

The American Scholar



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF RALPH WALDO EMERSON

Ralph Waldo Emerson was born May 25, 1803, the second surviving child of Ruth Haskins and Reverend William Emerson. Originally, Emerson wanted to follow in his Unitarian father's footsteps and become a minister, attending Harvard Divinity School in the 1820s and beginning his ministerial career in 1826. However, Emerson soon found himself at odds with some of the church's practices and left the church. Emerson married his first wife, Ellen Tucker, in 1829. After Ellen died just two years later, Emerson took a tour of Europe where he met notable poets and philosophers such as Mill, Wordsworth, and Coleridge. Eventually, Emerson returned to America, married his second wife (Lydia Jackson), and settled in Concord, Massachusetts. Emerson became one of the leading figures of Concord's famous Transcendental Club, which also included Margaret Fuller, Bronson Alcott, and Henry David Thoreau. Emerson became a widely-renowned philosophical thinker, essayist, and poet. Over the course of his life, he delivered over 1,500 lectures all over the United States. Emerson developed pneumonia and died in his Concord home on April 27, 1882.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The 1830s, when "The American Scholar" was written and originally presented at Harvard, was a tumultuous time in America. The debate over slavery was becoming more and more heated, occasionally breaking out in violence (most notably Nat Turner's rebellion). The Indian Removal Act had stirred debates all over the country, more and more Americans were moving and settling west, and the early women's suffrage movement was starting to gain ground. These things may have helped fuel Emerson's urgent call for American scholars to step up and produce work that would help to unify a harshly divided nation. Transcendentalism, which Emerson helped pioneer, was partially born out of America's Second Great Awakening—a religious movement that swept through America in the early 19th century. Emerson and other Transcendentalists believed that formal religious worship was limiting and antiquated. Instead, they advocated for the idea that individuals had a divine spark within them and should be free to discover and follow their own truths, especially through the exploration and observation of nature.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

"The American Scholar" is just one of the dozens of works Emerson wrote and presented in his lifetime. Shortly before writing "The American Scholar," Emerson published his essay

"Nature," which introduced readers to his philosophy of transcendentalism and man's connection with the natural world. His later essay, "Self-Reliance," provides more details about some of the ideas put forth in "American Scholar," including his central belief that individuals must learn to think for themselves instead of echoing the ideas and beliefs of others. His well-educated and well-traveled background provided him with a wide variety of inspirations, including philosophers like Plato as well as poets like William Wordsworth. Emerson's essays and transcendentalist philosophy inspired Henry David Thoreau's experiment with living in relative seclusion at Walden Pond, an experience Thoreau went on to write about and publish in his most popular work, [Walden](#). "The American Scholar" and Emerson's call for a distinct American literary voice also inspired Walt Whitman, whose collection of poems *Leaves of Grass* became one of the most popular American poetry collections of the 19th century. Emerson went on to influence myriad writers during and after the 19th century, including philosopher and psychologist William James, philosopher and writer Friedrich Nietzsche, and poet Robert Frost.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** The American Scholar
- **When Written:** 1837
- **When Published:** Delivered on August 31, 1837; published later in 1837
- **Literary Period:** American Transcendentalism
- **Genre:** Speech, philosophical essay
- **Point of View:** First person, third person

EXTRA CREDIT

A Friend in Need. Thoreau and Emerson were close friends as members of the elite Transcendental Club. Emerson even gave Thoreau the money and land he needed to build a cabin at Walden Pond, where he wrote his most famous work, [Walden](#).

In Character. Emerson was friends with Bronson Alcott, Louisa May Alcott's father. Louisa also became close to Emerson, who she considered a mentor, and he was the inspiration behind the character Geoffrey Moor in her early novel, *Moods*.



PLOT SUMMARY

Emerson begins his speech by saying that while his audience's gathering is a "friendly sign of the survival of the love of letters," it is time for America's "sluggard intellect" to assert itself and

produce works that scholars all over the world can appreciate. The American Scholar, according to Emerson, will produce poetry and other works that will lead in an artistic revolution and a new age for American society. That same society, however, has become so divided and subdivided that the artistic revolution Emerson hopes for will have to be a unifying one, designed to remind individual men and women that they are fundamentally united by certain ideas. The scholar's role, then, is to reveal these unifying truths.

There are three main influences over a scholar's development and the first "in time and [...] in importance" is that of nature. The scholar, as a young boy or girl, begins studying nature because they are surrounded by it, and their initial instinct is to classify what they see. According to Emerson, this classification will eventually lead to finding connections between objects by a "unifying instinct" inherent in the scholar. Ultimately, the scholar will find that all they see, including themselves, "proceed from one root." In studying nature, the young scholar will find that they begin to know and understand themselves and, by extension, mankind in general.

The second influence over a scholar is "the mind of the Past" in the form of books. Emerson states that books were written because past scholars wanted to share their interpretation of the world and the society they moved in. However, because society is always changing, new books need to be written for every generation, and that is the job of the scholar. It is also the scholar's job to learn how to think for themselves and create new books instead of simply writing on the great books they studied in college libraries. If they allow themselves to be over-influenced by books, then the scholar risks becoming a "satellite" instead of a "system," and so they can never achieve true greatness. On the other hand, when read correctly, books can help unite readers by revealing to them some of the truths that bind all mankind together.

The third influence is action. Emerson criticizes the popular idea that scholars can't actually do anything "practical" because they're too busy thinking and writing. Instead, Emerson asserts that "living" and taking an active role in society's work actually helps scholars produce better academic work. He believed that action could lead to thought, much like the "ebb and flow of the sea." Not only do the experiences of working and action lead to new thoughts, but it also introduces the scholar to new vocabularies. Getting to understand the language of "the field and the work-yard" as well as that of the upper classes adds color to the scholar's language and helps them convey their ideas in a language that all can relate to and understand.

As an important piece of a larger whole, the scholar has a certain set of duties in society. In order to live up to Emerson's intellectual ideal of **Man Thinking**, the scholar must pursue both the unity of their society and the cultivation of their individuality. Unfortunately, Emerson acknowledges that these duties frequently come at the expense of being perceived as

fashionable and they must "relinquish display and immediate fame." Ironically, the scholar often finds themselves somewhat alienated from the same society they are observing and trying to benefit. However, the scholar is content with the knowledge that they are "exercising the highest functions of human nature." Emerson warns his audience that, as scholars, they need to avoid getting caught up in the fashion and controversies of the moment to find the underlying truths common to all human beings if they want to achieve their full potential.

The American Scholar has the opportunity to not just understand, but *define* the world they live in. As Emerson states, "Not he is great who can alter matter, but he who can alter my state of mind." The impending revolution that Emerson predicted in the beginning of the speech will be "wrought by the gradual domestication of the idea of Culture," which the scholar is uniquely qualified to do by writing new books. Emerson finds hope for a positive revolution in the sudden popularity of books that focus on neglected classes: "literature of the poor, the feelings of the child, the philosophy of the street, the meaning of household life." These, Emerson believe, give unique insight into the true state of society, including that of the past and the future due to the universality of some of the truths these books portray.

Finally, Emerson sees the "new importance given to the single person" as another sign of the readiness of American society for artistic revolution. Scholars take upon themselves the duty of uniting their society. In the case of the American Scholar, they will help unite the country by creating work that is distinctly American and that reflects the reality and truth of being part of the United States in the 19th century, rather than continuing to rely on European traditions that had no relevance in a country as young as the U.S. Not only would that scholar earn the nation's respect, but they would pave the way for future American scholars that had long been discouraged by the negative attitudes towards "speculative" individuals. Ultimately, Emerson predicts that the works produced by American scholars will result in a truly united nation by showing each individual that they are connected by a "Divine Soul which also inspires all men."



