost and predominant influence on the scholar. He learns a great lesson from Sun, Stars, Wind and grass. Nature is like the human spirit that neither a beginning nor an end. Both Nature and the Scholar's spirit are eternal like Natural power.

To the young mind, everything is individual, stands by itself. By and by, it finds how to join two things, and see in them one nature; then three, then three thousand. The astronomer discovers that geometry is the measure of planetary motion. The chemist finds proportions and intelligible method throughout matter; and science is nothing but the finding of analogy, identity, in the most remote parts. This school-boy is suggested, that he and it proceed from one root; one is leaf and one is flower; relation, sympathy, stirring in every vein. Root is the soul of his soul – a thought too bold, – a dream too wild. Its beauty is the beauty of his own mind. Its laws are the laws of his own mind. **The ancient precept, "Know thyself," and the modern precept, "Study nature," become at last one maxim.**

Books - The Past manifest in books

**The next great influence on the scholar is the mind of the past. Books represent the past a great more than the others.**

Books are the expression of the new order of the universe by a productive mind. He receives life and utters truth. A book will be more relevant the period in which it is written. Every age showed own books. The act of creation is of great importance.

The theory of books is noble. The poet was felt to be a divine man: henceforth the chant is divine also. The writer was a just and wise spirit. Books are written on it by thinkers, not by Man Thinking; by men of talent, that is, who start wrong, who set out from accepted dogmas, not from their own sight of principles. Meek young men grow up in libraries, believing it their duty to accept the views, which Cicero, which Locke, which Bacon, have given, forgetful that Cicero, Locke, Emerson and Bacon were only young men in libraries, when they wrote these books. Books make a sort of Third Estate with the world and the soul. Books are the best of things, well used; abused, among the worst. They are for nothing but to inspire. I had better never see a book, than to be warped by its attraction clean out of my own orbit, and made a satellite instead of a system. The one thing in the world, of value, is the active soul. The soul active sees absolute truth; and utters truth, or creates. The book, the college, the school of art, the institution of any kind, stop with some past utterance of genius. This is good, say they, – let us hold by this. They pin me down. They look backward and not forward. But genius looks forward: the eyes of man are set in his forehead, not in his hindhead: man hopes: genius creates. There are creative manners, there are creative actions, and creative words; manners, actions, words, that is, indicative of no custom or authority, but springing spontaneous from the mind's own sense of good and fair. Genius is always sufficiently the enemy of genius by over influence. The literature of every nation bears me witness. The English dramatic poets have Shakspearized now for two hundred years. Man Thinking must not be subdued by his instruments. Books are for the scholar's idle times. When he can read God directly, the hour is too precious to be wasted in other men's transcripts of their readings.

The Arabian proverb says, "A fig tree, looking on a fig tree, becometh fruitful." It is remarkable, the character of the pleasure we derive from the best books. We read the verses of one of the great English poets, of Chaucer, of Marvell, of Dryden, with the most modern joy, – with a pleasure.

As the human body can be nourished on any food, so the human mind can be fed by any knowledge. But reading should also be creative. The reader should also be a creator.

One must be an inventor to read well. As the proverb says, "He that would bring home the wealth of the Indies, must carry out the wealth of the Indies." There is then creative reading as well as creative writing. When the mind is braced by labor and

invention, the page of whatever book we read becomes luminous with manifold allusion. Every sentence is doubly significant, and the sense of our author is as broad as the world. He must learn history and exact science by laborious reading. Colleges teach elements. But they can only highly serve us. Thought and knowledge are natures in which apparatus and pretension avail nothing. Gowns, and pecuniary foundations, though of towns of gold, can never countervail the least sentence or syllable of wit. Our American colleges will recede in their public importance, whilst they grow richer every year.

Action - Action and its relation to experience duties.

**The third influence on the scholar is action.** Only action makes the scholar a full-fledged man as it transforms through into reality. The past events and actions of the scholar provide him with materials for speculation. The scholar should always be on the lookout for action.

