UNIT 2: FRANCIS BACON: LIFE AND WORKS

UNIT STRUCTURE

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2.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to:

- describe the life and the times in which the English essayist, Francis Bacon lived
- discuss the literary works by the essayist
- explain the content of the essay "Of Garden"
- gain an interest to further explore the essays by Francis Bacon

2.2 INTRODUCTION

Francis Bacon (1561-1626) was an English essayist, philosopher, scientist, statesman and jurist, considered as one of the significant prose writers of the seventeenth century. The present unit focuses on the life and literary works by Bacon, before we explore one of his essays titled "Of Garden" in the next unit. Thomas Sprat in his *History of the Royal Society of London* (1667) appreciated Bacon's precise and powerful literary style thus, "[h]e [Bacon] was a Man of strong, clear and powerful Imaginations: his Genius was searching and inimitable: and of this: I need give no other proof, then his Style itself" (236) as mentioned in the work titled *Francis Bacon and Renaissance Prose* (1968) by B. Vicker. It is important to note

that Bacon is considered a pioneer of 'essay' or 'essay-writing', particularly owing to his contributions as an essayist. His volume of essays encompasses important aspects of life and living, philosophy and practicality, information and knowledge. Let us then go through the brief discussion on the life and the times in which Francis Bacon lived and wrote.

2.3 FRANCIS BACON: THE ESSAYIST

Bacon was truly a Renaissance figure in terms of his contributions to various fields such as literature, philosophy, science, law, politics and diplomatic services. His literary volume titled *Essays* remains an all time classic and we shall gain a glimpse of his mastery at handling prose in the essay "Of Garden" as prescribed for the course. Before we explore the content of the essay with its various thematic and stylistic aspects, let us have a look at the life and contribution of Bacon as an essayist.

2.3.1 His Life

Francis Bacon was born in the year 1561 as the youngest son to the Lord Keeper of the Seal for Elizabeth I, Sir Nicholas Bacon and Lady Anne (Cooke) Bacon who belonged to a noble aristocratic family of England. Lady Anne Bacon, a scholar in her own right was the daughter of the humanist, Sir Anthony Cooke. Bacon's mother was well-versed in various literature and languages that had a positive influence on Bacon's early childhood. He also had an elder brother named Anthony Bacon. Much of his early education began at home and he had also developed a flair for Latin as he was tutored at home in the same language. At the tender age of 'twelve', he received the wonderful opportunity of studying at theTrinity College, Cambridge. Later, he went on to pursue law at the University of Poitiers, thereafter joining the Gray's Inn in the year 1576. Bacon had a sharp intellect and was greatly influenced by some of the ancient philosophers namely Aristotle, Plato, Socrates and Cicero which found a reflection in most of his reflective writings to a great extent.

As a young man, Bacon had the opportunity of travelling to various places like Poitiers, Italy and Spain which had greatly enriched his learning experiences. During this time, he had joined as an Assistant to Amias Paulet, the British Ambassador of France which provided him with a wide working-knowledge of the diplomatic services. However, in the year 1579, when Bacon received the news of his father's demise, he had to return home to his family. Bacon did not inherit much in terms of paternal property or wealth. Further, owing to financial restraints, he decided to take up work at the Gray's Inn where he had worked for three years. He was eventually promoted as a barrister and he continued his work at the Gray's Inn while also searching for better employment opportunities.

In 1582, Bacon earned a law degree and soon joined the Parliament after his election as a representative in the year 1584. This was a milestone in Bacon's political career and his political career prospered through a span of thirty-six years starting from 1584 to 1617. Moreover, after King James I had come into power, Bacon's career prospects rose further and he went on to receive the knighthood in 1603. He held high offices of the Attorney General and Lord Chancellor of England during his time in the Parliament. Although, his career as the Lord Chancellor of England (as appointed by the King) suffered a setback, due to legal charges of corruption, Bacon pleaded innocent on the grounds that he received gifts like any other person without much thought and yet maintained his sense of personal integrity at all times.