CHARACTERS

Ralph Waldo Emerson – The author and narrator of "The American Scholar," Emerson is specifically addressing American college students to inspire them to lead the country into an artistic revolution that will earn them the entire world's respect. Emerson believes that nature mirrors humanity, so by studying the complexities and unities in nature, one can learn all about society, as well. As a leading transcendentalist thinker, Emerson embraces unity among individuals and believes that it can be achieved through the production of new philosophies,

books, and art. On the other hand, Emerson also encourages individuality, especially in the scholar. He believes that for a scholar to produce truly great work, they have to be more self-reliant and leave behind the antiquated philosophies that they study in books. Although the country was still young when Emerson delivered the essay as a speech in 1837, Emerson believed that the rest of the world was had decided that no American was intellectual enough to create respectable works of art, and so he turns to the new generation of American college graduates to prove the rest of the world wrong. To that end, Emerson encourages his audience to break away from European ways of thinking and styles of art to create something new and distinctly American.

The American Scholar – The American Scholar is Emerson’s intended audience for the essay. The American Scholar is a collective term for post-Revolutionary War college students who are capable, according to Emerson, of finally breaking away from European influences and pioneering new forms of art and philosophies that are uniquely American. He originally delivered the essay as a speech to the Phi Beta Kappa Society of Harvard College, an intellectual audience that embodies this ideal of the American Scholar. Emerson’s hope for the American Scholar is that they will bring unity to America, which had become increasingly divided along lines of class, as well as long-standing lines of sex, race, and religion. Emerson warns the American Scholar that they will have to be very self-reliant and get used to being seen as something of an outcast, but that ultimately their work can potentially revolutionize and revitalize American society and the world at large.



THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.



SOCIAL UNITY

In his essay “The American Scholar,” Emerson urges his audience to remember that they are important parts of a larger whole and that, as scholars, they have a specific function in society: to facilitate unity. He asserts that all people, no matter their education or social standing, play equally important roles in creating and maintaining a successful society. As it is, however, Emerson says that society has become so divided that individuals have lost pride in the work they do and do not recognize that they are a part of something bigger than themselves. Emerson therefore argues that it is among the chief duties of the American scholar to find and share the connections and universal truths that will help unite mankind and inspire future generations.

Although individuals are, in Emerson’s opinion, inextricably bound to one another by metaphysical ties, he also contends that “the state of society is one in which the members have suffered amputation from the trunk.” Instead of feeling united and valued, individuals within the larger society feel isolated from one another. Emerson believes that social and economic barriers prevent individual men and women from understanding the “true dignity” of their role in society. This means they begin to work solely for their own benefit, and not for society as a whole. To help bridge this divide, Emerson encourages his audience to engage in all types of work, saying, “There is virtue yet in the hoe and the spade for learned as well as unlearned men.” That “virtue” is that they will develop a better understanding of their fellow men by working alongside them. Emerson believes that men should not be classified and separated from one another based on their individual roles: “Man is not a farmer, or a professor, or an engineer, but he is all.” This highlights his conviction that there is an undercurrent of unity that binds all of humankind—no matter how outwardly different—together.

Emerson adheres to “the doctrine that man is one,” and posits that by developing an understanding of a range of individuals and of the self, the scholar can discover universal truths that are applicable and beneficial to all people. Emerson argues that “you must take the whole society to find the whole man.” This means that to find universal truths that will benefit all, scholars must not limit their social experiences and observations to one group, but seek “frank intercourse with many men and women.” While interactions with a wide variety of other people is essential, it is also important that scholars explore their own thoughts and feelings because, as Emerson argues, the scholar will learn “that in going down to the secrets of his own mind he has descended into the secrets of all minds.” As the “delegated intellect” of mankind, the scholar must devote their life to discovering and sharing these “secrets” of themselves and others in the hope that it will help reestablish a sense of unity among individuals.

Beyond introspection and having forming relationships with other people, Emerson also advocates that scholars should play an active role in unifying American culture. “The office of the scholar,” says Emerson, “is to cheer, to raise, and to guide men by showing them facts amidst appearances.” That is to say that the scholar must look beyond the surface divisions of society and formulate ideas and observations that will help other people do the same. Emerson writes, “The world is his who can see through its pretension,” meaning that a good scholar is one who can look beyond the societal mores that were designed to divide people and recognize the common elements that unify all human beings. He praises the literature that focuses on “the near, the low, the common” over that which only deals with “the great, the remote, the romantic” because it portrays a segment of society that had largely been neglected, thus helping

members of the upper classes realize they have something in common with those of lower status. Emerson believes that scholars in the United States will break free of antiquated European literary and artistic traditions to create something distinctly American that will help unify the nation and create a new sense of national pride.

One of Emerson's most passionate beliefs was in the interconnectedness of mankind, and he mourned the fact that society had devolved and divided itself to such a point that individuals no longer recognized the importance of the role they played in society. America, as far as Emerson was concerned, had arrived at a crisis and it was time for it to pull away from the social customs and traditions that dominated Europe and create something new that would reestablish a sense of oneness and belonging for Americans from every walk of life. In Emerson's view, it was the unique role of the scholar, society's "delegated intellect," to accomplish this goal and cement America's place in the world as its own distinct nation worthy of respect and admiration.



NATURE AND CONNECTION

In "The American Scholar," Emerson emphasizes the particular role that nature has in a scholar's development. Emerson believed that man was one with nature, and that by studying nature man could learn more about himself and all of mankind. America—as a new and vast country that was still being explored—offered ample opportunities for scholars to study and experience nature in a way that Europeans from smaller and more heavily-developed countries could not. By exploring and observing the "savage nature" that still existed in America, the American scholar could help pioneer a new intellectual and literary tradition that would be distinctly American and help define the present age.

Emerson considers nature "the first in time and the first in importance of the influences" in the early development of a scholar. The scholar, according to Emerson, is naturally drawn to nature as an object of study. He writes that the "young mind" initially sees everything as "individual," but eventually begins finding connections between seemingly different objects. The clear connections among living things in the natural landscape serve as the intellectual basis for observing these connections elsewhere. The scholar's "unifying instinct" eventually turns inward and they find that "nature is the opposite of the soul, answering to it part for part." In studying nature, they begin to understand more of themselves and their place in the world. Furthermore, Emerson also believed that "man, rightly viewed, comprehendeth the particular natures of all men." This meant that if one man could truly begin to understand himself, especially through the study of nature, then he could also begin to understand those around him.

Emerson believed that "man is related to all nature." Therefore, understanding nature was the first step to understanding

mankind as a whole and not just the individual self. The "unifying instinct" that drives the scholar to find commonalities on the surface also drives them to look below the surface of the earth, where they will discover "roots running under ground whereby contrary and remote things cohere and flower out from one stem." Because nature mirrors society, it follows that there are also unseen "roots" that bind individuals to one another despite differences in class, religion, race, sex, and culture. The scholar will recognize that he or she has the ability to use this knowledge to inspire others. However, they also likely know that they are not the first to find these connections, and that rather than regurgitating the wisdom of past scholars, it is important for them to create something original and specific to the present time and place.

When Emerson wrote this essay in the 1830s, America was still a new nation and largely unexplored and undeveloped. His hope was that a new generation of American scholars would turn to America's landscape for inspiration to form new ideas and create a new style of art that would reflect the landscape's untamed wildness. Emerson believed that new art and ideas did not come from libraries or colleges, but "out of unhand-sold savage nature." Furthermore, it was not a life spent in formal education that gave birth to the most influential ideas and literature, but that "out of terrible Druids and Berserkers come at last Alfred and Shakespeare." Emerson also believed that the extent of a scholar's understanding of nature reflected the extent of their understanding of their own mind. This would imply that because so much of America's nature was still unexplored and therefore not understood, so, too, were the unique minds of the American people. America's newly won independence and anxiety to create a respectable national identity, its vast expanses of unexplored land, and its relative isolation from European countries all contribute to Emerson's assertion that the time was ripe for an artistic revolution, "if we but know what to do with it."

