UNIT 1: THE ESSAY AS A GENRE

UNIT STRUCTURE

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1.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

This unit is designed to introduce you to the key concepts in the genre of essay writing, without which the prose paper shall remain incomplete. You will be interested to know that both in style and in content, essays can be of many different kinds. The essay form is a relatively loose sort of composition, in that, unlike drama or poetry, it is not bound by very strict rules pertaining to 'form'. Therefore, it is important to approach the paper with a clear concept of what an essay is and the function it fulfills. The unit also establishes the learning objectives so that you can identify the key areas you need to focus on when you are particularly studying essay as a genre. After reading this unit you will be able to:

- gain an idea on the genre of essay
- describe the hallmarks of a good essay
- identify the major short story writers
- develop your interest in the skill of essay writing
- appreciate the literary form of the essay

1.2 INTRODUCTION

This unit introduces to you the features of essay writing and as it aims to acquaint you with this interesting genre, which is also a widely

practiced literary form it is desirable that you have a fairly good idea of the form. Moreover, since there are almost as many varieties of the essay as there are essayists, you may find the sheer variety a little bewildering. The essay, as a form of literature, has been in existence since ancient times. The introduction provides you a brief history of the essay as a literary form and introduces you to some of the major essayists, each differing from the other. It also helps you to learn some of the varied forms and types of the essay and poses certain related questions to help you figure out as to how well you have comprehended the unit.

1.3 THE ESSAY AS A LITERARY FORM

The essay, as a practiced literary form, has been around since ancient times (even prior to it being known as a genre) as practiced by the Greeks Theophrastus and Plutarch, Cicero and Seneca. In the words of Bacon, one of the greatest of English essayists, “the word is late, but the thing (essay form) is ancient”. Bacon was one of the most famous of the English essayists who wrote during the late sixteenth and the early seventeenth centuries. Francis Bacon was an English philosopher and essayist who had popularised the essay as a literary genre. Among his important works are his *Essays, The Advancement of Learning, Novum Organum, The History of the Reign of King Henry the Seventh, The New Atlantis* and others written in concise and succinct style. Bacon in the year 1597 had described his *Essays* as “grains of salt which will rather give an appetite than offend with satiety”. It was Michel de Montaigne, one of the most influential writers of the French Renaissance, who had coined the term for this particular genre after having named his first publication of essays as *Essais* in the year 1580. Thus, Montaigne, may be considered as the father of essay form as we know it today.

The essay is a rather loose form of writing that can range from highly learned writings in philosophy or the sciences to very personal ruminations on trivial, everyday issues. They may be only a few pages in length, as are the essays of Bacon, or they may be the length of a book e.g., Locke’s “Essay Concerning Human Understanding”. Also, they may show marked

differences in style as well. Montaigne, for an instance, wrote in a style that was discursive, informal and intimate. While Bacon chose a style that was terse, didactic and aloof. Montaigne wrote on topics such as the title themselves suggest: “Liars”, “The Custom of Wearing Clothes” and “The Art of Conversation”. Bacon, on the other hand, wrote on such topics such as “Of Envy”, “Of Riches”, “Of Negotiating”, among others. But on the other hand, if one were to pick up a volume of essays by the essayist Charles Lamb, one would find or come across essays that are very different. Lamb’s essays talk mostly about his personal life, thoughts or memories and are written in the rambling, conversational style, in a very informal language. His style of narration and subtle sense of humour endears him to the readers who tend to relate to his experiences.

After Bacon, the next great English essayist was Sir William Cornwallis whose *Essays* were published in 1600 followed by Abraham Cowley who followed Montaigne’s tradition of personal and reflective informality and wrote on such subjects as liberty, solitude, avarice, the brevity of life, and the uncertainty of riches, etc.