The value of action lies in fact that it is a resource. Action and thought are the two great components in the principle of polarity. Only thinking could with living makes one a whole man. Thinking means the unveiling of ideal form. There goes in the world a notion, that the scholar should be a recluse, a valetudinarian, – as unfit for any handiwork or public labor, as a penknife for an axe. The ‘practical men’ sneer at speculative men, as if, because they speculate or see, they could do nothing. I have heard it said that the clergy are always, more universally than any other class, the scholars of their day.

Action is with the scholar subordinate, but it is essential. Without it, he is not yet man. Without it, thought can never ripen into truth. Whilst the world hangs before the eye as a cloud of beauty, we cannot even see its beauty. Inaction is cowardice, but there can be no scholar without the heroic mind. The preamble of thought, the transition through which it passes from the unconscious to the conscious, is action. Only so much do I know, as I have lived. Instantly we know whose words are loaded with life, and whose not. The world, this shadow of the soul, or other me, lies wide around. Its attractions are the keys which unlock my thoughts and make me acquainted with myself. I do not see how any man can afford, for the sake of his nerves and his nap, to spare any action in which he can partake. It is pearls and rubies to his discourse. Drudgery, calamity, exasperation, want, are instructors in eloquence and wisdom. The true scholar grudges every opportunity of action past by, as a loss of power. It is the raw material out of which the intellect moulds her splendid products. The manufacture goes forward at all hours. The actions and events of our childhood and youth, are now matters of calmest observation. They lie like fair pictures in the air. The new deed is like a ripe fruit, to become a thought of the mind.

Cradle and infancy, school and playground, the fear of boys, and dogs, and ferules, the love of little maids and berries, and many another fact that once filled the whole

sky, are gone already; friend and relative, profession and party, town and country, nation and world, must also soar and sing.

He, who has put forth his total strength in fit actions, has the richest return of wisdom. I will not shut myself out of this globe of action, and transplant an oak into a flower-pot, there to hunger and pine; nor trust the revenue of some single faculty, and exhaust one vein of thought, much like those Savoyards, who, getting their livelihood by carving shepherds, shepherdesses, and smoking Dutchmen, for all Europe, went out one day to the mountain to find stock, and discovered that they had whittled up the last of their pine-trees. Authors have written out their vein, and moved by a commendable prudence, sail for Greece or Palestine, follow the trapper into the prairie, or ramble round Algiers, to replenish their merchantable stock. If it were only for a vocabulary, the scholar would be covetous of action. Life is our dictionary.

We learn from any speaker how much he has already lived, through the poverty or the splendor of his speech. This is the way to learn grammar. Colleges and books only copy the language which the field and the work-yard made.

The final value of action, like that of books, and better than books, is a resource. Every atom and every fluid, is known to us under the name of Polarity, – these “fits of easy transmission and reflection,” as Newton called them, are the law of nature because they are the law of spirit.

The mind now thinks; now acts; and each fit reproduces the other. When the artist has exhausted his materials, when the fancy no longer paints, when thoughts are no longer apprehended, and books are weariness, – he has always the resource to live.

Character is higher than intellect. Thinking is the function. Living is the functionary. The stream retreats to its source. A great soul will be strong to live, as well as strong to think.

Time shall teach him, that the scholar loses no hour which the man lives. Herein he unfolds the sacred germ of his instinct, screened from influence. What is lost in seemliness is gained in strength.

I have now spoken of the education of the scholar by nature, by books, and by action. It remains to say somewhat of his duties. They are such as become Man Thinking. They may all be comprised in selftrust. The office of the scholar is to cheer, to raise, and to guide men by showing them facts amidst appearances.