To Emerson, nature is inextricably connected to humanity and is therefore the greatest influence upon the development of the scholar. By studying nature, Emerson believes, the scholar can develop all the tools they needed to study humanity and create literature and art that can uplift and inspire people from all walks of life. Furthermore, America's unique landscape, if viewed and studied properly, could inspire a new generation of artists whose words and ideas would define what it was to be an American in the early 19th century.



CREATION AND NATIONAL IDENTITY

"The American Scholar" was written and presented in the 1830s, when America was in a state of transition. Having won independence and devoted its energies to the creation of a functioning system of government and legal system for 50 years, Americans were now at leisure to focus on forming an American identity. To

Emerson, this meant forging an original literary and artistic identity separate from the traditional European ones that continued to dominate America's cultural landscape. Emerson maintained that this identity would not be formed solely in the library or the classroom, but through lived experiences and observations made in nature and at all levels of society. Ultimately, Emerson's message is that American scholars should strive to achieve greatness and earn the world's respect by putting aside the works of the past and creating something altogether new and exciting—something that could inspire a sense of oneness and national pride within American society.

Throughout this essay, Emerson makes it clear that America is on the cusp of change, but still needs a push in the right direction before it can begin to fully crystallize an identity through artistic work. "Our day of dependence," Emerson claims, "our long apprenticeship to the learning of other lands, draws to a close." This statement is particularly powerful because of how recently America had won its independence—by claiming that America is still "dependent," Emerson seeks to motivate his audience to recognize and throw off what chains still connect their identity to that of England and other European countries. However, Emerson also acknowledges that times of revolution—even just of artistic revolution—can be difficult for society to work through, especially as "the old and the new stand side by side and admit of being compared." This is why Emerson also tells his audience of scholars that they must be self-reliant and fearless as they move forward with their creative work. To further his point, Emerson also tells his audience that Americans are "already suspected to be timid, imitative, tame." Once again, Emerson plays on his audience's sense of national pride to shock them into action.

Emerson's opinion was that the state of education in America was part of what prevented scholars from producing the kind of groundbreaking work that they studied in universities. To produce really great work, he argued, scholars must supplement their formal education with lived experience and action. Emerson writes, "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, and Bacon were only young men in libraries when they wrote these books." This emphasizes his belief that formal education could be too limiting if it's not supplemented first-hand experiences and observations. Rather than passively absorbing the ideas of others, Emerson urges young scholars to formulate new ideas of their own. Furthermore, Emerson believed that the creation of a new literary tradition meant the creation of a new language, which primarily happened in "the field and the work-yard" and not in the classroom. Therefore, a truly great scholar takes advantage of every opportunity for action in all levels of society, but particularly the working class. After all, Emerson recognizes the greatest hope for successful artistic

revolution in the burgeoning trend of making "the near, the low, the common" the focus of observation and art. In elevating the lower classes by portraying them in respectable and accessible art, the scholar helps support the radical ideas of human equality that America was founded upon.

America had already won political independence, but Emerson believed that it would never truly be its own country if it wasn't creating its own art. If done correctly, the creation of a distinctively American artistic identity would not only earn the world's respect, but could unify and elevate the nation in its own estimation. Emerson acknowledged that the country had already made a name for itself for its "exertions of mechanical skill," but to really put it on par with more developed countries it must rouse its "sluggard intellect" and focus its energies on artistic development. However, Emerson also admits that there are many who look down on the "study of letters," preferring studies that bring about more tangible results. To combat this, Emerson argues that, "Not he is great who can alter matter, but he who can alter my state of mind." Those who can do this, as Emerson knows, are those who are ultimately recognized as having a lasting and profound impact on the world. If American scholars can direct their energies towards creating instead of imitating, Emerson declares that, "A nation of men will for the first time exist, because each believes himself inspired by the Divine Soul which also inspires all men." This means that not only would America establish itself as a force to be reckoned with artistically, but it would inspire and pave the way for all Americans to live up to their full potential.

"The American Scholar" was Emerson's call to action: it was meant to inspire a new generation of American poets, novelists, and thinkers to take the national reins and lead the country into a new phase of artistic development. In doing so, the American scholar would also help form a unique cultural identity for the United States and thereby reestablish a sense of unity and equality in American society, which was becoming increasingly divided along social lines.



SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



MAN THINKING

Emerson uses his concept of Man Thinking to symbolize the ideal scholar who embodies both unity and individuality, or what Emerson refers to as a scholar in "the right state." Man Thinking, according to Emerson, is what any scholar can—and should—strive to become by studying nature, reading books, and taking an active role in all kinds of work, both intellectual and physical. Man Thinking recognizes the interconnectedness of all things, and that

anything they do should be for the betterment of society as a whole. Therefore, they work altruistically and “must relinquish display and immediate fame” and instead contend with “poverty and solitude.” In return, Man Thinking will find happiness and fulfillment in “exercising the highest functions of human nature.” At the same time, Man Thinking would embrace individuality and originality by thinking for themselves rather than limiting their opinions to those they read about in books. Man Thinking, then, is a symbolic representation of proper intellectual development to which the American Scholar can aspire. For the American Scholar to usher in the type of artistic revolution Emerson is advocating for, they must embody the ideal of Man Thinking.

world that is waiting to see what kind of literature Americans would produce. America had already proven itself formidable for “exertions of mechanical skill,” but Emerson expresses his eagerness for the “intellect” of the country to catch up and prove itself as an intellectual powerhouse, as well. As Emerson originally delivered this speech to an audience of college students, the reader can infer that he believes it is the American Scholars’ role to do just this. It is only through America’s scholars honing their abilities to their full potential that the United States will be able to forge a unique identity that sets the country apart from Europe’s long-standing artistic and intellectual traditions.



QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Dover Thrift Editions edition of *Nature and Other Essays* published in 2009.

The American Scholar Quotes

Perhaps the time is already come when it ought to be, and will be, something else; when the sluggish intellect of this continent will look from under its iron lids and fill the postponed expectation of the world with something better than the exertions of mechanical skill.

Related Characters: Ralph Waldo Emerson (speaker), The American Scholar

Related Themes:

Page Number: 149

Explanation and Analysis

Emerson begins the speech by pointing out that the audience has not congregated to share their artistic or physical achievements, but as a “friendly sign” that there are still people who enjoy studying literature and ideas. However, he clearly foresees a day when they *will* be meeting to share their literary feats with one another, suggesting that he has faith in the capabilities of the young Harvard students to whom he is speaking. This speech was given in 1837, so it had been a little over 60 years since the signing of the Declaration of Independence. Despite this break from European influence, the United States was still in its infancy, and had not yet established a concrete identity as a country.

Despite America’s relative youth as an independent nation, Emerson notes that it’s not only himself but the entire

The old fable covers a doctrine ever new and sublime; that there is One Man—present to all particular men only partially, or through one faculty; and that you must take the whole society to find the whole man. 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.

Related Characters: Ralph Waldo Emerson (speaker), The American Scholar

Related Themes:

Page Number: 150

Explanation and Analysis



Emerson introduces the fundamentals of his philosophy that all of mankind is intrinsically connected to one another despite surface differences. As a former Unitarian minister and prominent figure in the transcendentalist school of thought, Emerson believes that there is a deep spiritual thread (“One Man”) that pervades all of humanity, equalizing and connecting individual men and women from all social classes, races, and religions to one another. It is only by taking “the whole society” that one can truly appreciate how all the individuals within it contribute to making it run.

Furthermore, he instills in them the notion that individual people are not limited to their designated function in society (farmer, lawyer, engineer, etc.), but because of that common spiritual thread they have the ability to fulfill all those other functions to some degree. By highlighting this perceived truth, he encourages the American Scholar to broaden their horizons outside of what society expects of them, and value different forms of work other than academic pursuits. By learning to appreciate the value of

everyone, and of all types of work, the American Scholar should thus use their unique position in society to challenge the class divides and social stratification that exists in U.S. society.