Towards the end of the seventeenth century it was clear that the essay was becoming an increasingly popular form of diversion. Daniel Defoe, better known as a novelist, (you must certainly have heard of his famous novel *Robinson Crusoe*) also wrote journalistic essays and pamphlets which certainly influenced the growth and development of the English essay. However, it was with Addison and Steele that the essay in England had truly arrived. They wrote a type of essay which has come to be known as the periodical essay. Ranging from such subjects as the “Tombs in Westminster Abbey” to “Ladies’ Head-dress”, and from the “Cries of London” to “Recollections of Childhood”, these appeared in *The Tatler* (1709-11) and in *The Spectator* (1712).

In the nineteenth century numerous great essayists such as Lamb, Hazlitt, Thomas de Quincey, Coleridge, Macaulay, Carlyle, Ruskin, Matthew Arnold, Walter Pater and R. L. Stevenson carried forward the tradition of the English essay. In the nineteenth century the medium became indispensable for literary critics, reviewers, journalists and columnists. But

there were changes in the tradition as the subject matter no longer remained confined to light, informal diversions only. Later essayists include great names such as Max Beerbohm, Chesterton, T. S. Eliot, George Orwell, Graham Greene, Aldous Huxley, and W. H. Auden among others.

The form of essay we shall be reading here is, of course, the informal essay. But such essays are not very easy to write, although they may apparently seem to be very simplistic and deal with the most general of subjects. You must remember that an essayist deliberately makes certain choices (e.g., the choice of using the simplest of language). He must consciously achieve the result he desires on the basis of these choices. Consequently, it is in the effects of the essay that we are able to determine its worth. A few pertinent questions can help you determine whether any such informal or personal essay we happen to be reading is worthwhile or not. These questions could be somewhat like:

- Has the author been able to grip my attention from the very beginning?
- Do I find the content of the essay interesting?
- Does the essayist make me feel that I am actually listening rather than reading him/her?
- Is he/she saying things in such a manner that moves my emotions?
- Do I feel like laughing, grinning, crying or any such emotion while reading?

LET US KNOW



David Hume (1711- 76) is an English philosopher and historian, generally considered to be the greatest philosopher, writing in English. He is the author of famous works such as *A Treatise of Human Nature, An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding, The History of Great Britain, The Natural History of Religion,* etc.

George Orwell is a novelist, essayist and journalist. His most popular works are *Animal Farm* and *Nineteen Eighty- Four* which are pessimistic satires on the threat of political tyranny.

1.4 TYPES OF ESSAY

For the learner, essay writing serves the academic purpose of comprehension, analysis, assessment and learning. To introduce you briefly to the types of essay, in general the essay can be divided into two types namely the formal and the informal essay. As discussed by M.H. Abrams in *A Handbook of Literary Terms*, the formal essay (sometimes also known as 'article') is more formal or authoritative in tone and comparatively impersonal (e.g. essays in scholarly magazines) whereas the informal essay (also known as 'familiar' or 'personal' essay) is more informal and intimate in tone and personal and reflective in form, sometimes also rambling on everyday things (e.g. Lamb's *Essays of Elia*).

Some of the different types of essay forms that you may identify are:

- Political essay based on political aspects like the political essays by Coleridge.
- Familiar essay on various aspects which could include personal reflections, everyday things like Lamb's personal *Essays of Elia* or Hazlitt's lectures and essays on romantic travels to new countries, etc.
- Verse essay or compositions written in verse as practiced by Alexander Pope in the "Essay on Criticism" and ''Essay on Man".
- Historico-cultural essay or Review like Thomas Carlyle's "The Sign of the Times."

If you notice carefully these essay forms are based on the variety or sometimes on the difference in content and style of presentation. Also have you wondered about the definition of the term 'prose'? In the description provided by M.H. Abrams the term prose encompasses or includes all kinds of spoken or written discourses.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 1: Who may be considered as the father of the modern essay?

Q 2: Make a list of the names of some important essayists who have contributed to the development of the essay.

Q 3: Is the essay form regulated by strict guidelines?

