

English Literature:

OF STUDIES: Francis Bacon

Studies are a source of delight in leisure and loneliness; they provide apt phrases and sentences to garnish one's conversation with, and they also make men able to judge and plan the business of life. They develop and perfect the natural powers of the mind, but the wisdom yielded by them is vague and indefinite unless it is checked and corrected by the experience of real life. Men, cunning by nature, disparage studies, while simple men tend to wonder too much at every bit of their information, but wise men alone know the way of using them properly. For the way of using them properly cannot be learnt from books themselves, it is a wisdom that comes from the experience of real life and the observation of men and manners. One should not read a book simply to criticise or contradict its arguments, nor to accept everything passively, but to weigh its contents and separate the sound grains of truth from the heap of chaff overlying them. There are books and books and all do not deserve equal attention. Some books can be read selectively or in parts only; some wholly but hurriedly, while a few only deserve to be read with close care and attention accompanied with thinking and cogitation. Quite a few books may be read only through their abstracts made by a deputy, though the essence of a book is totally lost in the process of its distillation.

Reading fills the mind with ideas and images; conversation makes it quick and

agile, while writing serves to define and systematize one's thoughts and ideas. Studies influence character according to the nature of their subjects. For example, the study of history contributes to one's wisdom, of mathematics to one's mental subtlety; of science to one's intellectual depth, of philosophy to gravity of mind and of logic and rhetoric to one's power of reasoning and arguing with ability and success. And just as the physical defects and diseases are cured by proper exercise, in the same way every defect or weakness of the mind can find its proper remedy in an appropriate course of study. Thus, if a man's mind lacks power of concentration, he should read mathematics, where every step demands close attention. If the mind is lacking in the power of discrimination, the patient should devote his days and nights to the pages of the mediaeval philosophers, who were rightly nicknamed as 'hair-splitters'. In the same way, if a man's mind is not apt to recall references and illustrations to clarify and clinch his arguments, let him read law cases, where precedents are of necessity pressed into service at every step. In this way every mental defect has its proper remedy in studies.

Analysis

Bacon's essay, 'Of Studies', is justly popular for the wisdom of the precepts it embodies and also for the simplicity, precision and charm of its style. Whatever the author has said about the uses and limitations of studies, the proper way of reading books and utilizing their fruits, the different attitudes of the various kinds of readers to studies and remedies they

can provide for the mental defects, are all calculated to command general acceptance.

It is considered as opinions of a celebrated scholar who spent his entire life among books of all kinds, and who was also possessed of a large fund of practical experience to correct and chasten his bookish knowledge.

As regards the style of this essay its main charm lies in the simplicity and felicity of phrasing and the frequency of apt analogies with which the argument is interlarded. The analogies are taken from the common, every day, familiar processes and occupations of life and are well calculated to add point and pungency to the style and bring the wisdom of the writer home his readers. The second remarkable aspect of the style is related to the cast of sentences, which invites the reader's careful attention.

Consider, for example, the three-fold balance in most of the key sentences, of which the opening sentence provides a fine specimen-'studies serve for delight, for ornament and for ability.'

This is repeated in others which follow: 'some books are to be tasted, others to be swallowed, and some few to be chewed and digested', or 'Reading maketh a full man, conference a ready man; and writing an exact man'. Contd.....