●● He shall see that nature is the opposite of the soul, answering to it part for part. One is seal and one is print. Its beauty is the beauty of his own mind. Its laws are the laws of his own mind. Nature then becomes to him the measure of his attainments. So much of nature as he is ignorant of so much of his own mind does he not yet possess.

Related Characters: Ralph Waldo Emerson (speaker), The American Scholar

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 151-152

Explanation and Analysis

Emerson argues that there are three primary influences upon a scholar's development, the first and foremost of which is nature. A scholar is naturally drawn to the study of nature because, especially in a largely undeveloped country like America, they are surrounded by it, and it provides ample opportunities to explore and classify different things. According to Emerson, it doesn't take long for a scholar to stop focusing on differences in favor of exploring how seemingly different things are actually closely connected beneath the surface of the earth. In doing so, the scholar ultimately discovers that nature mirrors society and the human spirit. Like the natural landscape, human beings (no matter how different their lives may be) are connected by deep roots that exist beneath the surface. In this way, the study of nature inevitably leads to the study of society and the human mind.

The scholar also uses their knowledge of nature to measure how much they know about their own minds and the minds of those around them. Nature, as viewed by Emerson, is like the physical manifestation of the "laws of his own mind." By exploring and observing nature, both above and below ground, the scholar will be able to see in tangible form the interconnectedness of all things; how things, like ideas, can exist in an endless cycle of creation, destruction, and renewal; and how a multitude of seemingly unconnected things are all actually working together towards a common end. Without discovering and recognizing this, according to Emerson, the scholar will remain "ignorant" of "his own mind."

●● 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, and Bacon were only young men in libraries when they wrote these books.

Related Characters: Ralph Waldo Emerson (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 152-153

Explanation and Analysis

Of the main influences over the development of a scholar, Emerson considers books to be second only to nature. Of all the forms art can take, literature has the unique ability to transmit very specific thoughts, experiences, and beliefs to a wide audience, both within the author's lifetime and for generations after. Cicero, Locke, and Bacon were great thinkers and their literary works would have been found in any college library—this is particularly true of Locke, whose belief in the individual's inherent right to life, liberty, and property helped inspire America's Declaration of Independence. But Emerson believes that they, as complex individuals, have been overlooked. As he states earlier, one of the dangers of books is that proper veneration for the authors who write them so often "corrupts into worship of his statue," meaning readers lose sight of the human being behind the book.

Emerson partially blames this tendency to forget that philosophers and writers were once ordinary (and fallible) human beings on formal education, which frequently presents them as the sole authority on certain subjects, leaving little room for scholars to develop their own ideas. Because of this, many students forget that those philosophers and writers were not *always* great thinkers, but had also once been taught to follow the philosophies of those who came before them. "Meek young men," in Emerson's estimation, are those who have not developed the bravery or the originality to do the real work of developing, writing, and publishing their own thoughts and observations.

●● 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.

Related Characters: Ralph Waldo Emerson (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 153


Explanation and Analysis

Emerson continues to warn his audience of the danger of relying too heavily on books, this time by highlighting the importance of individuality and independence. Despite man's inherent interconnectedness and Emerson's own hope that Americans would soon become even more unified, Emerson also believed in the importance of individuality as a vital component of the healthy development of any person's sense of worth in an increasingly stratified society. Emerson deeply believed that a society in which the individual did not know they were a "system"—meaning they were capable of independent thought and action, and deserved to be respected by others—was incapable of becoming the kind of truly unified nation that America's founding members had envisioned.

In Emerson's opinion, books, no matter how meaningful or valuable, have a dangerous ability to convince readers to stop thinking for themselves and adopt the philosophies and beliefs of the author. Instead of being a self-contained "system" that actively thinks for itself, the reader might instead become a "satellite" that merely moves around in someone else's orbit, thus robbing themselves of their own individuality. This is closely tied to Emerson's earlier description about "meek young men" feeling obligated to accept the ideas of past philosophers instead of actively developing their own.

☛ 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.

Related Characters: Ralph Waldo Emerson (speaker), The American Scholar

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 155

Explanation and Analysis

The third influence Emerson states is vital to a scholar's development is action, without which the scholar will be unable to fulfill their designated role in society. "Action," in Emerson's sense of the word, really means life experience, particularly outside of the classroom or the library. Emerson

goes on to recommend manual labor, engineering, trade, and simply talking to a number of different men and women as ways of branching out and experiencing new things. The scholar, according to Emerson, will frequently find themselves isolated from the world's goings on as they work on thinking, writing, and reading. This, however, will hinder them from reaching their potential, and action is the only remedy.

The scholar needs actual life experience to help them to discover some kind of "truth" for them to explore and share with others. Without action, the Earth simply "hangs before the eye as a cloud of beauty," but they are unable to conceive of how truly beautiful it is without experiencing its frustrations, joys, heartaches, excitements, and the rewarding feeling of having truly accomplished something tangible. Emerson sees "inaction" as "cowardice" because it means that the scholar is limiting themselves to their personal comfort zone rather than pushing themselves to experience new things, which means they will never really meet the standards of a true scholar. Furthermore, "inaction" adds fuel to the prevailing belief that scholars are not actually useful to society because they do not do anything practical.

☛ Life is our dictionary. Years are well spent in country labors; in town; in the insight into trades and manufactures; in frank intercourse with man men and women; in science; in art; to the one end of mastering in all their facts a language by which to illustrate and embody our perceptions.

Related Characters: Ralph Waldo Emerson (speaker), The American Scholar

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 156

Explanation and Analysis

Emerson lists several reasons action is important to a scholar's development, not the least of which include his opinion that action will help broaden a scholar's vocabulary. Emerson urges his audience not to limit the scope of their action and experiences to parlors and libraries, but to take part in everything from "country labors" (like farming), to science, to simply going out into society to meet new people. This is because language varies depending on region, social class, and even what kind of work is being done. As Emerson points out later, the language one finds in college classrooms and libraries originated in the lower

classes, so the scholar who learns the language of the lower classes in their time and place will also be learning the language of future scholars.

Emerson specifically notes that the scholar should engage in “frank” conversations, meaning ones where propriety and etiquette do not limit what opinions and beliefs are expressed and everyone feels safe being honest with one another. The scholar studies human nature, but the rules that dictate society and determines what men and women can or cannot talk to each other about are also meant to obscure human nature and replace it with propriety. The importance of “frank” conversation is that it allows raw human nature to filter through, providing the scholar with the insight they need to be successful in their work.

●● He then learns that in going down into the secrets of his own mind he has descended into the secrets of all minds. He learns that he who 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.

Related Characters: Ralph Waldo Emerson (speaker), The American Scholar

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 158-159

Explanation and Analysis



While Emerson insists on the importance of action and interacting with people from all levels of society, he also advises that scholars make time for introspection. This, however, is not enough. The scholar must be honest with themselves and as objective as possible in exploring their own mind, or else they will find it nearly impossible to truly understand the minds of others. Earlier in the speech, Emerson talks about how difficult it is to calmly observe and think about experiences while they are happening, and argues that it is only with the passage of time that one can be calm and objective about exploring their meaning. This would indicate that the scholar must go through periods of activity—working alongside others and talking with new people—followed by periods of introspection and exploration of “the secrets of his own mind.”

If the scholar does successfully discover a universal truth or law of the human mind, according to Emerson, then they will naturally gain a great deal of influence over their audience.

Their readers, recognizing the importance of the scholar’s work and finding in it something they can personally relate to, might even be inspired to build upon the scholar’s work or simply find comfort in knowing that someone has helped them understand their own mind a little bit better. This echoes Emerson’s other belief that scholars should write for the next generation, so they learn about and build upon the true ideas of the previous.