Q 4: What basic differences would you find between a formal and an informal essay? (Answer in about 50 words)

Q 5: State whether the following statements are true or false:

a. Montaigne was an Italian essayist who wrote in English.

b. Abraham Cowley wrote in the style of Montaigne.

c. Daniel Defoe is better known to us as a novelist.

d. Addison and Steele contributed very little to the development of the essay in England.

e. Charles Lamb and William Hazlitt were nineteenth century essayists.

1.5 SOME FAMOUS ESSAYISTS

Among many such well known essayists, in this unit a selected few i.e. Sir Francis Bacon, Alexander Pope, Richard Steele, Joseph Addison and Charles Lamb have been discussed. In order to inculcate a habit of reading the works of good essayists, it is suggested to the learner to find out about more such essayists, their lives as well as the content of their literary works. The life and works of some of the famous essayists are described below:

Sir Francis Bacon, 1st Viscount St. Alban (22 January 1561- 9 April 1626):

Francis Bacon is one of the major essayists of his time and is considered as one of the pioneers of the essay form due to his literary contribution to the genre of essay-writing. He was born to the Lord Keeper of the Seal, Sir Nicholas Bacon and Lady Anne Cooke and thus came from a noble household. At the young age of twelve, he had joined the Trinity College, Cambridge and later entered the Honourable Society of Gray's Inn to pursue law. Also being actively involved in politics, he had served for a long term in the Parliament from 1584 to 1617, holding high offices of the Attorney General and Lord Chancellor of England.

Among his important works of literary merit are his *Essays* (1597-1625) and some of his other works include *On the Wisdom of the Ancients*,

based on ancient mythology, *The History of Henry VII* (1622), a historical work on Prince Charles, *The New Atlantis* (1624) and *Apothegms* (1624).

Bacon believed in the spirit of the new Renaissance humanism and true to the spirit of enquiry he was skeptical in his thought i.e. he doubted or questioned accepted opinions. His empirical or inductive method of knowledge which emphasised on the relevance of experience, proof and physical observation led to the development of the scientific method and modern sciences. In order to discover and verify nature's truth, the empirical method, now also known as the 'Baconian method,' encourages experimentation, systematic analysis and physical observation.

Thus, the great thinkers of the Renaissance period such as Voltaire and Diderot considered Bacon as the 'father of modern science'. He was optimistic that the empirical school of thought would replace the older schools of thought and usher in the spirit of Renaissance Humanism.

His concern as the philosopher of science had led to his well known work *Novum Organum* (1620) published in Latin in the year 1620 which had opened up a newer perspective to the scientific way of acquiring knowledge. He had also forwarded the idea of the 'duality of truth' which held that truth to the idealist and the common man is different. Even after his demise, Bacon had brought about a major scientific reform which came to be embodied in the principles of The Royal Society of London.

Alexander Pope (21 May 1688-30 May 1744):

Alexander Pope, an English poet of the 18th century was born in London to Alexander Pope, a linen merchant and Edith Turner. Belonging to a Catholic descent, they had to struggle against the severe laws enforced against both Catholics and Non-conformists alike during this period. As Catholics were prevented from living within 16 kms of London or Westminster, in the year 1700 Pope's family had moved to a small estate in Berkshire which was situated near the royal Windsor Forest countryside which also finds description in his poem "The Windsor Forest" (1713). The Test Acts which favoured the established Church of England were a series of harsh laws imposed particularly on practicing Catholics. They were denied their basic civilian rights such as voting or any form of education.

Thus, he was mostly self-taught and had cultivated interest in the classical works of Chaucer, Shakespeare and Dryden. He had developed an interest in several languages and read works in French, Italian, Greek and Latin. He had also translated Homer's *Illiad* which was completed in 1720 and with the money he received, Pope in 1719 shifted to a villa at Twickenham known for the grotto and gardens he had designed. Pope's grotto which still stands today was embellished with mirrors, diamonds, crystals and other such precious gems and stones

Pope's first work was *The Pastorals* (1709) which was as well received as the works followed after it known as the "Essay on Criticism" (1711) and "Essays on Man" (1733). He was a member of the satirical ***Scriblerus Club*** and was well acquainted with both Steele and Addison.



