

**EMERSON'S  
THE AMERICAN SCHOLAR**

- ❑ Originally titled "An Oration Delivered before the Phi Beta Kappa Society, at Cambridge, [Massachusetts,] August 31, 1837
- ❑ (Harvard's Phi Beta Kappa Society, an honorary society of male college students with unusually high grade point averages/ At the time, women were barred from higher education, and scholarship was reserved exclusively for men.
- ❑ Emerson published the speech under its original title as a pamphlet later that same year and republished it in 1838.
- ❑ In 1841, he included the essay in his book *Essays*, but changed its title to "The American Scholar" to enlarge his audience to all college students, as well as other individuals interested in American letters.
- ❑ Placed in his *Man Thinking: An Oration* (1841), the essay found its final home in *Nature; Addresses, and Lectures* (1849).

- ❑ The text begins with an introduction (paragraphs 1-7) in which Emerson explains that his intent is to explore the scholar as one function of the whole human being: The scholar is "Man Thinking."
- ❑ The remainder of the essay is organized into four sections, the first three discussing the influence of nature (paragraphs 8 and 9), the influence of the past and books (paragraphs 10-20), and the influence of action (paragraphs 21-30) on the education of the thinking man.
- ❑ In the last section (paragraphs 31-45), Emerson considers the duties of the scholar and then discusses his views of America in his own time.

# Man Thinking

- ❑ Greetings to the college president and members of the Phi Beta Kappa Society of Harvard College.
- ❑ Pointing out the differences between this gathering and the athletic and dramatic contests of ancient Greece, the poetry contests of the Middle Ages, and the scientific academies of nineteenth-century Europe
- ❑ He voices a theme that draws the entire essay together: the notion of an independent American intelligentsia that will no longer depend for authority on its European past.
- ❑ He sounds what one critic contends is "the first clarion of an American literary renaissance," a call for Americans to seek their creative inspirations using America as their source, much like Walt Whitman would do in *Leaves of Grass* eighteen years later.
- ❑ In the second paragraph, Emerson announces his theme as "The American Scholar" not a particular individual but an abstract ideal.

- ❑ The remaining five paragraphs relate an allegory that underlies the discussion to follow.
- ❑ According to an ancient fable, there was once only "One Man," who then was divided into many men so that society could work more efficiently.
- ❑ Ideally, society labors together — each person doing his or her task — so that it can function properly. However, society has now subdivided to so great an extent that it no longer serves the good of its citizens. And the scholar, being a part of society, has degenerated also.
- ❑ Formerly a "Man Thinking," the scholar is now "a mere thinker," a problem that Emerson hopes to correct successfully by re-familiarizing his audience with how the true scholar is educated and what the duties of this scholar are.

# The Influence of Nature

- ❑ In these two paragraphs comprising the first section on how a scholar should be educated, Emerson envisions nature as a teacher that instructs individuals who observe the natural world to see — eventually — how similar their minds and nature are.
- ❑ The first similarity he discusses concerns the notion of circular power — a theme familiar to readers of the Nature essay — found in nature and in the scholar's spirit.
- ❑ Both nature and the scholar's spirit, "whose beginning, whose ending he never can find — so entire, so boundless," are eternal.
- ❑ Order is another similarity — as it is in Nature — between the scholar and nature.
- ❑ At first, the mind views a chaotic and infinite reality of individual facts, but then it begins to classify these facts into categories, to make comparisons and distinctions.

- ❑ A person discovers nature's laws and can understand them because they are similar to the operations of the intellect.
- ❑ Eventually, we realize that nature and the soul — both proceeding from what Emerson terms "one root" — are parallel structures that mirror each other (Emerson's term for "parallel" may be misleading; he says that nature is the "opposite" of the soul).
- ❑ So, a greater knowledge of nature results in a greater understanding of the self, and vice versa.
- ❑ The maxims "Know thyself" and "Study nature" are equivalent: They are two ways of saying the same thing.

