

The American Scholar

by Ralf Waldo Emerson

Emerson is America's one of the foremost writers. As a transcendentalist and religious teacher, his works gained much popularity among the readers. He is a great thinker and philosopher too. He has won many laurels and awards for literary achievements. His lectures on literature, philosophy and transcendentalism are well received and quite popular even today. The prescribed prose piece, *The American Scholar* is a well known work that has forced a reception on par with his *Self Reliance*. *The American Scholar* is actually a speech delivered at Harvard in 1837. It is appropriately termed as the Intellectual declaration of American Independence. Following German Romantic Philosophy, Emerson formulated his transcendentalism. He is of the opinion that the human spirit and universe were expressions of God. He is one of the pioneers in adopting the eastern philosophy of life.

Emerson begins his lecture by stating that America's training phase of shaping its literary career has come to an end and it should not be further dependent on the literary traditions of Europe. A time has come to establish its own literary base, and be 'self reliant' thereof. He strongly believes that American life and experience should be celebrated in American poetry and literature. Hence, Emerson looks for newer horizons that would shower light on the hopes and character of the American Scholar.

He quotes the fable that "the gods, in the beginning, divided man into men, that he might be more helpful to himself." "The fable implies," Emerson goes on, "that the individual to possess himself, must sometimes return from his own labour to embrace all the other labourers. But unfortunately, this original unit, this fountain of power, has been so distributed in multitudes, has been so minutely subdivided and peddled out, that it is spilled into drops, and cannot be gathered." What we have then, in "the divided or social state," is a condition in which "Man is thus metamorphosed into a thing, into many things," but is nowhere complete. The influences on the American Scholar or Man Thinking, according to Emerson are threefold: Nature, Books and action.

Through his study of nature, the American Scholar can gather in his soul the facts as revealed by Nature. Emerson thinks of nature as a teacher to the potential scholar, "this school-boy under the bending dome of day" corresponds to the uses of nature—commodity, beauty, language, and discipline—as he enumerates and describes them in Nature. Particularly he has in mind the last of these uses, "discipline," by which he means something like "teaching": nature teaches us through its immense richness and variety and invites us to probe and fathom its complexity through our lower intellectual faculty, the understanding. It becomes the seal, and the soul of the scholar is the print that has retained all the impressions contained in the seal i.e. Nature. Promulgating his idea of books, (or what he calls "the mind of the Past"), Emerson observes that the writer of a book having observed the world around him, makes a new arrangement of facts, eventually, the organised facts take the shape of the book. So, a book is a transmutation of life and the world into the form of

several truths. It has its qualities of purity and imperishableness. But, at the same time, no book can be called perfect.

Emerson ends this section with an note, “Of course, there is a portion of reading quite indispensable to a wise man. History and exact science he must learn by laborious reading.” Yet even here, in getting back to basics, Emerson has a dig for Harvard: speaking of colleges, he says, “they can only serve us, when they aim not to drill, but to create”. Because the traditional Harvard pedagogy involved endless numbing recitations sections, his implication is clear.

The third influence on the scholar's development is action. Action is very essential for the scholar though it may have a subordinate place. Thought can never ripen into truth without action. One has to try to understand life and this world thorough action and experience. Action may lead a man to drudgery, exasperation and want. But these valuable experiences lead us to great many thoughts. Therefore, from action to experience and from experience to thought man can be assured of his growth.

Emerson charts out the duties of the American Scholar viz. with self trust; the scholar must cheer, raise and guide men by showing them the reality of facts that lie amidst darker surroundings. The scholar must always be in his private observatory watching for a few facts correcting old and erroneous thoughts. He should also be able to classify and categorize the obscure and nebulous thoughts of the human mind to turn them, in times of need, splendid and useful possessions.

The American Scholar should keep himself away from cheap display and be ready to experience poverty and solitude, self reliant and self restricted. He should be guided by his faculty of reason, for Emerson connects reason with intuition. He must rise himself above private considerations and breathe only illustrious thoughts, as he is the world’s eye and the world’s heart. The world will always make its wrong judgments by affirming the shot from a popgun to be crack of doom. But the scholar should remain far from such misjudgements and controversies. He can add observation to observation only in a state of silence, steadiness and abstraction. Above all, the scholar should be free and brave.

Emerson ends this remarkable speech with an emphasis on the independence of the scholar. “The world is nothing and man is all”. To encounter and dare anything is the major task of the American Scholar. This confidence in the unsearched might of man belongs by all means to the American Scholar. Far from being tame, timid and imitative, he should prove that he is Man thinking and indomitable. Self-trust is of paramount importance to both individuals and nations. They should resolve that they will walk on their own feet and speak their own minds.

