

Lesson- 6

On Reading in Relation to Literature

Very few persons know how to read. Considerable experience with literature is needed before taste and discrimination can possibly be acquired; and, without these, it is almost impossible to learn how to read. I say, almost impossible; since there are some rare men who, through a kind of inherited literary instinct are able to read very well even before reaching the age of twentyfive years. But these are great exceptions, and I am speaking of the average; for to read the characters of the letters of the text does not mean reading in the true sense. You will often find yourselves reading words or characters automatically, even pronouncing them quite correctly, while your minds are occupied with a totally different subject. This mechanism of reading becomes altogether automatic at an early period of life, and can be performed irrespective of attention. Neither can I call it reading to extract the narrative portion of a text from the rest simply for one's personal amusement, or in other words, to read a book "for the story". Yet most of the reading that is done in the world is done in exactly this way. Thousands and thousands of books are bought every year, every month, I might even say every day, by people who do not read at all. They only think that they read. They buy books just to amuse themselves, "to kill time" as they call it; in one hour or two their eyes have passed over all the pages, and there is left in their minds a vague idea or two about what they have been looking at; and this they really believe is reading. Nothing is more common than to be asked, "Have you read such a book?" Or to hear somebody say, "I have read such and such a book." But these persons do not speak seriously. Out of a thousand persons who say, "I have read this", or "I have read that", there is not one, perhaps, who is able to express any opinion, worth hearing, about what he has been reading. Many and many a time I hear students say that they have read certain books; but if I ask them some questions regarding the books, I find that they are not able to make any answer, or at best they will only repeat something that somebody else has said about what they think that they have been reading. But this is not peculiar to students; it is in all countries the way that the great public devours books. I would say that the difference between the great critic and the common person is chiefly that the great critic knows how to read, and that the common person does not. No man is really able to read a book who is not able to express an original opinion regarding the contents of a book.

No doubt you will think that this statement of the case confuses reading with study. You might say, "When we read history or philosophy or science, then we do read very thoroughly, studying all the meanings and bearing of the text, slowly, and thinking about it. This is a hard study. But when we read a story or a poem out of class-hours, we read for amusement. Amusement and study are two different things." I am not sure that you all think this; but young men generally do think so. As a matter of fact, every book worth reading ought to be read in precisely the same way that a scientific book is read, not simply for amusement; and every book worth reading

should have the same amount of value in it that a scientific book has, though the value may be of a totally different kind; for after all, a good book of fiction or romance or poetry is a scientific work; it has been composed according to the best principles of more than one science, but especially according to the principles of the great science of life, the knowledge of human nature.

The first thing which a scholar should bear in mind is that a book ought not to be read for mere amusement. Half-educated persons read for amusement and are not to be blamed for it; they are incapable of appreciating the deeper qualities that belong to a really great literature. But a young man who has passed through a course of university training should discipline himself at an early day never to read for mere amusement, and once the habit of discipline has been formed, he will find it impossible to read for mere amusement. He will then impatiently throw down any book from which he cannot obtain intellectual food, any book which does not make an appeal to the higher emotions and to his intellect. But on the other hand, the habit of reading for amusement becomes with thousands of people exactly the same kind of habit as wine-drinking or opium-smoking; it is like a narcotic, something that helps to pass the time, something that keeps up a perpetual condition of dreaming, something that eventually results in destroying all capacity for thought, giving exercise only to the surface parts of the mind, and leaving the deeper springs of feeling and higher faculties of perception employed.

The test of a great book is whether we want to read it only once or more than once. Any really great book we want to read the second time even more than we wanted to read it the first time; and every additional time that we read it we find new meanings and new beauty in it. A book that a person of education and good taste does not care to read more than once is very probably not worth much. But we cannot consider the judgment of a single individual infallible. The opinion that makes a book great must be the opinion of many. For even the greatest critics are apt to have certain dullness. Carlyle, for example, could not endure Browning; Byron could not endure some of the greatest of English poets. A man must be many-sided to utter a trustworthy estimate of many books. We may doubt the judgment of the single critic at times. But there is no doubt possible in regard to the judgment of generations. Even if we cannot at once perceive anything good in a book which has been admired and praised for hundreds of years, we may be sure that by trying, by studying it carefully, we shall at least be able to feel the reason of this admiration and praise. The best of all libraries for a poor man would be a library entirely composed of such great works only, books which have passed the test of time.

