

A Brief Summary of “The American Scholar”, by Ralph Waldo Emerson

Reprinted from http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_American_Scholar

"**The American Scholar**" was a speech given by Ralph Waldo Emerson on August 31, 1837, to the Phi Beta Kappa Society at Cambridge, Massachusetts. He was invited to speak in recognition of his groundbreaking work *Nature*, published a year earlier, in which he established a new way for America's fledgling society to regard the world. Sixty years after declaring independence, American culture was still heavily influenced by Europe, and Emerson, for possibly the first time in the country's history, provided a visionary philosophical framework for escaping "from under its iron lids" and building a new, distinctly American cultural identity.

Summary

Emerson uses Transcendentalist and Romantic views to get his points across by explaining a true American scholar's relationship to nature. There are a few key points he makes that flesh out this vision: We are all fragments, "as the hand is divided into fingers", of a greater creature, which is mankind itself, "a doctrine ever new and sublime."

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

To achieve this higher state of mind, the modern American scholar must reject old ideas and think for him or herself, to become "*Man Thinking*" rather than "a mere thinker, or still worse, the parrot of other men's thinking", "the victim of society", "the sluggish intellect of this continent".

"The American Scholar" has an obligation, as "Man Thinking", within this "One Man" concept, to see the world clearly, not severely influenced by traditional/historical views, and to broaden his understanding of the world from fresh eyes, to "defer never to the popular cry."

The scholar's education consists of three influences:

- I. Nature as the most important influence on the mind
- II. The Past manifest in books
- III. Action and its relation to experience

The last, unnumbered part of the text is devoted to Emerson's view on the "Duties" of the American Scholar who has become the "Man Thinking."

Importance

Oliver Wendell Holmes, Sr. declared this speech to be America's "Intellectual Declaration of Independence." Building on the growing attention he was receiving from the essay *Nature*, this speech solidified Emerson's popularity and weight in America, a level of reverence he would hold throughout the rest of his life. Phi Beta Kappa's literary quarterly magazine, *The American Scholar*, was named after the speech, and when printed, sold well.^[2] This success stands in contrast with the harsh reaction to another of his speeches, The Divinity School Address, given eleven months later.