UNIT 4: A.G. GARDINER: LIFE AND WORKS

UNIT STRUCTURE

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4.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After reading this unit you will be able to:

- grasp an idea about the famous essayist, A.G. Gardiner
- give an outline of the life of Gardiner
- discuss the contribution of A. G. Gardiner in the field of English literature
- identify with Gardiner's conversational writing style

4.2 INTRODUCTION

This unit aims to identify the key areas that will help to acquaint you with A.G. Gardiner, the essayist. Gardiner has always been a very popular choice in many anthologies meant for students. This unit will try to introduce you to the features of A.G. Gardiner's writing that have gained him such popularity.

Most importantly, this unit gives you an introduction to A.G. Gardiner and also provides you with a detailed study of the man, his life and his works. This unit will help you to read the next unit of this block that deals with one of his essays titled ''On Saying Please.''

4.3 A.G. GARDINER: THE ESSAYIST

A.G. Gardiner has always been rated very highly among English essayists. In fact, such essays as “All About a Dog” or “On Letter Writing” have been so popular, that anthologies of English prose for students invariably contain one of these essays. There is such a note of intimacy in the language that Gardiner always uses, and such an easy conversational style that the reader often feels as though he were in actual conversation with the author in some cozy corner. This unit shall provide you with an idea about the man and his work.

4.3.1 His Life

A.G. Gardiner was better known in his own day as one of the most powerful of editors in the England of King Edward VII who came to the throne after the death of Queen Victoria. His entire name was Alfred George Gardiner, but he preferred to call himself A.G. Gardiner as he never liked the Alfred or the George in his name. He actually preferred the English habit of calling people by their surnames against the American habit of calling people by their first names.

Born in 1865, Gardiner left school at the minimum age and decided to become a journalist. He was quite successful and rose to become the editor of *The Daily News*, a powerful newspaper owned by the Cadbury family. He held this position for fifteen years. However, by the end of this time, he fell into a feud with Lloyd George. The Cadbury family, who owned the paper, decided to support Lloyd George instead of Gardiner. As a result Gardiner found himself without a job, his career as an editor over.

This led to a new, gentler and quieter phase, in his life. He started writing essays under the name of ‘Alpha of the Plough’. He gained immense popularity as an essayist - perhaps almost as much as he had gained as an editor. After a long and a successful career as an essayist, Gardiner died in the year 1946.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 1: How did A.G. Gardiner begin his career?

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Q 2: How did Gardiner lose his job?

……..……..……



LET US KNOW

The English word 'essay' comes from the French 'essayer' which means 'to try', or 'to attempt'. Michel de Montaigne (1533-1592), who is considered to be the father of the essay as we know it, started writing his *Essais* in 1572, inspired by the works of the ancient Roman, Plutarch. In England the term 'essayist' was first used by Ben Jonson in 1609.

4.3.2 His Works

After his career as a very successful newspaper editor was over, Gardiner decided to write essays under the pen-name 'Alpha of the Plough'. Of all the books of compiled essays by Gardiner, perhaps *Many Furrows* and *Prophets, Priests and Kings* can claim to be the favourite of readers over the years. This, of course, does not mean that *Pebbles on the Shore* and *Leaves in the Wind* are in any way inferior. These collections, too, have always had their fair share of fans. Whereas the essays in *Many Furrows* are of a more general nature, the ones in *Prophets, Priests and Kings* are more political in nature. The following excerpt from the essay *On Smiles* from the latter book is a good example of Gardiner's political writing. It shows a more caustic side of a man whom one normally associates with the general:

> In an estimate of the qualities that have contributed to Mr. Lloyd George's amazing success a high place would have to be given to the twinkling smile, so merry and mischievous, so engagingly frank and yet so essentially secret and

> calculating, with which, by the help of his photographer, he has irradiated his generation. If Mr. Asquith had learned how to smile for public consumption, the history of English politics, and even of the world, would have been vastly different ....

By and large, his essays are the musings of a man who is content, who accepts the fact that he is growing old, who finds great pleasure in simple things like country walks or gardening, and is in the happy company of his wife, Jane.

As he grew older, his interest in age and ageing began to manifest itself in his essays. His newfound habit of gazing at shop windows, his praise for the month of November, or when he compares the false idea of longevity with the true spirit of the cricketer who knows that the game has no meaning unless, sooner or later, we are 'out' - all these show a man who is aware of the changes that age brings about; a man who is beginning to enjoy things he had no time for when he was younger and occupied.

