Biography:

Ralph Waldo Emerson was born in Boston on May 25, 1803. His father was a New England minister who died suddenly and unexpectedly when Emerson was only eight years old. Emerson grew up, as scholar Andrew Angyal puts it, “[being taught] the New England values of thrift, hard work, and mutual assistance within the family.” Emerson attended the Boston Latin School and Harvard, eventually becoming a Unitarian minister. After his wife died from tuberculosis, a devastated Emerson left the ministry. Emerson wrote, “My business is with the living...I have sometimes thought that in order to be a good minister it was necessary to leave the ministry” (qtd. in Carr 1823). Following the death of his wife, Emerson traveled to Europe for some time.

When Emerson returned from Europe he started studying, writing, and lecturing. He published his first work, *Nature*, in 1836. This led to the beginning of his fame and the founding of Transcendentalism. Angyal explains Emerson’s philosophy of Transcendentalism as that, “Man could seek revelations firsthand from nature, rather than having them handed down through tradition.” Emerson came to be known as the father of American literature. His essay, “The American Scholar,” was actually an address before the Harvard Phi Beta Kappa society. This address was known as the “intellectual Declaration of Independence” (Holmes qtd. in Angyal).

Emerson established his household in Concord and was neighbors with Hawthorne, Thoreau, and Alcott. Emerson was not political, believing that reform should begin with the individual. Emerson’s fame grew and he had many admirers and other writers sought his approval, such as Walt Whitman. Emerson was known for his essays, but also published some poetry. Emerson died quietly in 1882, having changed the face of American literature.

Questions:

1. What is Ralph Waldo Emerson’s view of what an American scholar should be?
2. Emerson tells us, “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” (1858). Emerson is speaking of the dangers of canonization and how it may suppress new ideas. Was Emerson canonized during his life and now?
3. Emerson tells us, “Each age, it is found, must write its own books; or rather, each generation for the next succeeding. The books of an older period will not fit this” (1858). However, Emerson later writes, “There is some awe mixed with the joy of our surprise, when this poet, who lived in some past world, two or three hundred years ago, says that which lies close to my own soul, that which I also had wellnigh thought and said” (1859). Do these two statements contradict each other? If so, how do we reconcile this?
4. Emerson states, “Books are the best of things, well used; abused, among the worst” (1858). What is the point Emerson is trying to convey by this assertion?
5. What connections can we find in Emerson’s philosophies in “The American Scholar” and some of the experiences he went through in his own life? Are there any instances where certain views could be connected directly to his biography?
6. Emerson exclaims, “Life lies behind us as the quarry from whence we get tiles and copestones for the masonry of to-day. This is the way to learn grammar. Colleges and books only copy the language which the field and the work-yard made” (1861). Is Emerson arguing that we do not need structural grammar classes? If so, what are the pros and cons to not studying formal grammar? Is it practical?
Angyal, Andrew J. "Ralph Waldo Emerson." *Critical Survey of Poetry.* Ed. Philip K. Jason and Frank N. Magill. Second Revised Edition ed. N.p.: Salem Press, 2003. 1-8. *MagillOnLiteraturePlus.* Web. 25 Apr. 2014. [Angyal gives a succinct biography of the writer Ralph Waldo Emerson. He briefly describes the literary forms Emerson used, such as poetry and essays. Angyal describes Emerson’s goal in “The American Scholar,” was to have a distinctive American poetry. Angyal spends some time explaining how Emerson’s poetic achievements, while not large, were as influential as his essays and lectures. Further, Angyal explains the biography of Emerson and how some of the tragedies in Emerson’s life may have affected his views and works. Angyal spends more time analyzing Emerson’s poetry and concludes that Emerson’s greatness comes from his originality and vision for American poetry.]