●● It is a sign—is it not?—of new vigor when the extremities are made active, when currents of warm life run into the hands and the feet. I ask not for the great, the remote, the romantic: what is doing is Italy or Arabia; what is Greek art, or Provençal minstrelsy; I embrace the common, I explore and sit at the feet of the familiar, the low. Give me insight into today, and you may have the antique and future worlds.

Related Characters: Ralph Waldo Emerson (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 162


Explanation and Analysis

Emerson has expressed his hope that an artistic revolution is America is just around the corner, now he begins describing what he sees as signs that the revolution has actually already begun. He is particularly excited by the emerging literary movement that portrayed the realities of day-to-day life instead of creating fantastic adventures or improbable stories of mystery and intrigue that take place in different countries. Emerson advocates for the creation of stories that take place in America that explore the realities of American life, and he especially encourages literature that focuses on the lower classes rather than the “remote” upper classes.

The foundation of all of Emerson’s beliefs was the concept of unity between all mankind. However, the upper classes did not behave as naturally as the lower because so much of their lives and how they could express themselves was dictated by social mores and strict rules of etiquette. He embraces “the common” or “the familiar, the low” because he believes they live more authentically and do not conceal their true natures to the same degree as the upper classes. Furthermore, because of his concept of unity, Emerson believes that getting true insight into people today will reveal truths that enable one to understand the people of both the past and the future, and the true nature of members of both the upper and lower classes.

●● Mr. President and Gentlemen, this confidence in the unsearched might of man belongs, by all motives, by all prophecy, by all preparation, to the American Scholar. We have listened too long to the courtly muses of Europe.

Related Characters: Ralph Waldo Emerson (speaker), The American Scholar

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 163


Explanation and Analysis

Emerson has finished explaining that an artistic revolution is imminent—that it has, in fact, already begun. In the final paragraphs of his speech, he bluntly tells his audience full of American college students that it is actually their destiny to create this movement. Revolutions are society’s way of breaking free from the old and ushering in something new, and Emerson sees it as the special province of America—a new country that had won independence through political and military revolution just 61 years before—to create the artistic revolution that will influence writers and thinkers the world over.

Perhaps most importantly, Emerson wants America to create its own identity. The “courtly muses of Europe” inspired nearly everything about America, from its writing to the architecture of its buildings to the education of its children. It is Emerson’s belief that this indicates that some substantial part of America’s identity is still under British rule, meaning that the country is not truly independent. By calling European influences “courtly,” Emerson acknowledges how tempting it is to let the older, more developed cultures in Great Britain and France guide America in the creation of its culture. However, for America to truly become great and win the respect of other countries, it needs to create a distinctive identity that is not merely an imitation of someone else’s. In Emerson’s opinion, literary achievement will complete America’s cultural and political severance from England and draw the young country together.

●● 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.

Related Characters: Ralph Waldo Emerson (speaker), The American Scholar

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 164

Explanation and Analysis

Emerson ends his speech by asserting that America will truly become independent *because* of the artistic revolution the American scholar will usher in. Earlier, Emerson argued that, thus far, the “study of letters” had been looked down upon as inferior to that of the sciences that could lead to new inventions or at least tangible results. Through the accomplishments of the American scholar, which Emerson predicts will be praised and studied all over the world, Americans will realize that men and women who study words and ideas are capable of making real and meaningful changes in the world that benefit all members of society. Because of this, future generations of American scholars will not face the same social obstacles as those in Emerson’s audience.

Emerson believes that once America has established itself as a producer of meaningful and respectable literature, Americans will finally be able to “walk on our own feet” rather than imitating the actions and ideas of European writers. In a sense, America independence has not been fully won, but the American scholar will win it through their work. Not only will independence be achieved, but true unity will be created because Americans will, for the first time, have literature that speaks to their unique experiences as a post-colonial nation. This will, in turn, awaken their sense of connection to one another as Americans and, therefore, their fundamental equality.



SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

THE AMERICAN SCHOLAR

Emerson begins by noting that the beginning of another school year is an occasion of “hope, and, perhaps, not enough of labor.” Emerson goes on to explain that, unlike in European countries, this lecture is not to celebrate scientific or physical achievements, but is simply “a friendly sign of the survival of the love of letters” in an otherwise indifferent society.

Emerson delivers this speech at Harvard in 1837. He immediately calls attention to the lack of real academic or physical achievements to celebrate, which is meant to grab the attention of the audience. However, Emerson turns it around by praising them for their continued “love of letters,” which is the first indication that Emerson believes that one day they will come together to celebrate some kind of shared literary achievement.



Emerson expresses his opinion that the “sluggard intellect” of America is on the cusp of waking up and producing “something better than the exertions of mechanical skill.” He argues that America’s “day of dependence” on the intellectual accomplishments of other countries is nearly over. Emerson believes that “poetry will revive and lead in a new age in America,” thanks to the American Scholar.

Emerson continues to challenge the pride of his audience by referring to America’s “sluggard intellect.” This incites his audience to prove him wrong, possibly by producing the kind of literature he believes will help kickstart a “new age in America.” He also refers to America’s continued “dependence” as a way to motivate his audience to listen to what he has to say so they will know how to really set the country apart as its own independent nation.



Emerson summarizes an “old fable” about how the gods “divided Man into men, that he might be more helpful to himself.” He states that this means there is a common, uniting spirit present in all individual men and women. According to Emerson, this also means that “you must take the whole society to find the whole man.”

One of the most important points Emerson wants to convey is that is that individual men and women are all united by metaphysical ties, each contributing something that benefits the whole of society. Therefore, the scholar that achieves something truly meaningful through literature is not just earning respect for themselves, but is actually winning respect for, and benefitting, the entire country.



Emerson further explains that Man has the capacity to fulfill all the necessary roles in society, but because Man was divided, all those jobs were “parceled out to individuals.” According to Emerson, individuals should be able to “embrace all the other laborers,” but society has become so divided that the individual parts no longer come together as they ought.

Emerson explains how society has become so divided: individuals stick to those who have similar functions in society. This means they isolate themselves from other groups (or social classes) and they lose sight of all that unites them to one another. Instead, he advocates that individuals should be open to a variety of skills and occupations to make for a more well-rounded, harmonious society in which everyone’s role is appreciated.



Because there is so much division, individual people have difficulty understanding the importance of their work in relation to other people from different social classes. Emerson argues that individuals essentially become the things they work with rather than develop into complete human beings.

The scholar, according to Emerson, is society’s “delegated intellect.” If the American Scholar has achieved the “right state” then they become **Man Thinking**. If they have not achieved that state, then they become “a mere thinker, or still worse, the parrot of other men’s thinking.”

Emerson tells his audience that he is going to explore the “main influences” on the development of the scholar, the first of which is nature. To the scholar, Emerson argues, nothing is as interesting as nature—including human nature—and in observing the natural world around them, the scholar soon realizes that its circular continuity “resembles his own spirit.”

To make sense of nature, the scholar begins classifying what they see. Emerson asserts that the “young mind” thinks “every thing is individual, stands by itself.” However, Emerson states that classifying nature inevitably leads to finding connections between individual and then larger groups of things. He believes that the act of classifying indicates that one has perceived natural things are not “chaotic,” but actually adhere to “a law which is also the law of the human mind,” which can also be applied to all sciences.

According to Emerson, when a person does not understand the true value of their function in society, they are never able to live up to their full potential. Because the individual parts of society are not achieving their full potential, the whole society is not functioning as well as it could if it was more united.



“Man Thinking” is the ideal that Emerson argues all scholars should strive to embody. As Man Thinking, they actively seek truth, develop their own ideas, and share those with other people in their society. Furthermore, they understand that what they do is for the good of all because of the deep connection between all individuals in society.



Not only are all individual men and women in society connected to one another, but they also have a deep connection with nature. In America, at the time Emerson was delivering this speech, much of the natural landscape of the country had not been explored and was therefore widely misunderstood. Likewise, Emerson believes the true spirit of all Americans is largely unexplored and misunderstood.