Flamsteed and Herschel, in their glazed observatories, may catalogue the stars with the praise of all men. The highest function of human nature is raises himself from private considerations, and breathes and lives on public and illustrious thoughts. He is the world's eye. He is the world's heart. He is to resist the vulgar prosperity that retrogrades ever to barbarism, by preserving and communicating heroic sentiments, noble biographies, melodious verse, and the conclusions of history.

Whatsoever oracles the human heart has uttered as its commentary on the world of actions, – these he shall receive and impart.

Let him not quit his belief that a popgun is a popgun, though the ancient and honorable of the earth affirm it to be the crack of doom.

He learns that he has mastered any law in his private thoughts, is master to that extent of all men whose language he speaks, and of all into whose language his own can be translated. The poet, in utter solitude remembering his spontaneous thoughts and recording them, is found to have recorded that, which men in crowded cities find true for them also.

Free should the scholar be, – free and brave. Free even to the definition of freedom, “without any hindrance that does not arise out of his own constitution.” Brave; for fear is a thing, which a scholar by his very function puts behind him. Fear always springs from ignorance. It is a shame to him if his tranquillity

As the world was plastic and fluid in the hands of God, so it is ever to so much of his attributes as we bring to it. To ignorance and sin, it is flint.

The great man makes the great thing. Wherever Macdonald sits, there is the head of the table. Linnaeus makes botany the most alluring of studies, and wins it from the farmer and the herb-woman; Davy, chemistry; and Cuvier, fossils.

Man has wronged himself. He has almost lost the light that can lead him back to his prerogatives. Men are become of no account. Men in history, men in the world of today are bugs, are spawn, and are called ‘the mass’ and ‘the herd.’

The poor and the low find some amends to their immense moral capacity, for their acquiescence in a political and social inferiority. They are content to be brushed like flies from the path of a great person.

The private life of one man shall be a more illustrious monarchy, – more formidable to its enemy, more sweet and serene in its influence to its friend, than any kingdom in history.

We have come up with the point of view which the universal mind took through the eyes of one scribe; we have been that man, and have passed on. First, one; then, another; we drain all cisterns, and, waxing greater by all these supplies, we crave a better and more abundant food.

It is one central fire, which, flaming now out of the lips of Etna, lightens the capes of Sicily; and, now out of the throat of Vesuvius, illuminates the towers and vineyards of Naples. It is one light which beams out of a thousand stars. It is one soul which animates all men.

Historically, there is thought to be a difference in the ideas which predominate over successive epochs, and there are data for marking the genius of the Classic, of the Romantic, and now of the Reflective or Philosophical age.

Each individual passes through all three. The boy is a Greek; the youth, romantic; the adult, reflective. Our age is bewailed as the age of Introversion. We cannot enjoy anything for hankering to know whereof the pleasure consists; we are lined with eyes; we see with our feet; the time is infected with Hamlet's unhappiness, – "Sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought." A boy dreads the water before he has learned that he can swim. If there is any period one would desire to be born in, – is it not the age of Revolution

The literature of the poor, the feelings of the child, the philosophy of the street, the meaning of household life, are the topics of the time. It is a great stride. It is a sign, –

The meal in the firkin; the milk in the pan; the ballad in the street; the news of the boat; the glance of the eye; the form and the gait of the body; – show me the ultimate reason of these matters; show me the sublime presence of the highest spiritual cause lurking.

This idea has inspired the genius of Goldsmith, Burns, Cowper, and, in a newer time, of Goethe, Wordsworth, and Carlyle. This idea they have differently followed and with various success. In contrast with their writing, the style of Pope, of Johnson, of Gibbon, looks cold and pedantic. This writing is bloodwarm. Man is surprised to find that things near are not less beautiful and wondrous than things remote. The near explains the far. The drop is a small ocean. A man is related to all nature. This perception of the worth of the vulgar is fruitful in discoveries. Goethe, in this very thing the most modern of the moderns, has shown us, as none ever did, the genius of the ancients. There is one man of genius, who Emanuel Swedenborg has done much for this philosophy of life, his literary value has never yet been rightly estimated.