After a brief courtship with a young widow named Elizabeth Hatton, Bacon courted and married a young girl named Alice Barnham in the year 1606 at the age of forty-five.They had a difficult married life due to the pressing legal charges against Bacon and the financial difficulties in the family. Although, Alice Barnham like her mother Dorothy Barnham was driven by power and riches, yet she was left without any inheritance from her husband. Due to

severe pneumonia Bacon quietly passed away on 9 April 1626 at Highgate, London after a long successful literary and public career. In fact, Bacon is best remembered for his literary essays that shaped up a new genre of literature in itself.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 1: When was Bacon born? Who were the parents of Francis Bacon?

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Q 2: Write a few lines on Bacon's education. (Answer in about 50 words)

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Q 3: Name the British ambassador of France with whom Bacon had worked as an Assistant.

Q 4: Mention the year in which Bacon earned his law degree? What was the milestone in his political career?

Q 5: What was the span of Bacon's successful political career?

2.3.2 His Works

Bacon believed in the spirit of the new Renaissance humanism and true to the spirit of enquiry, he was a 'skeptic' in his thought or we could say that he was an individual who 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 also known as the 'Baconian method', encouraged experimentation, systematic analysis and physical observation.

Bacon was optimistic that the empirical school of thought would replace the older schools of thought and usher in the spirit of Renaissance Humanism. Thus, it is not surprising that great thinkers of the Renaissance period such as Voltaire and Diderot considered Bacon as the 'Father of Modern Science'. In fact, his concern as a philosopher of science had led to his well-known work *Novum Organum* (1620) published in Latin which had opened up a newer perspective towards the scientific way of acquiring knowledge. He had also forwarded the idea on the 'duality of truth' which held that truth to the idealist and the common men were different. Even after his demise in 1626, Bacon's influence had brought about a major scientific reform which came to be embodied in the principles of the Royal Society of London.

The most important works of literary merit by Bacon are his *Essays* (1597-1625), the first edition was published in 1597 containing a total of ten essays and the second publication came out in 1612 with thirty-eight essays followed by a final compilation published in 1625 that contained fifty-eight essays.Some of his other philosophical, scientific, religious and historical works include *On the Wisdom of the Ancients*, based on ancient mythology, *Colours of Good and Evil* (1597), *Sacred Meditations* (1597), *The Advancement and Proficience of Learning Divine and Human* (1605), *Novum Organum Scientarium* (1620), *The History of Henry VII* (1622), *The New Atlantis* (1624) and *Apothegms* (1624).

These reflect his efforts at covering a wide range of knowledge in his works. Also, Bacon was known to have practiced taking notes from book sources, recording interesting observations, proverbs, reflections, quotations, Latin phrases, etc. It is this interest in writing 'notes' that perhaps gave shape to his essays which enquired into multiple aspects of human life much like his French counterpart 'Michel de Montaigne', the French essayist, from whom he was much inspired. The first biography of Bacon was written by his private chaplain William Rawley in the year 1657 after his demise.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 6: How was the spirit of enquiry reflected in the works of Francis Bacon? (Answer in about 50 words)

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Q 7: What does the Baconian method encourage?

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Q 8: What was the contribution of Bacon's *Novum Organum* ?

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Q 9: Match the following set A with set B

i) Novum Organum	a) 1624
ii) Sacred Meditations	b) 1620
iii) The New Atlantis	c) 1597



LET US KNOW

The philosophical and scientific ideas of Bacon were held in great regard during the 1630s which had also earned him the title "Father of Empiricism". He is also considered to have brought about a change in creating a modern scientific approach towards Nature.