The quintessential Gardiner essay begins with the description of a seemingly trivial incident, a remark he happened to have overheard, a not very significant headline in a newspaper - something seemingly trivial, from which he goes on to his main issue.

A perceptive critic once remarked:

> The charm of the genre is the sense of freedom and the unexpected: you don't have to plough through too much on the same subject. Unlike academic writing it requires no definition of 'field' and unlike most journalism it requires neither specialisation nor topicality. It is a form of writing which has almost entirely disappeared from our newspapers: if A.G. were to offer his services now ... he would end up as a gardening or a countryside correspondent ... Gardiner was nothing if not reflective.

While Hume or Orwell wrote essays which are challenging, to say the least, Gardiner's essays belong to a very different form. Like William Hazlitt or Robert Lynd, who was Gardiner's friend, Gardiner wrote essays that are more of a pleasure to read than a challenge. They induce in the reader gentle thoughts, gentle smiles, may be even gentle tears.

He also wrote the biography of Sir William Harcourt titled as *The Life of Sir William Harcourt*.

When Gardiner died in 1946, he left behind a legacy of charming essays that may be read in books as disparate as school anthologies and Edward Pearce's contribution in *History Today*. The charm of an A.G. Gardiner essay is such that, long after newer forms of the English essay have supplanted the style, one still finds a pleasure in it that cannot be compared to any other kind.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 3: Name two books that contain the essays of Gardiner.

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Q 4: What are the prominent features of Gardiner's essays? (Answer in about 75 words)

…….

Q 5: How does Gardiner often begin his essays?

…….

Q 6: Name the biography that has been written by A. G. Gardiner.

…….



4.4 LET US SUM UP

After reading this unit, you have gained an idea regarding the essayist-A.G. Gardiner, who is known for his conversational style of writing. This unit pointed out some of the major incidences of his life, thereby adding to your

impression on this essayist. Being an essayist, Gardiner's contribution can not be overlooked who have enriched the genre with his excellent and friendly compositions. You are now aware of his works and acquainted with the amount of excellence he had cultivated that secured him a place in the world of the English essay.



4.5 FURTHER READING

1. Allison, Lincoln .*The Ploughman's Canapes: A.G. Gardiner's Many Furrows.* (Web Review : The Social Afffairs Unit).
2. Gardiner, A.G.(1914). *Prophets, Priests and Kings.* Cambridge: J.M Dent & Sons.
3. Gardiner, A.G. (1924). *Many Furrows.* London: J.M Dent & Sons.
4. Koss, Stephen. (1846). *Fleet Street Radical: A.G. Gardiner and the Daily News.* London: Penguin.
5. You can also surf the internet for articles on A.G. Gardiner. Try http:// www.Amazon.com for books on or by A.G. Gardiner. You might search for 'Alpha of the Plough' too - the name Gardiner wrote under.



4.6 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Ans to Q No 1: He was quite successful and rose to become the editor of The Daily News, a powerful newspaper owned by the Cadbury family. He held this position for fifteen years.

Ans to Q No 2: Due to a feud with Lloyd George.

Ans to Q No 3: *Many Furrows and Prophets, Priests and Kings.*

Ans to Q No 4: His essays are the musings of a man who is content . . . who finds great pleasure in simple things . . . As he grew older, his interest in age and ageing began to manifest itself in his essays.

Ans to Q No 5: Gardiner's essay begins with the description of a seemingly trivial incident.

Ans to Q No 6: *The Life of Sir William Harcourt.*



4.7 MODEL QUESTIONS

Q1: Analyse the contribution of A.G. Gardiner as an essayist.

Q2: What idea of Gardiner did you get after reading the unit?

Q3: Describe A. G. Gardiner's experience as an editor.

Q4: Mention the features of Gardiner's essays.

Q5: Write a short note on the works of A. G. Gardiner.

Q6: State whether the following statements are true or false:

a) There is a note of intimacy in the language that Gardiner uses.

b) The essays in *Prophets, Priests and Kings* are of a more general nature, the ones in *Many Furrows* are more political in nature.

c) Gardiner was the editor of *The Daily News*.

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