Pestalozzi said, "I learned that no man in God's wide earth is either willing or able to help any other man." Help must come from the bosom alone. The scholar must be a university of knowledges. If there be one lesson more than another, which should pierce his ear, it is, The world is nothing, the man is all; in yourself is the law of all nature, and you know not yet how a globule of sap ascends; in yourself slumbers the whole of Reason; it is for you to know all, it is for you to dare all.

The spirit of the American freeman is already suspected to be timid, imitative, tame. Public and private avarice make the air we breathe thick and fat. The scholar is decent, indolent, and complaisant.

Young men of the fairest promise begin life upon our shores, inflated by the mountain winds, shined upon by all the stars of God, find the earth below not in unison with these. If the single man plant himself indomitably on his instincts, and

there abide, the huge world will come round to him. Patience, – patience; – with the shades of all the good and great for company; and for solace, the perspective of your own infinite life; and for work, the study and the communication of principles, the making those instincts prevalent, the conversion of the world.

It not the chief disgrace in the world, not to be a unit; – not to be reckoned one character; – not to yield that peculiar fruit which each man was created to bear, but to be reckoned in the gross, in the hundred, or the thousand.

We will walk on our own feet; we will work with our own hands; we will speak our own minds. The study of letters shall be no longer a name for pity, for doubt, and for sensual indulgence. The dread of man and the love of man shall be a wall of defense and a wreath of joy around all. A nation of men will for the first time exist, because each believes himself inspired by the Divine Soul which also inspires all men.

### Self-Test Questions

1. "The American Scholar" was addressed by Emerson in the year  
A) 1837 A)D. B) 1839 A)D. C) 1842 A)D. D) 1845 A)D.
2. Which among the following inspired Emerson to write the poem 'Brahma'?  
A) Kathopanishad B) Bible C) Quran D) Greek Mythology
3. The Scholar in the right state according to Emerson is a  
A) Mulethinker B) Victim of Society  
C) Man thinking D) Parrot of other's thinking
4. Emerson's 'The American Scholer's' refers to  
A) A Seer B) A Recluse C) A Man Thinking D)A preacher
5. What does Emerson say the American scholar should avoid ?  
A) Becoming Man-thinking B) The influence of Nature  
C) Becoming Man of action D) Excessive European literary influence
6. The Scholar's influence in The American Scholar consists of three influences ..... the Past, Books and Action.  
A) Religion B. Nature  
C. Society D. Education.
7. 'Fear always springs from ignorance' who wrote these lines.  
A) Whitman B. Emerson  
C. Hawthorne D. None of the above.
8. Emerson asserts the ..... of the truly creative scholarship.  
A) Sincerity B) Originality C) Creativity D)  
Loyalty
9. What according to Emerson is "higher than intellect " ?

A)Experience      B)Character    C)Education    D)Scholarship

10. Emerson in "The American Scholar" calls "Genius is always sufficiently the enemy of the Genius". Because of \_\_\_\_\_.

A : Subordination    B : blind adherence    C : custom            D : over influence

11. Who is called as 'the father of American Transcendentalism' ?

A : Thoreau    B : Emerson            C : Hawthorne            D : Walt Whitman

12. Emerson's 'The American Scholar' is \_\_\_\_\_

A : A Lecture            B : A Poem            C : A Journal            D : A Novel

13. According to Emerson the first in time and the first in importance of the influences upon the mind of a scholar is that of \_\_\_\_\_

(A) nature            (B) books            (C) friends            (D) teacher

14. Emerson states that both Nature and the Scholar's spirit are eternal like the :

(A) Universal power            (B) Revolving power  
(C) Circular power            (D) Natural power

15. For Emerson THINKING means the

A) the unveiling the ideal form    B)the unveiling ofgod  
C)the unveiling ofself            D)the unveiling oftalents