A “young mind” might refer to a child’s mind, but it also refers to an inexperienced mind, one which is just beginning to think for itself. It focuses on the obvious: differences. As it matures, however, Emerson believes that observing the interconnectedness of nature is how people begin to explore beneath the surface and discover the connections between seemingly unconnected things. Furthermore, all of these things perform individual functions that benefits the whole, hearkening back to Emerson’s assertion that all members of a society play an important role in its functioning.



While the scholar is still a “schoolboy,” Emerson states that they will realize that they come from the same “root” as the natural world around them, and that “nature is the opposite of the soul, answering to it part for part.” This observation will lead to the development of that “ever expanding knowledge” that belongs to “a becoming creator.” Eventually, for the scholar, the phrases “know thyself” and “study nature” will become synonymous.

Emerson believes that the mind of a scholar will quickly make the connection between the individual and nature, and that studying nature will help them understand themselves starting from when they are a child. This is when they begin to develop not just as a “scholar,” but as a “creator” who will be capable of making art and literature that reflects the discoveries about themselves and all of humanity they found through observing nature. In the context of Emerson’s call for a unique body of American art and literature, this means that studying nature and recognizing the world’s underlying connections is the key to scholars becoming competent writers and thinkers.



The second major influence over the development of the scholar is the “mind of the Past,” specifically in the form of books. Books, according to Emerson, allowed past scholars to share their perceptions of the world around them in the form of “immortal thoughts” that, depending on “the depth of mind from which it issued,” can influence future scholars for many generations to come.

Emerson believes that only great minds can create great and meaningful books. Their ideas remain relevant through the generations because they speak to truths that people from all levels of society can understand and relate to, highlighting Emerson’s emphasis on the importance of recognizing the common threads that connect all people. Books help introduce scholars to ideas and thoughts that continue to guide the society they live in, which can be invaluable to the scholar when they begin working on their own books that will contribute to America’s literary canon.



Although books are an importance influence, Emerson also states that “none is quite perfect” because nobody can completely prevent “the conventional, the local, the perishable” from finding its way into them. Because of this, Emerson argues that each generation “must write its own books; or rather, each generation for the next succeeding.”

Each individual is a product of their time and are liable to entertain some of the same biases and quirks unique to the time and place in which they exist. Because of this, Emerson acknowledges that not all books will be relevant in all ages or places even though he believes everyone is universally connected. This shows that, although Emerson believes in the unity of all people, he also places high value on the individual. Each generation must create something new to continue to pass down its unique ideas and beliefs.



However, Emerson also warns that “hence arises a grave mischief” as people place more importance on the book than on the person who produced that book, “as love of the hero corrupts into worship of his statue.” Instead of creating new and original works, Emerson argues that more books will be written about the original book “by thinkers, not by **Man Thinking**.” Furthermore, young scholars will spend all of their time in libraries studying the original books and forget that they are capable of writing equally important ones.

Books, as Emerson knows, are liable to over-influence their readers. This can be particularly dangerous for developing scholars who have been taught to accept the writings and beliefs of a select few. Instead of creating books for the next generation, those who rely too heavily on past minds stifle their individuality, thus limiting themselves to writing about ideas that are not as applicable in the current age as when they were originally written.



Emerson also warns that, “Books are the best of things, well used; abused, among the worst.” He writes that he would rather never read a book than “be warped by its attraction... and made a satellite instead of a system.” This, he says, is because the most important thing is an “active soul,” and focusing too much on books means one is looking to the past instead of creating something new for the future.

In order to read books without abusing them, Emerson prescribes “periods of solitude, inquest, and self-recovery” while reading. Furthermore, he says that books should be reserved for the scholar’s “idle times” when they are finding it difficult to work. In those cases, Emerson believes that books can help inspire new and original ideas that the scholar can then use to write their own literature.

Emerson describes the pleasure the reader gets from reading a book and finding that the author has written down something that the which reader strongly relates or has thought of before. Emerson writes that this feeling further proves that there is “some preestablished harmony” between all people, no matter when or where they live.

Emerson also admits that books are important because they can feed the human mind. He notes that there have been “great and heroic men” who only had books to learn from, but, even then, a good reader must be capable of forming original ideas of their own and will only embrace “the authentic utterances of the oracles” instead of superfluous details and ideas.

A scholar must learn how to read books “well” if they want to protect themselves against becoming a “satellite” and simply following an idea just because it is the product of a great mind from the past. They do this by cultivating an “active soul” and teaching themselves to think critically and independently so they can create something new for the society they live in. By doing so, the American scholar can help define the country’s unique identity through their work, rather than merely echoing the long-standing European tradition.



It is important for individual scholars to turn inwards and try to discover their own unique thoughts on different topics, and “periods of solitude” allow them to do this away from outside influences that might make it more difficult for the scholar to understand their own mind. This, again, shows that Emerson values individual minds apart from the connections among them. Additionally, though, Emerson encourages engaging with the ideas of other writers since reading other people’s work can help a scholar who is struggling with their work find a more coherent way to share their thoughts.



Emerson emphasizes that the unity between individual men and women—and human beings and nature—transcends time, as shown by humanity’s continued connection with literature from the past. Emerson believes there are thoughts, feelings, and beliefs that remain fundamentally unchanged, and discovering these in books that were published long ago increases a person’s awareness of the connection they have with everyone else around them, and, perhaps more importantly, their potential to influence future generations.



Emerson has already warned the scholar against losing their individual perspectives by relying too heavily on books, but now he emphasizes the additional importance of not getting hung up on superficial details or authorial biases. Instead, the scholar must use their judgment and feelings to identify what parts of a book are “authentic” and reflect truths about the human experience. These “authentic” passages, according to Emerson, should inspire the scholar and help them further develop their own original ideas.



Furthermore, there are some subjects that one can only learn about through books, namely history and “exact science.” Colleges can also use books to “teach elements” that will encourage scholars to create their works. That, according to Emerson, is the college’s primary duty.

The final major influence over the scholar that Emerson discusses is action. He mourns the fact that scholars—and particularly clergy—are looked down upon by “practical men” who think “speculative men” aren’t good for anything. Emerson, however, believes that action is an essential component of a scholar’s development because it helps them learn how to create something that can benefit many different people.

Emerson believes that one can judge how much life experience a scholar has by how they talk. By taking an active part in society, the scholar will be introduced to experiences and emotions that will help them develop “eloquence and wisdom.” According to Emerson, “experience is converted into thought” in a process that is continuously taking place within a scholar.

As important as action is, Emerson also states that it will be difficult to truly think about it until it is in the past. This is because the scholar will be too immersed in the present to think about it with the same calm with which they think about the experiences of their childhood. Over time, however, the scholar will be able to look back on their experiences and be inspired by them to create something new.

Although Emerson warned of the dangers of formal education—namely, that many students are not taught to think critically and independently—he reaffirms to his audience that this type of schooling is also necessary for factual information. A responsible college is one that teaches students “elements” (facts) that will give them the language and inspiration to make something new instead of simply telling students how to think.



“Practical men” are those who work for tangible results, but “speculative men” deal in ideas, which cannot be touched and which are not always immediately useful. However, Emerson advises his audience full of “speculative men” to work side by side with “practical men” in order to observe and understand them better. Emerson believes that there are deep connections between all human beings, but the key to discovering these connections is by going out of what might be the scholar’s comfort zone to engage in “practical” work (like farming or engineering). This not only provides the scholar with new experiences to think about, but it helps them better understand the needs and perspectives of their fellow American men and women.



Emerson believes that a scholar who has spent all their life in a library studying old books and writing about them will not speak with the same kind of emotional intelligence that one who has experienced real life will. This ties in with Emerson’s earlier observation about “meek young men” who limit their studies to a college library. By solely reading the works of others, a scholar risks losing their individuality to the ideas of past thinkers. However, when a scholar goes out into the world and takes an active role in society, they expose themselves to new and unique experiences that provide them with ample opportunity to make observations that lead to new thoughts that might inspire their next work.