2.4 THE *ESSAYS* BY BACON

In an introduction to *Francis Bacon: The Major Works* (1996), an interesting discussion on Bacon's literary works also highlights R.S. Crane's observation and study of Bacon's *Essays* "as a contribution to the study of human life from what we would describe as a psychological and sociological viewpoint" (xxi). Bacon's volume of fifty-eight essays contain interesting areas of discussion as the title of essays suggest such as: "Of

Great Place", "Of Friendship", "Of Parents and Children", "Of Love", "Of Goodness and Goodness of Nature", "Of Travel", "Of Riches", "Of Ambition", "Of Nature in Men", "Of Youth and Age", "Of Death", "Of Unity in Religion", "Of Adversity", "Of Great Peace", "Of Boldness" to mention a few.

As already discussed, the *Essays* is considered to have stemmed from Bacon's interest in collecting commonplace books, which was also a common Renaissance practice and the habit of note-taking from various references, particularly books. Through the wide ranging themes found in the volume of essays, Bacon succeeds at providing a deep insight into his philosophical and moral reflections presented in a concise manner with his acute observations and lively examples. Moreover, his essays cover interesting aspects of human life and human nature to which we can easily relate to and from which we may be inspired to broaden our own perspectives of life and living. An essay taken from this volume titled "Of Garden" provides readers with a literal gardener's almanac that records the best time and climatic conditions, to plant flowering and ornamental plants, herbs and shrubs, shade and fruit trees. In a nutshell, the message contained in the essay is the importance of cultivating a love for plants that not only makes a delightful hobby but also creates pleasant natural surroundings which in turn become our spaces of joyous retreat.

Further, garden-planning or landscaping, as discussed in the essay, enhances one's creativity by encouraging experimentation with seasonal and evergreen plants based on one's geographical climate and location together with aesthetic utilization of garden spaces. It encourages one to mix and match flowering plants and take into account the importance of air, sunlight, rain and water while planning a garden. As Mary Augusta Scott suggests in her introduction to the edited volume of Bacon's *Essays*, she mentions some of her thoughts on the essay and prominent writers who had visited the gardens of Francis Bacon. She writes thus,

> "I think I took most pleasure in editing the essay, *Of Gardens.* It is not possible now to know just what iris Bacon meant by the 'chamairis,' or whether 'flos Africanus' was the botanical name of the French marigold in his day, but as far as I could I have identified

botanically all the plants and flowers Bacon mentions in his Elizabethan garden, except those so familiar as to need no comment. And wherever any of them is mentioned by Shakespeare, I have added a posy from his plays. But Keats and Cowper and Tennyson and Ben Jonson and Thomson and Evelyn and Dryden also walked in Bacon's garden, and last, but not least, Sir Walter Scott was there showing his friend, Susan Edmonstone Ferrier, about."



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 10: Name some of the essays from Bacon's volume of fifty eight essays.

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Q 11: What was the main source for Bacon's *Essays*?

Q 12: What is the reason that Bacon literally provides a gardener's almanac in his essay "Of Garden"? (Answer in about 75 words)

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Q 13: Write a few lines on the aspect of garden planning or landscaping as discussed in the essay "Of Garden." (Answer in about 75 words)

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ACTIVITY 2.1

Spend some time reflecting on the beauty of gardens that come to your mind, it could be your own lawn or garden at home, your kitchen garden or little orchard or even your neighbour's garden. If you are a gardening enthusiast write down your gardening experiences. And if you have not gathered gardening experiences as yet, try writing a

piece of appreciation on any garden or even an orchard that catches your fancy or try remembering the last time you really took notice of a garden, blooming with fragrant flowers, ripe fruits, flowing fountains, fleeting butterflies and bees buzzing by. Also, write down a list of Indian flowers, fruits, plants and trees that you know, just so that you can expand your knowledge with new names that you are yet to learn and discover.



2.5 LET US SUM UP

After going through this unit, you have gained a better insight into the life and works of the English essayist Francis Bacon. The unit will supplement your knowledge on the essayist before we begin to explore the prescribed essay titled “Of Garden” by Francis Bacon. It is suggested that the learner goes through the original text of the essay before going through the provided explanation of the text in the following unit. The essays of Bacon are not only interesting for their universal appeal but are also packed with a lot of practical information, so much so, that his volumes could easily be considered a resourceful guide on various practical and philosophical aspects of life.