# The Influence of the Past

- ❑ Emerson devotes much of his discussion to the second influence on the mind, past learning — or, as he expresses it, the influence of books.
- ❑ He emphasizes that books contain the learning of the past; however, he also says that these books pose a great danger.
- ❑ While it is true that books transform mere facts ("short-lived actions") into vital truths ("immortal thoughts"), every book is inevitably a partial truth, biased by society's standards when it was written.
- ❑ Each age must create its own books and find its own truths for itself.



- ❑ Following this call for each age's creating truth, Emerson dwells on other dangers in books.
- ❑ They are dangerous, he says, because they tempt the scholar away from original thought. Excessive respect for the brilliance of past thinkers can discourage us from exploring new ideas and seeking individualized truths.
- ❑ The worst example of slavish deference to past thinkers is the bookworm, a pedant who focuses all thought on trivial matters of scholarship and ignores large, universal ideas.
- ❑ This type of person becomes passive and uncreative, and is the antithesis of Emerson's ideal of the creative imagination: "Man hopes. Genius creates. To create, — to create, — is the proof of a divine presence."
- ❑ The non-creative bookworm is more spiritually distanced from God — and, therefore, from nature — than is the thinker of original thoughts.

- ❑ But the genius, too, can suffer from the undue influence of books.
- ❑ Emerson's example of this kind of sufferer are the English dramatic poets, who, he says, have been "Shakespearized" for two hundred years: Rather than producing new, original texts and thoughts, they mimic Shakespeare's writings.
- ❑ Citing an Arabic proverb that says that one fig tree fertilizes another — just like one author can inspire another — Emerson suggests that true scholars should resort to books only when their own creative genius dries up or is blocked.

- ❑ The last three paragraphs of this section refer to the pleasures and benefits of reading, provided it is done correctly.
- ❑ There is a unique pleasure in reading. Because ancient authors thought and felt as people do today, books defeat time, a phenomenon that Emerson argues is evidence of the transcendental oneness of human minds.
- ❑ Qualifying his previous insistence on individual creation, he says that he never underestimates the written word: Great thinkers are nourished by any knowledge, even that in books, although it takes a remarkably independent mind to read critically at all times.
- ❑ This kind of reading mines the essential vein of truth in an author while discarding the trivial or biased.

- ❑ Emerson concedes that there are certain kinds of reading that are essential to an educated person: History, science, and similar subjects, which must be acquired by laborious reading and study. Foremost, schools must foster creativity rather than rely on rote memorization of texts: ". . . [schools] can only highly serve us, when they aim not to drill, but to create."

## The Influence of Action

- ❑ In this third section, Emerson comments on the scholar's need for action, for physical labor.
- ❑ He rejects the notion that the scholar should not engage in practical action. Action, while secondary to thought, is still necessary: "Action is with the scholar subordinate, but it is essential."
- ❑ Furthermore, not to act — declining to put principle into practice — is cowardly. The transcendental concept of the world as an expression of ourselves makes action the natural duty of a thinking person.
- ❑ Emerson observes the difference between recent actions and past actions. Over time, he says, a person's past deeds are transformed into thought, but recent acts are too entangled with present feelings to undergo this transformation.

- ❑ He compares "the recent act" to an insect larva, which eventually metamorphoses into a butterfly — symbolic of action becoming thought.
- ❑ Finally, he praises labor as valuable in and of itself, for such action is the material creatively used by the scholar.
- ❑ An active person has a richer existence than a scholar who merely undergoes a second-hand existence through the words and thoughts of others.
- ❑ The ideal life has "undulation" — a rhythm that balances, or alternates, thought and action, labor and contemplation: "A great soul will be strong to live, as well as strong to think."
- ❑ This cycle creates a person's character that is far superior to the fame or the honor too easily expected by a mere display of higher learning.

## The Scholar's Duties

- ❑ After Emerson has discussed how nature, books, and action educate the scholar, he now addresses the scholar's obligations to society.
- ❑ First, he considers these obligations in general, abstract terms; then he relates them to the particular situation of the American scholar.
- ❑ The scholar's first and most important duty is to develop unflinching self-trust and a mind that will be a repository of wisdom for other people.
- ❑ This is a difficult task, Emerson says, because the scholar must endure poverty, hardship, tedium, solitude, and other privations while following the path of knowledge.
- ❑ Self-sacrifice is often called for, as demonstrated in Emerson's examples of two astronomers who spent many hours in tedious and solitary observation of space in order to make discoveries that benefited mankind.