Emerson believes that for a scholar to be successful, they have to understand that they cannot be very objective about an experience while it is happening. Objectivity, to the scholar, means honest exploration of their experiences and the thoughts they inspire without allowing emotion to obscure the truth too heavily. Time allows a person to look back with far more objectivity than they have in the moment, allowing them the benefit of hindsight and perhaps a better understanding of themselves and what these experiences meant to them.



Not only must the scholar take action, according to Emerson, but they must put as much of themselves into everything they do that they can. They must also seek a variety of different actions to “replenish their merchantable stock” so they do not run out of material to create new ideas with.

Additionally, varied experiences introduce the scholar to new vocabularies. Emerson states that “frank intercourse” with a variety of different people from different backgrounds will introduce the scholar to different forms of language that they can use to describe their particular experiences. Furthermore, Emerson argues that both books and colleges “only copy the language which the field and the work-yard made.”

The “final value” of action, Emerson writes, is that it can cause thought. Emerson compares this to cycles in nature, such as the “ebb and flow of the sea; in day and night; in heat and cold.” When the scholar finds that they are having difficulty reading books or formulating thoughts to write about, then they should turn to “the elemental force of living them.”

Emerson goes on to state that it is “unhandselled savage nature” that creates new ideas and cultures, not formal education. Primitive work, according to Emerson is beneficial to all citizens, but he also maintains that individuals should not give up their true opinions and thoughts just for the sake of new experiences.

“Merchantable stock” to the scholar are feelings, experiences, and the thoughts these things inspire. They are unique to the scholar, but will still contain truths that speak to readers from every part of society. However, to find something meaningful in an experience, the scholar has to make themselves open to it and not allow any of their preconceived notions or biases limit their openness to the new perspectives and ideas they will inevitably encounter.



One of the aims of the scholar is to reach as many people as possible, so it is important for them to be able to write in a language that is easy for individuals from every social class and region to understand. As Emerson aptly points out, language has a way of working its way up from the bottom, and the slang of the “field and the work-yard” often becomes so popular in all different social classes and environments that it eventually finds its way into the respectable academic books found in college libraries. Therefore, going out and learning the language used in contemporary “field[s] and [...] work-yard[s]” actually makes the scholar more relatable to both their immediate audience and to future college students who will be encountering this language in their classrooms.



The scholar’s work is to observe and write about the human experience, but, as Emerson argued earlier, they begin this work by studying nature, and the laws of nature reflect the laws of the human mind and spirit. The scholar’s mind, according to Emerson, naturally gravitates towards observations of human behavior, which they can only really make by taking an active role in society. However, the scholar becomes isolated from activity while they read and write, and Emerson urges them to return to action when this isolation hinders their work. In this, the life of a successful scholar is similar to the “ebb and flow of the sea.” The scholar should, in Emerson’s opinion, recede into themselves while they work, and then routinely returning to society and communal action for more “merchantable stock.” By focusing on their intellectual development as an individual, then, the scholar can more effectively connect with



The less an individual is restrained by social etiquette, according to Emerson, the more natural their thoughts and behaviors will be. Through primitive work like farming, the scholar can reconnect with their own “unhandselled savage nature” because it involves working directly with nature in a way that doesn’t require social etiquette. Thus, it allows the scholar—and those the scholar may be working alongside—to behave and think more naturally themselves.



Emerson moves on to the duties of scholars, explaining that they “are such as become **Man Thinking**.” The primary duty of the scholar, he states, is to “cheer, to raise, and to guide” those around them. However, he also writes that the scholar will not get the same kind of immediate fame as astronomers enjoy because studying human behavior and ideas takes more time. Additionally, the scholar might even be looked down upon by others in society for not being up to date about the “popular arts.” As a result, while they create their original works, the scholar may have to accept “poverty and solitude.”

Instead of enjoying all the benefits of society, Emerson says that the scholar will find comfort in the knowledge that they are “exercising the highest functions of human nature.” Their job is ultimately altruistic, providing society with works of literature full of “heroic sentiments” and any “new verdict of Reason” that they have discovered.

Because their job is so important, Emerson advises the scholar to “feel all confidence” in themselves as one of the few who really understand the world. He urges the scholar not to let themselves be distracted by temporary things, no matter how important they may seem to society (“some fetish of a government, some ephemeral trade”), but focus on fundamental truths. The scholar will feel satisfied at the end of the day if they have “seen something truly.”

Emerson also prescribes introspection for the scholar, arguing that getting to know oneself is important in getting to understand mankind. He illustrates his point by saying that there are poets who record their “spontaneous thoughts” and then later find that they have actually “recorded that which men in crowded cities find true for them, also.” Emerson also explains that many will feel insecure about their thoughts (especially their private, personal ones), but will ultimately discover that they are “the complement of his hearers.”

Once again, Emerson emphasizes that much of society prefers the “practical man” whose career yields immediate results that one can use for themselves over the “speculative man” who deals with intangible ideas and emotions. Emerson further warns that, because of the scholar’s possible unpopularity in much of society, they may never achieve fame or even recognition in their lifetime.



According to Emerson’s concept of unity in society, not only does the work of one individual help the entire society, but the abilities of one individual reflect the abilities of all. Therefore, the scholar’s accomplishments and abilities reflect all that humanity is capable of. Furthermore, the products of the scholar’s intellectual labors will pave the way for future scholars because, as Emerson stated before, books are written for the benefit of the next generation.



This passage echoes Emerson’s past warnings about the isolation due to a lack of interest in the “popular arts” that scholars typically experience. This isolation, however, helps the scholar maintain independence of thought, which in turn enables them to see “something truly,” such as the underlying truths about humanity the “popular arts” or current social movements actually reflect. This point, then, shows that Emerson does not believe that individual thought and unity among people are mutually exclusive.



Thoughts that are “spontaneous” reflect the true nature of an individual, and so, according to Emerson’s belief in the interconnectedness of humanity, these thoughts are also the ones that other men and women will find easiest to relate to and understand because they speak to the inner natures of all men and women. This reaffirms Emerson’s earlier point that many of the best ideas and cultures emerge from “savage nature” rather than from limiting oneself to studying someone else’s thoughts and works.



Self-trust is fundamental to the scholar, who should always be “free and brave.” Emerson asserts that scholars must put their fear “behind [them]” because fear is born of ignorance, and scholars are not ignorant. When the scholar does encounter something they fear, they “turn and face it,” exploring it in detail until they understand it and can move forward. In a similar way, the scholar looks beyond the world’s “pretension” and learns to separate human truths from lies.

Emerson criticizes the notion that “the world was finished a long time ago.” The scholar recognizes that things can always be improved and learning never stops, and that “great” men are the ones who can “alter” the minds of others. Furthermore, the great scholar will carry themselves in such a way that others realize the importance of what they are doing and that all of society can benefit from their work.

Emerson believes that “man has been wronged; he has wronged himself.” According to Emerson, individual men have become too complacent, happy to become part of a “herd” and allow only one or two people to achieve real greatness. Instead of trying to better themselves and find true fulfillment, Emerson says that too many people are “content to be brushed like flies from the path of a great person.” Furthermore, instead of living their own lives and exploring their own importance, Emerson says that many people are willing to “live in” their heroes.

Emerson notes that it is natural for people to focus on earning money or power because they believe it is the highest possible achievement. However, Emerson says that these things are a “false good” and that it will be the “gradual domestication of the idea of Culture” that creates a revolution in America. To this end, the scholar will find that understanding human nature is more valuable than “any kingdom in history.”