This then would be the most important guide for us in the choice of readings. We should read only the books we want to read more than once, nor should we buy any others, unless we have some special reason for so investing money. The second fact demanding attention is the general character of the value that lies hidden within all

such great books. They never become old; their youth is immortal. A great book is not apt to be comprehended by a young person at the first reading, except in a superficial way. Only the surface, the narrative is absorbed and enjoyed. No young man can possibly see at first reading the qualities of a great book. Remember that it has taken humanity in many cases hundreds of years to find out all that there is in such a book. But according to a man's experience of life, the text will unfold new meanings to him. The book that delighted us at eighteen, if it be a good book, will delight us much more at twenty-five and it will prove like a new book to us at thirty years of age. At forty we shall re-read it, wondering why we never saw how beautiful it was before. At fifty or sixty years of age the same facts will repeat themselves. A great book grows exactly in proportion to the growth of the reader's mind.

- Lafcadio Hearn

About the Lesson:

Lafcadio Hearn (1850-1904) was an author of international fame and is best known for his writings about Japan.

In this essay Lafcadio Hearn defines the concept of reading with its meaning, process and aim. The author makes a distinction between the motives of a great critic and a common person. He states that a great and scientific book contains universal truth and sublime ideas that are applicable in every age. At every additional time a great book unfolds to the reader a new meaning and interpretation that leaves a permanent impression on his/her mind.

GLOSSARY:

considerable (adj.)	- great in amount, size, importance etc.
discrimination (n)	- the ability to recognize or judge difference between right and wrong
instinct (n)	- a natural tendency for using knowledge and abilities
passed over (phr. v.)	- overlooked
vague (adj.)	- not clear in a person's mind
peculiar (adj.)	- belonging or relating to a particular person
devour (v)	- to eat something quickly and greedily, here to read books quickly or without going deep into them
fiction (n)	- a type of literature that describes imaginary people and events
narocotic (n)	- a substance that relaxes and reduces pain or causes or induces sleep or drowsiness
perception (n)	- the ability to understand the true nature of something

infallible (adj.)	- that never fails
endure (v)	- experience and tolerate something that is painful or unpleasant, especially without complaining
comprehend (v)	- to understand something fully

ACTIVITY -1 : COMPREHENSION:

A. Say whether the following statements are True or False. Write 'T' for True and 'F' for false.

1. Every body knows the art of reading.
2. Reading in its true sense means reading the words or characters automatically and pronouncing them correctly.
3. A scholar should keep in mind that a book should not be read for mere amusement.
4. We can consider the judgment of a single person infallible.
5. Great books never become outdated.

B. Answer the following questions in about 20-30 words each:

1. Who are able to read very well even before reaching the age of twenty five years?
2. How much is retained in the mind of a reader who reads only for amusement?
3. Why are most of the persons unable to express their original opinion about a book?
4. What does the author mean by hard reading?
5. Explain how, according to Lafcadio Hearn, amusement and study are two different things.
6. What are the chief characteristics of a scientific book?
7. What is the author's opinion about half educated persons?
8. What is the result of the habit of discipline formed in a person?
9. What do we find when we re-read a book?
10. Why has reading for mere amusement been compared to a narcotic?

C. Answer the following questions in about 60-80 words each:

1. How does a great critic differ from a common person?
2. "A good book of fiction or romance or poetry is a scientific work". Explain.
3. How is the greatness of a book determined?
4. Mention the qualities of a good book.
5. What should guide us in the choice of our readings?
6. What does the author mean by "A great book grows exactly in proportion to

the growth of the reader's mind"?

ACTIVITY -2 : VOCABULARY:

(a) Use the following words/phrases in sentences of your own:

considerable experience, literary instinct, passed over, vague idea, worth reading, half educated, intellectual food, perpetual condition, many sides, trustworthy estimate, superficial way

(b) Form verbs from the following nouns and use them in your own sentences:

amusement, opinion, education, judgment, admiration, growth

(c) Convert the following verbs into nouns and use them in sentences of your own : express, confuse, appreciate, compose

(d) Look up the meaning of each of the following words to acquaint yourself with these:

- (i) Dictionary (ii) Thesaurus (iii) Encyclopaedia
- (iv) Philosophy (v) Epic.

ACTIVITY -3 : SPEECH ACTIVITY:

1. Prepare a speech on each of the following for discussion in your class:

- (i) My favourite poet
- (ii) Women's empowerment
- (iii) Importance of National Integration
- (iv) The most inspiring book/story I have read

ACTIVITY 4: COMPOSITION:

- 1. Write an article to be published in your school magazine on "Reading Makes a Man Perfect".
- 2. Write an article on the topic 'Books and Friends Must be Few but Good'.
- 3. Prepare a report for your school magazine on the usefulness of Audio Visual Teaching Aids in Developing English Speaking Skill.