

Of Studies by Francis Bacon

Introduction

The essay *Of Studies* by Sir Francis Bacon is the first essay in the series of ten essays published in 1597. Later, it was revised in 1612 with the addition of some more sentences and ideas in it along with the alteration in some vocabulary terms. This essay is regarded as Bacon's masterpiece enriched with stylised Latin vocabulary, fresh and new ideas, logical and relevant themes and wisdom of the world. For these reasons, the essay is still popular among individuals of all ages. Adopting a didactic approach, the essay informs the readers about the benefits and uses of studies in one's life.

Summary

Highlighting the importance of studies, Bacon's essay illustrates the role studies play in an individual's daily life. For Bacon, the study is always related to the application of knowledge in practical life.

At the beginning of his essay, Bacon describes the three main purposes of study including studying for gaining delight, studies done for ornamenting one's life and studying in order to improve one's ability.

The author is the notion that only learned and well-read men can execute plans effectively, manage their daily affairs with expertise and lead a healthy and stable life. He further states that reading makes a full man; conference leads to a ready man while writing makes an exact man.

While throwing light on the advantages and usefulness of studies, Bacon also puts forward some demerits of study as he thinks that studying for a prolonged period of time may lead to laziness.

He also condemns the act of studying from books solely without learning from nature around. The essay *Of Studies* further asserts the benefits of studies by considering this act as a medicine for the defects of the human mind and the source of enhancing one's wit.

While discussing the importance of studying in an individual's life, the essayist informs his readers about the benefits of reading good books.

For Bacon, some books are only meant to be tasted; others are there to swallow while some books are meant for chewing and digesting properly. Therefore, the readers must choose wisely before studying any book to enhance his/her knowledge about the world around.

Of Studies : Analysis

In this essay Bacon describes the importance of studies in human life. Bacon begins the essay by enlisting three purposes of studies – "to delight, for ornament and for ability." Studies delight most when one is secluded and reposed. Knowledge acquired through studies serve as ornament in a conversation. A well read man will have a good vocabulary and greater knowledge which will increase the worth of a conversation. Studies improve one's judgmental and authoritative abilities.

Ordinary men can no doubt go about their daily business without difficulty but a learned man will do so with higher efficiency. Bacon however says that studying too much is a sign of laziness and using too many ornaments while conversing makes one look pretentious. To make judgments only on the basis of rules is the eccentricity of a scholar.

Studies make a man perfect. Studying is not an inborn talent; it is acquired. The natural abilities of man are to be enhanced by studies just like the growth of plants is enhanced by trimming. Studies provide both direction and experience. Practical men often condemn studies but wise men use it. Studies teach man to learn from observation. One must not use knowledge as a means of contradiction or confutation. Studies must also not be used to believe or to take for granted, or to talk and discourse but “to weigh and consider”.

Then Bacon speaks about the different ways in which different books are to be read. He says – “Some books are to be tasted, others to be swallowed, and some few to be chewed and digested.” This means some books are to be perused lightly, that is, tasted while some other books are to be understood and enjoyed, that is, swallowed. On the other hand certain books are to be digested, that is, to fully extract their meaning and implemented in one’s life. Therefore some books are to be read only in parts, others are to be read with less curiosity, and some books are to be read with attention and diligence. Bacon however also says that sometimes it may be enough to read extracts or reviews of books made by others instead of reading the whole book by oneself. But according to Bacon this is to be done only in case of books of less importance. He considers these “distilled books” to distilled waters which he calls “flashy things”.

Reading makes a man complete, conversation makes a man quick and witty, and writing improves the memory. If a man writes less he will lack a good memory, if he speaks little he will lack wit and presence of mind, and if he reads less he will not have much knowledge.

A study of history makes a man wise while a study of poetry makes him witty. Mathematics makes a man exact and precise and natural philosophy increases the depth of the mind. Morals make a man grave whereas a study of logic and rhetoric makes him more comprehensive. Studies pass into character. A man’s character is influenced and defined by the type of books he reads.

There is no disease of the mind that cannot be cured by proper study. Bowling is good for the bladder and the kidneys, shooting for the lungs and breast, walking for the stomach and riding is good for the head. Similarly mathematics is the remedy for a wandering mind because if a man’s mind wanders while solving a problem he will have to begin again. If a man is unable to make distinctions he must study schoolmen and if he is not quick in passing through matters he should study the law. Thus Bacon concludes the essay by establishing that for every deficit of the mind a remedy is to be found in studies.

More Notes:

Studies are a source of pleasure. They have an ornamental value and also add to one’s ability.

This essay deals with some of the uses of study and offers some sound ideas relating to this theme. The pleasure of study can best be enjoyed by a man leading a life of aloofness and retirement. The ornamental value of study lies in enabling a man to become a good talker. He who spends too much time in studies is temporarily lazy. He who makes too much use of reading for purposes of

conversation, is trying to make a vain display of his learning. If a man's judgment is governed wholly by rules, he has learned from books, it shows his eccentricity.

Studies makes one develop one's abilities with ease Studies by themselves provide guidance, but without practical experience this is abstract. Men who are cunning, do not approve of the studies, but those who are simple, feel an admiration for studies. Men who are basically wise, make use of studies for their progress.