According to Emerson, the scholar must be able to look past the superficial and transitory, both in society (its “pretension”) and within themselves (fear). Beneath each of these things, however, is the opportunity for the scholar to expand their understanding of the human mind. Furthermore, it is part of a scholar’s job to not only face and see past these things for themselves, but to help guide others through them, as well.



Emerson’s criticisms here are similar to his past argument that each generation should be writing for the next, implying that there always is something that is not only passed down but built upon. A successful scholar will have helped their society understand that the world never was “finished” and, therefore, the scholar’s work never was, nor will be, unimportant.



This echoes Emerson’s earlier assertion that humanity has become too divided, which, unfortunately, is something it has done to itself. Individual men and women have convinced themselves that they have a particular place in society and that they have no choice but to limit themselves to that role. They have become content to “live in” their heroes because that is all they think they can do. Emerson believes that the scholar can help their audience realize that everyone has the ability to achieve greatness regardless of their place in the prevailing social hierarchy.



The “domestication of the idea of Culture” means that art and literature will primarily focus on domestic issues, which are more relatable and have the greater capacity to convey truth than improbable romances or lofty poetry written in language only the highly educated can understand. According to Emerson, money and power are secondary to the ability to understand one another. Through understanding, the scholar can achieve something far more lasting and beneficial: uniting a divided society.



Emerson claims that society has “quite exhausted” the books that were once great, so there is a need for something new. No single man or idea can “feed us ever,” writes Emerson, because the “human mind” is like a “central fire” or light that “beams out of a thousand stars.” It cannot be limited, and it is the scholar who has to keep it alive in different times and places.

Emerson says that time has been divided by the ideas which dominated them, namely the Classic, Romantic, and (the current) Reflective ages. He argues, however, that according to his ideas of “oneness” in mankind, that individual people pass through all three in their lifetime.

In reply to those who “bewailed” the times as “the age of Introversion,” Emerson asks why that should be considered a negative thing. If society is tormented by its desire to know and understand everything, Emerson states that it is because they “find themselves not in the state of mind of their fathers” and therefore lack guidance. Emerson welcomes this as a sign that American society is ready for a revolution.

In fact, Emerson recognizes signs that revolution has already begun and is optimistic about what they portend. Specifically, Emerson welcomes the literary movement that embraces “the near, the low, the common,” as those subjects have been neglected for too long. His opinion is that the literature that illustrates the day-to-day lives of different classes of people will help provide insight into “antique and future worlds.” Furthermore, this type of literature calls to attention the “sublime presence of the highest spiritual cause” that animates all of mankind.

The old ideas found in the books scholars typically read no longer yield the same amount of inspiration because they have been used too heavily. They need to be built upon, adapted, or even refuted by each and every generation if the cycle of learning, understanding, and creating is going to continue. Emerson is saying, then, that only those scholars who are capable of critical thought and maintaining intellectual independence will be able to keep the “central fire” alive from one generation to the next.



According to Emerson, humanity’s primitive explorations of human thought and emotions found in Classical literature gave way to the understanding of humanity’s oneness with nature found in Romantic literature, which, Emerson argues, has given way to the introspection found in the current Reflective age. The individual’s understanding of human nature develops in the same pattern, starting with childhood (Classic) and ending with adulthood (Reflective). This demonstrates the cyclical nature of knowledge, both on a societal and a personal level, and reinforces Emerson’s emphasis on passing down wisdom to the next generation



Emerson is once again emphasizing his belief in the inevitability of an American artistic revolution. After the Revolutionary War, American society had been successful in establishing a working government and even making meaningful contributions to the world’s understanding of science and the natural world. However, Americans lacked a literary voice that could define what it was to be American and help American society find its footing to move forward.



America was founded upon the idea that all men and women were created equal, and none were inherently better than the rest. Literature that focuses solely on the few who live with immense wealth and privilege does not accurately speak to the human experience because it excludes so much of humanity. Emerson applauds literature that appeals to “the near, the low, the common” because it speaks the most truth to the most people, which will do more to unite the nation than literature about “the remote” rich.



Emerson says that the ideas inspired by everyday life and people are what gave genius to Goldsmith, Burns, and Cowper in a past age and currently inspires poets like Goethe, Wordsworth, and Carlyle. It is through reading the works of these men that scholars and average readers learn that “things near are not less beautiful and wondrous than things remote” and, more importantly, that understanding these seemingly mundane topics can help one understand those that seem more glamorous and “remote.”

Emerson further emphasizes the importance of literature which portrays “things near” rather than “things remote” because it has the greater capacity to unify. The “genius” of the writers Emerson lists is that they famously used the language of the middle and lower classes rather than that which could only truly be understood by the educated upper classes. They created poetry and books that were easier for all members of society to relate to and understand, and by following their example the American scholar could produce literature that would help unify their American audience.



Emerson singles out Emanuel Swedenborg as one who had been widely underappreciated in his own time. Emerson claims that Swedenborg had “done much for this philosophy,” particularly in drawing a connection between nature and “the affections of the soul.”

Swedenborg, like Emerson, believed that there was an actual relationship between human beings, nature, and the divine. This oneness meant studying natural sciences could help humanity better understand itself and promote spiritual growth.



Emerson writes that another sign of impending revolution is the “new importance given to the single person.” He believes that a society in which individual members know they are worthy of respect and can govern themselves is greater and more united than a society divided by class. The scholar’s place in all this, according to Emerson, is to be a “university of knowledges” and help society understand that the “world is nothing, the man is all.”

Earlier in the speech, Emerson acknowledges that people tend to work for power or money because these things help them move up the social ladder. While the desire for the comforts of wealth and the respect that comes with power are natural, Emerson believes the American scholar will help society realize that working for the advancement of society is more important than working for the “world” (i.e. reputation, money, or social standing).



Emerson specifically believes that it is the American Scholar who will bring about a revolution that unites the country. He asserts that the country has “listened too long to the courtly muses of Europe” and that the result is the rest of the world sees Americans as “timid, imitative, tame.”

Emerson returns to some of the sentiments he shared in the first paragraphs of his speech. By listening too much to Europe’s “courtly muses,” the American Scholar had been complicit in holding America back from achieving true cultural independence. America had achieved something great by winning political independence from England, but without cultural independence, the country would never earn the respect of other world powers.



Furthermore, the “mind” of America “eats upon itself” because it believes it can only “aim at low objects.” Emerson mourns that there are young Americans who dream of making big changes, but get discouraged and feel “hindered from action by the disgust which the principles on which business is managed inspire.” To fix the situation, Emerson reminds his audience that all it takes is one person to stick by their principles for others to begin following suit.

Emerson also criticizes the notion that all people should be judged “in the gross, in the hundred, or the thousand” instead of as a whole “unit.” Instead of their opinions being “predicted geographically, as the north, or the south,” Emerson asserts that Americans will soon “walk on our own feet; we will work with our own hands” and the “study of letters” will no longer be scorned because it will produce ideas that unite Americans. Because of this, “A nation of men will for the first time exist, because each believes himself inspired by the Divine Soul which also inspires all men.”

Emerson believes that American society has placed too much importance on industrialization and innovation, and not enough on intellectual development. This reflects Emerson’s earlier comment that the “practical” people of the world look down on the “speculative” ones for seemingly not contributing to society. America’s “mind” is essentially atrophying because it has grown complacent and is willing to accept the ideas and traditions of other nations rather than challenging itself to aim higher and create something new and unique. However, should one scholar make a breakthrough, then others would surely follow.



As a new country, Emerson believed that America had the potential to become the first truly united nation. The European countries that so many Americans had chosen to leave were characterized by strong and insurmountable social divisions, primarily through their adherence to the concepts of nobility and primogeniture that prevented members of the lower classes from advancing to the upper. Emerson believes that it won’t be through scientific discovery or new inventions that America achieves greatness, but through literature and art. The American Scholar will bridge social divisions by proving that no human being is inherently superior to another just because they were born into a “noble” family, but that all human beings are made equal by a “Divine Soul” that is common to all.





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