- ❑ Many readers will wonder just how satisfying the reward really is when Emerson acknowledges that the scholar "is to find consolation in exercising the highest functions of human nature."
- ❑ The true scholar is dedicated to preserving the wisdom of the past and is obligated to communicating the noblest thoughts and feelings to the public.
- ❑ This last duty means that the scholar — "who raises himself from private considerations, and breathes and lives on public illustrious thoughts" — must always remain independent in thinking and judgment, regardless of popular opinion, fad, notoriety, or expediency.
- ❑ Because the scholar discovers universal ideas, those held by the universal human mind, he can communicate with people of all classes and ages: "He is the world's eye. He is the world's heart."
- ❑ Although he appears to lead a reclusive and benign life, the scholar must be brave because he deals in ideas, a dangerous currency.



- ❑ Self-trust is the source of courage and can be traced to the transcendental conviction that the true thinker sees all thought as one; universal truth is present in all people, although not all people are aware of it.
- ❑ Instead of thinking individually, we live vicariously through our heroes; we seek self-worth through others when we should search for it in ourselves. The noblest ambition is to improve human nature by fulfilling our individual natures.

- ❑ Emerson concludes the essay by observing that different ages in Western civilization, which he terms the Classic, the Romantic, and the Reflective (or the Philosophical) periods, have been characterized by different dominant ideas, and he acknowledges that he has neglected speaking about the importance of differences between ages while speaking perhaps too fervently about the transcendental unity of all human thought.
- ❑ Emerson now proposes an evolutionary development of civilization, comparable to the development of a person from childhood to adulthood.
- ❑ The present age — the first half of the 1800s — is an age of criticism, especially self-criticism.
- ❑ Although some people find such criticism to be an inferior philosophy, Emerson believes that it is valid and important.

- ❑ Initiating a series of questions, he asks whether discontent with the quality of current thought and literature is such a bad thing; he answers that it is not.
- ❑ Dissatisfaction, he says, marks a transitional period of growth and evolution into new knowledge:
- ❑ "If there is any period one would desire to be born in, is it not the age of Revolution; when the old and the new stand side by side, and admit of being compared; . . . This [present] time, like all times, is a very good one, if we but know what to do with it."
- ❑ Emerson applauds the views of English and German romantic poets like Wordsworth and Goethe, who find inspiration and nobility in the lives and work of common people.

- ❑ Instead of regarding only royal and aristocratic subjects as appropriate for great and philosophical literature, the Romantic writers reveal the poetry and sublimity in the lives of lower-class and working people. Their writing is full of life and vitality, and it exemplifies the transcendental doctrine of the unity of all people.
- ❑ Ironically, we should remember that at the beginning of the essay, Emerson advocated Americans' throwing off the European mantle that cloaks their own culture.
- ❑ Here, he distinguishes between a European tradition that celebrates the lives of common people, and one that celebrates only the monarchical rule of nations:
- ❑ "We have listened too long to the courtly muses of Europe."

- ❑ Making special reference to the Swedish philosopher and mystic Emanuel Swedenborg, Emerson contends that although Swedenborg has not received his due recognition, he revealed the essential connection between the human mind and the natural world, the fundamental oneness of humans and nature.
- ❑ Emerson finds much inspiration for his own thinking and writing in the doctrines of Swedenborg.
- ❑ American concept, which he develops at much greater length in the essay "Self-Reliance," is America's major contribution to the world of ideas.
- ❑ The scholar must be independent, courageous, and original; in thinking and acting, the scholar must demonstrate that America is not the timid society it is assumed to be.
- ❑ We must refuse to be mere purveyors of the past's wisdom: ". . . this confidence in the unsearched might of man, belongs by all motives, by all prophecy, by all preparation, to the American Scholar," who will create a native, truly American culture