

Chapter 5: What is a Good Book?

NCERT · Class 11 · English · Woven Words · Essay

Understanding The Text

Question 1

What, according to Ruskin, are the limitations of the good book of the hour?

Solution

According to the essayist, the limitations of the good book of the hour are that these are merely newspapers or letters in good print and not true books. The good books of the hour are some pleasant or useful talk of a person whom one cannot converse with. These books are basically written for the purpose of communicating with a huge number of people. According to Ruskin, good books are only books of talk that are printed as the author cannot speak to a wide audience at once. It is only the conveyance of voice using printed words.

Question 2

What are the criteria that Ruskin feels that readers should fulfil to make themselves fit for the company of the Dead?

Solution

The criteria that Ruskin feels that readers should fulfil to make themselves fit for the company of the Dead are that one must remain open to merit and labour. The essayist feels that no name will overawe, no wealth will bribe, and no artifice will deceive the guardian of those Elysian gates. Ruskin says that one should rise to the level of their thoughts to be with their company.

Question 3

Why does Ruskin feel that reading the work of a good author is a painstaking task?

Solution

Ruskin feels that reading the work of a good author is a painstaking task because it is difficult to understand the real meaning of words written by the author. He says that a person should work hard like an Australian miner in order to have a clear idea of a good book that is born of wisdom. According to the essayist, mining is a painstaking task which is similar to reading a good book. The author feels that one should go through the lines to get a complete awareness of the difficult words that are present in good books. One needs hard work and patience, similar to an Australian miner, to get a brief knowledge of the works of famous authors.

Question 4

What is the emphasis placed by Ruskin on accuracy?

Solution

Ruskin emphasised accuracy by highlighting the difference between non-education and education, which is composed with accuracy. The essayist says that a well-educated gentleman may not know many languages— may not be able to speak any but his own—may have read very few books. Nevertheless, he knows the language precisely and pronounces the words correctly. The author highlights that a person may choose to read the entire books present in the British Museum and remain an uneducated and illiterate person, but if one reads about ten pages from a good book, letter by letter, with accuracy, that is rewarding.

Discuss in pairs

Question 1

Ruskin's insistence on looking intensely at words, and assuring oneself of meaning, syllable by syllable—nay, letter by letter.

Solution

Ruskin advises that one should look intensely at words and assure oneself of the meaning, syllabus by syllable – nay, letter by letter. He feels that one must read between the lines to understand the core of the text of any good book. It can be painstaking and time-consuming but rewarding. It provides accuracy, which is the sign of a well-educated person. A person who is educated can read a few books,

but only if one reads them word by word, syllable by syllable, he can gather wisdom, reap the fruit of his effort and transform his life.

Another view –

As reading between the lines is a time-consuming process, there is a possibility that a person may not get an idea of the various perspectives on different life issues. This is because one can read only a few books and develop an attitude which is aristocratic. One should know the perspectives of many authors in order to develop a viewpoint which is comprehensive. Though extensive reading is valuable, Ruskin talks about intensive reading only. Moreover, one may not find it easy to categorise books as bad or good. This categorisation is based on a subjective assessment, which is of relative nature. A good book might be good for some and not good for others.

Question 2

Choice of diction is very crucial to the communication of meaning.

Solution

Communication using words can be easy, but the emphasis should be provided on the choice of diction for effective communication. The impact of communication is based on the choice of diction. A few words would convey the meaning, but a specific word will effectively convey the actual meaning.
