



# The American Scholar; Self-Reliance. Compensation

*Ralph Waldo Emerson*

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### **The American Scholar; Self-Reliance. Compensation** Ralph Waldo Emerson

The American Scholar was a speech given by Ralph Waldo Emerson on August 31, 1837, to the Phi Beta Kappa Society at Cambridge. 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.

### **The American Scholar; Self-Reliance. Compensation Details**

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## From Reader Review The American Scholar; Self-Reliance. Compensation for online ebook

### Breck says

This is a speech given by Emerson in 1837 and basically outlines what a true "American" scholar should be. The basic idea is that rather than becoming an intellectual, pedantic, bookworm, the American scholar should be one who goes to nature and books for inspiration and then creates--so rather than living by the light of others or becoming a "parrot of other man's thinking" the true scholar delves into his own soul to discover truth and upon discovering it has a duty to act and share what he discover with the world. This has completely changed the way I think about learning and improving myself. Rather than just adding knowledge, I should read to be inspired and then spending more time in creative thought, writing, and other activities that strengthen my soul and character. In the end, it made me ashamed for every calling myself a bookworm!

Free link to the entire speech:

<http://www.emersoncentral.com/amschol...>

A few favorite quotes:

Each age, it is found, must write its own books...the books of an older period will not fit this.

Books are the best of things, well used; abused, among the worst. They are for nothing but to inspire.

Man Thinking must not be subdued by his instruments. Books are for the scholar's idle times. When he can read God directly, the hour is too precious to be wasted in other men's transcripts of their readings.

Character is higher than intellect.

...in going down into the secrets of his own mind, he has descended into the secrets of all minds.

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### Jennifer says

Emerson's essay on Compensation hit home in a way no other philosophical essay ever has. He put into words that gut sensaion I'd called "my luck," "murphy's law," what a lot of people call karma. Whatever it is, Emerson had absolutely masterful insight into the complexities of life. Whether his speculation on the "whys" are true, his understanding of the "what" is amazing.

This is one of my favorite pieces ever written.

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### Aaron Quinn says

Once a year I read The American Scholar. Just profound!

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## Bill Kerwin says

Emerson is now a classic author, read by at least six generations of American high school students. It is easy to see him as a stuffy Boston Brahmin, pontificating his Platonic and Vedantic insights from a rarefied spiritual plane.

But that would be a mistake, an unjust caricature. When Emerson, at the age of thirty-four, burst forth on the American academic scene with a lecture to Harvard's Phi Beta Kappa Society (later called "The American Scholar"), he spoke as a man acquainted with adversity, aware of the challenges and possibilities America faced in the tumultuous world of 1837.

His father the minister having died when he was seven, Emerson was raised by his mother and aunt; his mother took in boarders to support a family never far from poverty. Emerson entered Harvard at the age of fourteen—not unusual for the time—with a small scholarship, and worked his way through college as an usher, a waiter, a tutor, an errand boy (to the president of the college), and—during the summer vacation—as a teacher at his uncle Sam's school. After he graduating at eighteen, he started his own school, located in the family home.

Although he continued to teach, he suffered from ill health, particularly from tuberculosis. For a time he journeyed to the Southern United States, seeking a healthier climate, and his health improved. (He also acquired there a lifelong hatred of slavery.) Tuberculosis continued to plague him in other ways, however: two of his younger brothers, and his beloved first wife, died of the disease before Emerson had reached the age of thirty-four.

By 1827 he had completed divinity school and become a minister, but his years of independent reading and thinking had made him unorthodox in his theology (even for a 19th century Unitarian!) and revolutionary in his political opinions. His religious doubts intensified with his wife's death, and he found himself unable to celebrate communion. He decided to part company with the ministry, and—having inherited a living from his wife's estate—he chose to become a writer and lecturer instead. He still preached, but now he could preach the gospel according to Emerson.

In "The American Scholar," Emerson speaks to the American intellectual during a time of unrest and unease. Half a century after the Constitutional Convention, the United States was no longer an exciting revolutionary experiment, but an English-speaking nation still dominated by British culture, divided by "the peculiar institution" of slavery, and touched by new ethnic unrest. It was a time of financial uncertainty too: unemployment was at record levels, and the "the panic of 1837" had precipitated a banking crisis. (When Emerson delivered his lecture at the end of August, the banks had been refusing to redeem paper money for "specie"—gold and silver—for the last two months, and would continue to do so for *seven months* to come.) Recently, ethnic conflict had erupted in Emerson's own city of Boston, when a three-hour riot between native Protestants and immigrant Catholics—precipitated (it is said) by a clash between speeding Yankee firemen and a slow-moving Irish funeral procession—had to be put down by the militia. In addition, the United States had just traded a strong president (Jackson) for a weak one (Van Buren), and was beginning to question what allegiances, what characteristics, defined the changing American identity.

Emerson was a man of hope, not of fear, and he provided his audience with an inspiring answer. Just as the hand "is divided into fingers," so every individual man is a part of the greater entity called "mankind." We must not lose ourselves in our everyday activities, but remember we are part of the whole. We must learn from the past and its great writers (including of course the British ones), but we should never become the servant of books or the slave of other men's ideas. Each of us must not be a mere thinker, or (worse) the parrot of other men thinking, but instead must strive to be "man thinking": if we see the world clearly, just as

it appears to us, unswayed by popular fads, we--the fingers of the hand of humankind--will come to see it as part of all humanity:

*The world of any moment is the merest appearance. Some great decorum, some fetich of a government, some ephemeral trade, or war, or man, is cried up by half mankind and cried down by the other half, as if all depended on this particular up or down. The odds are that the whole question is not worth the poorest thought which the scholar has lost in listening to the controversy. Let him not quit his belief that a popgun is a popgun, though the ancient and honorable of the earth affirm it to be the crack of doom. In silence, in steadiness, in severe abstraction, let him hold by himself; add observation to observation, patient of neglect, patient of reproach, and bide his own time,—happy enough if he can satisfy himself alone that this day he has seen something truly. Success treads on every right step. For the instinct is sure that prompts him to tell his brother what he thinks. 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. The poet, in utter solitude remembering his spontaneous thoughts and recording them, is found to have recorded that which men in cities vast find true for them also. The orator distrusts at first the fitness of his frank confessions, his want of knowledge of the persons he addresses, until he finds that he is the complement of his hearers;—that they drink his words because he fulfills for them their own nature; the deeper he dives into his privatest, secretest presentiment, to his wonder he finds this is the most acceptable, most public and universally true. The people delight in it; the better part of every man feels—This is my music; this is myself.*

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## Mya says

I had my great moments (like how come I never thought of this: it is still relevant today) to blah it's alright.

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## Sarah says

Technically, I listened to this rather than reading the edition I listed, and half-read a copy from a textbook, but I can't list the audio version to which I listened, and don't want to list the entire textbook, so...

Emerson was a product of his time, and spoke to the people of his time, about his time. In spite of this, he had a lot of practical wisdom, and for the modern reader who can read past his outdated ideas (we educate more people than rich white men now), there is plenty to glean.

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## Gordon says

One of my favorite new quotes (ever):

"To the young mind, every thing is individual, stands by itself. By and by, it finds how to join two things, and see in them one nature; then three, then three thousand ... But what is classification but the perceiving that these objects are not chaotic, and are not foreign, but have a law which is also a law of the human mind?"

The astronomer discovers that geometry, a pure abstraction of the human mind, is the measure of planetary motion. The chemist finds proportions and intelligible method throughout matter; and science is nothing but the finding of analogy, identity, in the most remote parts." - The American Scholar by Ralph Waldo Emerson.

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### **Carly says**

Read for ENGLISH 101H

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### **Bri says**

I read this for my American Lit class, everyone should read this book. Emerson was a prolific writer. Beautiful words. I'm glad this was assigned to me.

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### **Melvin says**

I like Emerson's work.

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### **Kelly says**

Boring

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### **Jenny says**

Interesting view of human nature and motivations.

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### **Ken Moten says**

I think I can make a rare generalization here; anyone who goes through kindergarten to 12th grade education (which is the last year of secondary school before university, for my non-U.S. friends) in the U.S. will have had to read this essay and Self-Reliance. I have read Emerson in school on multiple occasions and have recently re-visited him. The reason why I have waited so long to add him to Goodreads is because he is, for all intents, BORING!

I do not mean he is not revolutionary or a controversial figure who you can have a good conversation about. Emerson's ideas were and still are revolutionary in a lot of ways; the way he went about communicating his ideas was very problematic. It is horrifyingly dry prose that never fails to make me start daydreaming--and that is a shame because what he is talking about is very important and inspiring. His views launched the American Transcendentalist movement and without him we would not have people like Henry David

Thoreau, Walt Whitman, or Emily Dickinson. Given that, those three were infinitely better at communicating transcendentalism than Emerson in my opinion. With all that said, let's talk about the essay.

This essay was delivered at Harvard and it was meant as a rallying cry to young American...scholars and academic-types to forge their own views and scholarly pursuits independent of Europe. He puts it down to the difference between one who invents and sells something and one who merely works in a factory reproducing somebody else's work to be sold. The American scholar must be the inventor and that means throwing out the traditions of the "Old World" in favor of creating the "New."

Now the prime way of doing this is to look to yourself and the natural world around you (i.e. in this case the American frontier or just America). Transcendentalism was itself just the American manifestation of the European Romantic movement (never-mind the existence of Edgar Allan Poe) so there is your irony. He does not advocate abandoning the way you pursue knowledge like book-reading and etc. a la Rousseau, but suggest that you add the glory of nature to your learning style:

*"The world, — this shadow of the soul, or other me, lies wide around. Its attractions are the keys which unlock my thoughts and make me acquainted with myself. I run eagerly into this resounding tumult. I grasp the hands of those next me, and take my place in the ring to suffer and to work, taught by an instinct, that so shall the dumb abyss be vocal with speech. I pierce its order; I dissipate its fear; I dispose of it within the circuit of my expanding life."*

*"It is the raw material out of which the intellect moulds her splendid products. A strange process too, this, by which experience is converted into thought, as a mulberry leaf is converted into satin. The manufacture goes forward at all hours."*

This was very revolutionary stuff in ante-bellum America and you still find these ideas having an impact on undergraduates before student-loan debts pull them back to Earth. I just wish he could have kept his essays on a more charismatic, interesting tone because as much as I have read historians and philosophers who many consider extremely dull, something about how Emerson writes prose just does not move me like I know it should. Be that as it may, if you want to see the foundation of American exceptionalism in academia, this essay is ground-zero for me.

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## **Kika says**

Ľalšia vec na literatúru. Nebol oto zlém malo to dobré myšlienky, ale rozhodne to nie je nie?o, ?o by som ?ítala každý de?...

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## **Aaron says**

My initial thoughts are that Emerson is saying we must think as individuals, and if we do that right, we will think as a superior group overall. Typically, the thoughts of a collective are regarded negatively as collective implies the reliance on the ancients or the leading figures of the day. Emerson warns against following the paths of several categories of these people, from the bookworm who speaks of the tales and proclaims the ideals of others but not his own, to those who act without thought of why they act. Instead, we must identify patterns ourselves and seek new experiences to discern our own creative thoughts.

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