LET US KNOW

The ***Scriblerus Club*** members comprised writers who were also Tories like the writers, Alexander Pope, John Gay, Jonathan Swift, Thomas Parnell and John Arbuthnot. On the other hand, the **Kit-Cat Club** members comprised Whig politicians Richard Steele, Joseph Addison and John Vanbrugh. Steele and Addison had together found *The Tatler* and *The Spectator* magazine which had also propelled and popularised the trend of the periodical journalism.

The difference between a **Tory** and a **Whig** is that while a Tory is a member or supporter of the British Conservative Party, a Whig is a member or a supporter of the British reforming party, supporting the Parliamentary system.

Richard Steele (12 March 1672-1 September 1729):

Richard Steele was born in Dublin to Richard Steele, an attorney and Elinor Symes. He was educated at Charter House, England in 1684, Christ Church, Oxford in 1689 and Merton College, Oxford in 1691. He assumed the pseudonym 'Issac Bickerstaff' which was borrowed from Jonathan Swift's pseudonym. Steele was an English essayist of the 18th

century, a journalist and a politician. Together with Joseph Addison, Steele had founded *The Tatler* and *The Spectator*. In fact, his association with Addison had begun early at Charterhouse and their friendship had resulted in one of the most important literary collaboration in the history of English literature.

His first published work was *The Christian Hero* (1701) and his plays include *The Funeral* (1701), *The Lying Lover* (1703), *The Tender Husband* (1705) and *The Conscious Lovers* (1722)– a successful sentimental comedy.

He was appointed as a Gazetteer writer of *The London Gazette* by Robert Harley and although this association brought him into contact with other Whigs, he did not find in it a creative fulfillment which he did in co-writing as well as editing with Addison. Steele contributed to *The Englishman*, *The Guardian, The Lover* (which contained a total of his 40 essays), The *Reader*, *Town-Talk, The Plebeian* and a bi-weekly periodical *The Theatre.*

The Tatler had first appeared in 1709 and was a tri-weekly periodical. A major chunk of the contents of *The Tatler* i.e. 192 of a total of 271 issues was entirely written by Steele, while Addison had written 42 and they had together co-written 36 issues. It contained writings on informative ideas, entertainment, poetry, politics, changing fashions and tastes and a range of subjects circulating from the popular coffee houses of the time. You will be interested to know that during the early eighteenth century, coffee-houses became a hub for intellectual meetings and a place that gave rise to a 'coffee house culture' where periodical magazines were circulated, which provided news, information and gossip in a good measure.

The Tatler stopped circulating probably because it was difficult for Whigs to fare successfully in a political scenario in which the Tories had come to power in 1710. This could also be one of the reasons for him having officially lost the post of Gazetteer writer. It was after two months of this sudden halt in publication that both Steele and Addison brought out *The Spectator*, followed by *The Guardian* (1713) and *Englishman* (1713-1714). Thus, the two essayists Steele and Addison developed the form of the periodical essay.

Joseph Addison (1 May 1672- 17 June 1719):

Joseph Addison was born in Wiltshire, England to the Reverend Lancelot Addison who later held the position of Archdeacon of Coventry and Dean of Lichfield. He was educated at Queen's College, Oxford and being a meritorious scholar of Latin was a fellow at Magdelen College, bearing a great deal of knowledge of the Classics. He served as a Commissioner of Excise in 1705 and was also actively involved in politics, being a Member of Parliament from 1709 until his last and served as Chief Secretary to Lord Wharton in 1709.