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Where I Lived and What I Lived for

by Henry David Thoreau

The naturalist, poet, philosopher and essayist Thoreau is an incomparable asset to the American literary world. He is also a transcendentalist but he takes a different path, not the one that Emerson espoused. For him, it is a way of life that can mould the destiny of the individual. It turns out to be a doctrine of self-culture. Thoreau has been greatly influenced by great writers like Shakespeare, Jefferson, Tom Paine and Emerson. The impact of Indian scriptures like Bhagavad Gita, Manu Smruthi, Rig Veda and the Upanishads could be sensed in his works. Thoreau's famous works are, *The Maine Woods*, *Cape Cod*, *The Journal* and *Walden*.

The prescribed text, *Where I lived and what I lived for* is the second chapter in his *Walden*. His personal experiences at the Walden Pond where he stayed between 4th July 1845 and 6th September 1847 – two years, two months and two days – have taken the shape of *Walden*. It can be called a spiritual biography and an attempt of his self-reform. It is Thoreau's quest for spiritual scales of living.

Thoreau explains that he went to live alone in the woods in a hut which himself built by the side of Walden Pond. He wanted to try living close to nature, apart from society in which "the mass men lead lives of quiet desperation". He wanted to live simply, without "modern improvements". For he wished to be free, to observe in tranquillity nature and his own soul, to reflect, to read, and to write.

As he had been living there, he had made a survey of the vicinity; he felt that the landscape of the entire region belonged to him. Accordingly, he says, "In imagination I have bought all the farms in succession, for all were to be bought, and I knew their price." ...and continues, "I walked over each farmer's premises, tasted his wild apples, discoursed on husbandry..." It was on Fourth of July 1845, he took up his abode, into his cabin on Walden Pond, though it was not fully completed. It was located in a thickly wooded area, between Concord village and Lincoln town. The pond nearby was a great beauty.

As a result of his continuous explorations in that region, he became well-acquainted with the landscape and the farmers living around Walden Pond. His love for conversation made him enjoy these visits in the neighbourhood. He often imagined himself as an owner of different estates and houses. Every segment or part of his stay there adores the natural grandeur, especially the pleasant morning. A description of dawn or morning can delight the reader in almost every paragraph of *Where I lived and what I lived for*. Every morning was an invitation to him to lead a life of simplicity and innocence amidst nature.

He is sure while he says "The morning, which is the most memorable season of the day, is the awakening hour. Then there is least somnolence in us; and for an hour, at least, some part of us awakes which slumbers all the rest of the day and night." Thoreau observes that large majority of people are awake only for physical labour. Hardly one in a million is sufficiently awake for effective intellectual work. The Vedas say, "All intelligences awake

with the morning”. Thoreau observes, “Poetry and art, and the fairest and most memorable of the actions of men date from such an hour. All poets and heroes, like Memnon are the children of Aurora and emit their music at sunrise”

He wanted to live life to the core, deep in its fullest possible way. For him, life is a precious gift. Most people, with their misconceived meanness and their preoccupation with trivialities tend to forget living their life in its full deep sense, to its ‘marrow’. While discussing this, Thoreau gives out the reason for getting into the woods, leading a life of recluse. He affirms, “I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived. I did not wish to live what was not life, living is so dear; nor did I wish to practice resignation, unless it was quite necessary.”

Thoreau is a strong supporter simplicity. He is of the opinion that our concerns and affairs should be as few as possible. A larger proportion in anything could be reduced to its smallest necessity. He reiterates this way of human life saying, “Simplicity, simplicity, simplicity! I say let your affairs be as two or three, and not a hundred or a thousand; instead of a million count half a dozen, and keep your accounts on your thumbnail....In the midst of this chopping sea of civilized life, such are the clouds and storms and quick sands and thousand-and-one items to be allowed for, that a man has live, if he would not founder and go to the bottom and not make his port at all, by dead reckoning; and he must a great calculator indeed who succeeds. Simplify, simplify.”

Thoreau strongly believes that a busy life cannot be enjoyed fruitfully. Our technological and industrial developments and the facilities they offer should not be taken that seriously if at all we want to live a life of simplicity. He is not for any hurry burry. It is as if he is telling us all, why should we keep running? Let us wait...relax...observe what goes around. Thoreau had been seeing people moving up and down fast, faster than the engines and machines. He understands that they move about, but mechanically missing myriads of mirthful and irrevocable moments of life.

Hence, he appeals to all of us, “Let us spend one day as deliberately as Nature,....Let us rise early and fast, or break fast, gently and without perturbation; let company come and let company go, ...Why should we knock under go with the stream?. For such of his thoughts, some critics might have branded him a social rebel sort of. But, that is not true. In fact, it is a gentle reminder and kind warning to the busy bees of mechanical life forgetting the reality – the importance of releasing one’s stress. It should be remembered that Thoreau never advocates deliberate lethargy. Thoreau concludes his essay saying that people’s understanding of the concept of time is limited or shallow. It is actually an entity of eternity.

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