2.6 FURTHER READING

1. Chaudhuri, Sukanta. (ed.) (2006). *Bacon’s Essays: A Selection*. Oxford University Press: New York.
2. Nandwani, Aditya. (ed.) (2009). *Bacon’s Essays*. Anmol Publications. New Delhi.
3. Scott, Mary Augusta. (1908). *The Essays of Francis Bacon*. C. Scribner and Sons, Harvard University Collections.
4. Vickers, Brian. (ed.) (1996). *Francis Bacon: The Major Works*. Oxford University Press: New York.
5. Vickers, Brian. (ed.) (1968). *Francis Bacon and Renaissance Prose*. Cambridge University Press.

2.7 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Ans to Q No 1: Francis Bacon was born in the year 1561 as the youngest son to the Lord Keeper of the Seal for Elizabeth I, Sir Nicholas Bacon and Lady Anne (Cooke) Bacon who belonged to a noble aristocratic family of England.

Ans to Q No 2: Much of his early education began at home and he also had developed a flair for Latin as he was home-tutored in Latin. At the tender age of 'twelve', he received the fine opportunity of studying at the Trinity College, Cambridge and later, he pursued law at the University of Poitiers, joining the Gray's Inn in 1576.

Ans to Q No 3: Amias Paulet.

Ans to Q No 4: In 1582, Bacon earned a law degree and soon joined the Parliament after his election as a representative in the year 1584 which was a milestone in Bacon's political career.

Ans to Q No 5: Bacon's political career prospered through a span of thirty-six years starting from 1584 to 1617.

Ans to Q No 6: Bacon believed in the spirit of the new Renaissance humanism and true to the spirit of enquiry he was a 'skeptic' in his thought or we could say that he was an individual who doubted or questioned accepted opinions.

Ans to Q No 7: Baconian method encourages experimentation, systematic analysis and physical observation.

Ans to Q No 8: *Novum Organum* (1620) had opened up a newer perspective to the scientific way of acquiring knowledge.

Ans to Q No 9: i) b, ii) c, iii) a

Ans to Q No 10: Bacon's volume of fifty-eight essays contain interesting areas of discussion as the title of essays suggest such as: "Of Great Place", "Of Friendship", "Of Parents and Children", "Of Love", "Of Goodness and Goodness of Nature", "Of Travel", "Of Riches", "Of Ambition", "Of Nature in Men", "Of Youth and Age", "Of Death", "Of

Unity in Religion", "Of Adversity", "Of Great Peace", "Of Boldness" to mention a few.

Ans to Q No 11: The *Essays* are considered to have stemmed from Bacon's interest in collecting commonplace books, which was also a common Renaissance practice and the habit of note-taking from various references, particularly books.

Ans to Q No 12: An essay taken from this volume titled "Of Garden" provides readers with a literal gardener's almanac that records the best time and climatic conditions, to plant flowering and ornamental plants, herbs and shrubs, shade and fruit trees. In a nutshell, the message contained in the essay is the importance of cultivating a love for plants that not only makes a delightful hobby but also creates pleasant natural surroundings which in turn become our spaces of joyous retreat.

Ans to Q No 13: Garden-planning or landscaping, as discussed in the essay, enhances one's creativity by encouraging experimentation with seasonal and evergreen plants based on one's geographical climate and location together with aesthetic utilization of garden spaces. It encourages one to mix and match flowering plants and take into account the importance of air, sunlight, rain and water while planning a garden.



2.8 MODEL QUESTIONS

Q1: Give a detailed description of the life of the English essayist Francis Bacon.

Q2: Discuss the literary works by Francis Bacon.

Q3: Write a short note on the following:

a. The spirit of enquiry

b. The *Essays* by Bacon

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