Although the Whig government had collapsed in 1710, he returned to London after a brief year spent in Ireland and became a member of the Kit-Cat Club and met his close friends, Jonathan Swift and Richard Steele. Thus began the literary association of Addison and Steele in founding *The Tatler* and *The Spectator* (as already described above) which made them two of the most leading journalists of their time. Though the popular character of Roger de Coverley was sketched by Steele, Addison had developed the humorous and satirical essays based on the sketch better known as the de Coverley papers to full length and with remarkable literary skills.

Some of his major works include "The Campaign" (1704) a poem in heroic couplets based on the Battle of Blenheim, a tragic play written in blank verse titled *Cato* (containing a prologue penned by Alexander Pope), a prose comedy *The Drummer* (1715), several hymns, political tracts and papers on travel. When the Whigs returned to power in 1715 he went on to hold the position of Lord Commissioner of Trade in 1716 and also started the political newspaper *The Freeholder* (1715-16).



LET US KNOW

Steele and Addison wrote the essays "The Aim of the Spectator", "The Scope of Satire" to outline the aim of *The Spectator*. They aimed at bringing about a reform in the society on social life of England and also refine the tastes of English people.

The Spectator ran a total of 555 issues till 1712 and to add to it,

Addison had revived 80 more issues in 1714. Alexander Pope, Lady Mary Wortley Montagu among others had contributed to the magazine and it contained topics of socio-cultural and moralistic relevance presented in a satirical, reforming way and yet making them a pleasant and interesting reading.

Charles Lamb (10 February 1775 - 27 December 1834):

Born in London, the writer and essayist, Charles Lamb had a carefree childhood, often visiting his grand mother who was a house keeper to a family with a large country-house at Blakesware, Hertforshire. He shared a close relation with her and also with his sister Mary Lamb, who was ten years elder to him. In the essay "Witches, and Other Night-Fears" he is quoted to have said: "[f]rom my childhood I was extremely inquisitive about witches and witch-stories. My maid, and more legendary aunt, supplied me with good store". His years in London captured his interests in books and the theatre and he came to be acquainted with Hazlitt, Hunt and Shelley.

He remained a bachelor for life due to the commitments he had towards his family. He took it upon himself to take care of his sister until his last. She was affected with mental illness and had stabbed her mother in a fit of mania. After their father passed away suffering from prolonged mental illness and a heart stroke, Charles moved in a new home at Mitre Court Buildings in the Temple, with Mary where they resided together for nine long years. Their home was a meeting place for their literary friends and Lamb was particularly close to Coleridge who was his schoolmate. Both the friends were devout believers and friends for life.

You will be interested, to know that he wrote under the pen name of 'Elia' while writing for the *London Magazine* and his popular collection of personal essays are titled as *Essays of Elia*. His works include *Rosamund Gray*, a tragic play *John Woodvil* and the *Last Essays of Elia*. He had collaborated with Mary and together they wrote three books, of which *Tales from Shakespeare* was most well received. His reflective essays endear him to the readers and thus he is considered as one of the major English essayists. Lamb passed away after catching an infection at the age of 59.

His sister Mary outlived him but both brother and sister were buried beside each other.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 6: Which work of Bacon had opened up a newer perspective to the scientific way of acquiring knowledge?

Q 7: Who were the members of the Scriblerus Club and the Kit Cat Club?

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Q 8: Which essayists wrote under the pseudonym of 'Issac Bickerstaff' and 'Elia'?

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Q 9: Name some of the journalistic contributions of Richard Steele.

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Q 10: How many issues of *The Tatler* were written by Steele?

Q 11: In which essays were the aims of *The Spectator* outlined?

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Q 12: Name some of the essays by Charles Lamb.

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Q 13: Answer true or false:

a. The coffee-house-culture began in the 16th century.

b. Alexander Pope wrote the tragic play *Cato*.

c. Lamb collaborated with his sister Mary on the book *Tales of Shakespeare*.

d. A Whig is a supporter of the British Conservative Party

e. Bacon believed in the spirit of the new Renaissance humanism.



