

# Essay example

Literature



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Multiple Choice All of the above. 2. The mind. 3. When inspiration is needed. 4. Creation. 5. Emerson believes that people should think for themselves.

Essay:

Emerson: Reading and Creativity.

Ralph Waldo Emerson, in his 1837 speech, “ The American Scholar,” defines the role of books and institutional learning in the intellectual life of man. He takes the stand that the sole purpose of books and institutions, such as schools and colleges, is to inspire the reader. He warns that books may become an obstacle to original thinking and can “ pin (me) down” (11) with rigid truths of the past. When man creates, he becomes a genius. The mark of genius is an active, progressive viewpoint, geared to “ look forward” (11). Creativity in “ Manners, actions, words” (16) springs from original thought. Excessive respect for books and institutional authority can stifle this originality and creativity. Emerson illustrate this stifling of original thinking by citing the example of the English dramatists’ long adherence to the Shakespearean norm. He reiterates that books, and conventional knowledge, are only for inspiration when one’s creative faculties require nourishment. Emerson’s emphasis on original thinking is commendable but his contention that books are solely meant for inspiration is debatable.

Emerson asserts that original thinking, and creativity, is the mark of genius. The spark of this genius is present in the soul of every man. Emerson is right when he warns that the blind acceptance of past writing can become an obstacle to the individual exploration of new ideas. When the reader is excessively attracted to the writing of another man, there is the tendency to accept that writing as the absolute truth, and remain content to echo these thoughts. The development of a unique, individual style, and the urge to

explore new ideas, becomes a casualty to books of the past. Slavish imitation can result when a person submits to the “over influence” (22) of books. Books represent past “custom or authority” (17) and serve as an impediment to original thought, unless they are “sternly subordinated” (25) to the readers’ own creative imagination. Educational institutions can stifle creativity by inculcating rigid adherence to the standards of the past and encouraging learning by rote.

Emerson categorically states that the sole purpose of books is to inspire the reader and to foster creativity. It is difficult to agree with his assertion that inspiration is “the one end” (2) of books. After all, books cover a vast area of subjects and have several purposes. Books can serve as sources of information, as in the case of encyclopedias. A good detective novel or humorous book of fiction can be a very good companion for leisure hours. In this case, books are used as tools of pure entertainment. The purpose of books can vary with the reader. There cannot be just one “right way of reading” (25) for all men. Each individual takes away from a book a different gain. In the same way, educational institutions, in addition to engendering original thought, can also serve other secondary purposes, such as the inculcation of discipline and the acquisition of practical skills tested and proved over the years.

Emerson's claim about the role of “the book, the college, the school of art, the institution of any kind” is only partially true. I agree with Emerson when he states that the highest mark of a true scholar is original thinking. It is man's creativity which has fuelled the progress of civilization. Books and institutionalized learning should definitely encourage the flowering of this originality. However, it cannot be said with absolute justification that the only

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purpose of books is to serve as the springboards for original thinking. While there is a lot of truth in Emerson's warning about the capacity of books to stifle creativity, books can also inform and entertain the reader. The purpose of reading can vary with the need of the individual reader and with the genre of each particular book.