One should not read books only to contradict others. All things written in books should not be followed in life. One should ponder over what he read and how he uses it.

Some books are to be read in parts only. Some may be read quickly and hastily. There are only a small number of books that are worth close and detailed study. In the case of some books, a man may engage somebody else to read them and then tell him what they contain and also give him extracts from them. But this method should be adopted in the case of the meaner sort of books only. No man can be satisfied with a mere summary or synopsis of a good book.

Reading develops the whole personality of a man. Conversation makes a man witty. Different kinds of books have different effects upon the reader. History makes a man wise, Poetry makes a man imaginative, Mathematics develops subtlety in a man, Natural science enables a man to look deep into the things, Logic and art of public speaking develop a person's communicative skills.

Various capabilities are developed by effective and useful reading. If a man's mind wanders too much, he should be made to study Mathematics to develop concentration; if a man is unable to make distinctions amongst things, he should study the literature produced in the Middle Ages.

Studies are a cure for mental deficiency. Just as bowling is good for kidneys, shooting for the lungs, walking for digestion and riding for the head, so also mathematics is good for wondering wits. Every defect of a man's mind can be cured through studies.

Analysis

This essay deals with different kinds of books and their effect on the reader. The uses of studies are classified by Bacon under three heads – the use of studies for delight; the use of studies for ornament and the use of studies for ability. Bacon also gives us some excellent advice as to why or how one should read. He tells us that different studies have varied effects on the human mind.

Various mental defects can be remedied by various kinds of studies. The need of experience to supplement and perfect studies has duly been emphasized in the essay. Bacon would not be satisfied with more bookish knowledge. The wisdom won by experience is as necessary as the wisdom gained from books.

But it is not only the ideas that are so important in this essay. We find Bacon displaying his talent for using the maximum economy of words in order to express his ideas. The essay is a masterpiece of brevity and terseness. Some of his sentences read like proverbs.

Bacon's essays abound in very appropriate and original similes. We have one such simile here when Bacon says that "distilled books are, like common distilled waters, flashy things".

We could say, without any exaggeration, that it is one of the finest essays in English prose. It gives us a number of sound maxims and a number of sentences that we can use as quotations when occasion demands. Some of the sentences, indeed, cling to our memory without any mental effort on our part to memorise them. This is one of the best known essays from the pen of Bacon.

Theme:

The Elizabethan Age is the most creative period in English Literature. The foreign wars were over and the Englishmen had for the first time the leisure to devote their energies to interests other than war upon their neighbours.

Fortunately, just at this time, the great wave of the Renaissance, the new birth of letters, having spent itself in Italy and crossing over France and Spain reached the shores of England.

With Francis Bacon begins philosophical reflections upon life, in the style of Plutarch's "Morals" and the "Essays" of Montaigne. Bacon's mind was catholic in its range, but the subjects of moral thought that interest him are comparatively few and generalized.

The method used by Bacon is to reduce reflection to the lowest terms to try to discover the fundamental principles of conduct, the influence and the actions of men. His essays reflect his experiences of learning. His observations do not clear his likes or dislikes. They are austere, brief to the point of crudeness.

In the essay *Of Studies*, a life-long student, Bacon describes his craft. He was no plodder upon books though he read much and that with great judgment. The subject of this essay was the one that revolved longest in the edition of his "Essays".

Structure:

One peculiarity of this essay which deserves notice is the frequency with which Bacon repeats himself. Thus each sentence is carefully selected and strung together, Bacon has gems of thought and language, but he does not scatter them about with uncalculating profusion of a Shakespeare, non-like wealthy men who care not how they give, but rather like those who are spending their story with care'.

Bacon is not an optimist. He has no sentiment to lead the reader astray. He writes with brevity and compactness. To the careless reader much of what he has written will seem common-place enough. But to the serious reader, his thoughts are universal. The sentences are compact and simple.

Style:

The passage is compressed, bold, full of condensed thought and utterly devoid of ornamentation. The sentences run smooth. Force and precision are its main characteristics. The sustained passage has easy eloquence, and sentences here and there are of singular and unaffected beauty and not thrust in but flowing continuously with the rest. Bacon writes with an air of modesty. His passages bear the mark of a grand and confident self-esteem sometimes directly assertive, sometimes

condescending, sometimes scornful, sometimes disguised under a transparent affectation of modesty.

There is one special characteristic of Bacon's manner which does not admit of being illustrated except at a prohibitive length, his long magnificent roll of sentence after sentence. Each falling into its place, each adding new weight to what has gone before it, and all together uniting to complete the entire effect.

His style has simplicity, strength, brevity, clearness and precision. Simplicity cannot be said to be a characteristic in its strict sense, of his style. His passage is simple in the sense of being free from all affectation, free from any studied elegance in the choice of words and in the structure of sentences. He avoids with equal care both pedantry and vulgarity, though he has no scruple in using homely illustrations, where such illustrations would be more telling. That the quality of strength in Bacon's style is intellectual rather than emotional.

Acknowledgement: Notes have been compiled from various open sources