ACTIVITY 1.1

1. Read an essay written by any of the writers mentioned above. See for yourself if the essay is written on a subject of personal nature or on something of general interest.

2. Read as many essays as you can from your school text book. Classify the essays according to the topic they discuss. For instance, you may find essays that can be brought under such a heading as 'nature', or 'history', or 'education', etc. Note the length of each essay in terms of the number of pages printed. This will give you a fair idea of the versatility of the essay as a form of literature. You may even come across essays that you will enjoy reading.



1.6 LET US SUM UP

After going through this unit, you have been familiarised with not only what an essay is, but also what makes a good essay. You have learnt that the essay is one of the most widely practised forms of literary writing and is also one of the most flexible of all literary forms. This unit provided you with an idea regarding some of the major essayists in the history of English literature while also providing a brief idea on the various forms and types of the essay. Also in the course of this unit you have learnt about how *The Tatler* and *The Spectator* which were also the mirrors of the 18th century had contributed significantly to the genre of the English essay. Thus, the unit which is designed to serve the purpose of acquainting the learner to the literary genre of the essay also highlights the importance of the essay which lends itself to a variety of forms.



1.7 FURTHER READING

1. Abrams, M. H. (1999). *A Glossary of Literary Terms*. Singapore: Thomson Asia Pvt. Ltd.

2. Adorno, T. W. et al. (1984). "The Essay as Form". *New German Critique*, No. 32. pp. 151-171. Print.
3. Chevalier, Tracy (ed.) (1997).*Encyclopedia of The Essay*. London: Fitzroy Dearborn Publishers.
4. Cuddon, J. A. (1999).*Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory*. London: Penguin.



1.8 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Ans to Q No 1: Montaigne.

Ans to Q No 2: Montaigne, Bacon, Charles Lamb, William Cornwallis, Abraham Cowley, Daniel Defoe, Richard Steele, Joseph Addison, Alexander Pope, William Hazlitt, Thomas de Quincey, S.T Coleridge, Macaulay, Thomas Carlyle, Matthew Arnold, Walter Pater, R.L Stevenson, Max Beerbohm, Chesterton, T.S Eliot, George Orwell, Graham Greene, Aldoux Huxley, W.H Auden among others.

Ans to Q No 3: No.

Ans to Q No 4: Formal: formal, authoritative, comparatively impersonal
Informal: informal, intimate, personal, reflective.

Ans to Q No 5 : a. True
b. True
c. True
d. False
e. True

Ans to Q No 6:*Novum Organum.*

Ans to Q No 7: Scriblerus Club, Tories: Alexander Pope, John Gay, Jonathan Swift, Thomas Parnell, John Arbuthnot
Kit-Cat Club, Whigs: Richard Steele, Charles Lamb, Joseph Addison and Joshn Vanbrugh.

Ans to Q No 8: Richard Steele and Charles Lamb

Ans to Q No 9:*The Tatler, The Spectator, The Guardian, The Englishman, The Lover, The Reader, Town-Talk, The Plebeian, The Theatre.*

Ans to Q No 10: 192 of a total of 271 issues.

Ans to Q No 11: "The Aim of the Spectator" and "The Scope of Satire."

Ans to Q No 12: *Essays of Elia, Rosamund Gray, John Woodvil, Last Essays of Elia.*

Ans to Q No 13: a. False

b. False

c. True

d. False

e. True



1.9 MODEL QUESTIONS

Q1: What are the hallmarks of a good essay?

Q2: In about hundred words, attempt an essay on the importance of maintaining a diary.

Q3: Briefly describe the essay as a literary form while also tracing the history of the form.

Q4: What are the few pertinent questions to determine whether an essay is worthwhile to read or not?

Q5: Briefly state a few of the characteristics of essay writing.

Q6: What are the different types of the essay form?

Q7: Briefly describe the life and works of Sir Francis Bacon.

Q8: Describe in detail the collaborated publication of *The Spectator* and *The Tatler*.

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