UNIT 5: A.G. GARDINER: "ON SAYING PLEASE"

UNIT STRUCTURE

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5.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After reading this unit you will be able to:

- describe the context of the essay
- explain the essay "On Saying Please"
- analyse A. G. Gardiner's style and technique
- locate the status of A.G. Gardiner as an essayist

5.2 INTRODUCTION

This unit deals with one of the essays by A. G. Gardiner titled "On Saying Please". You will get a detailed synopsis of the essay in this unit. Over and above the unit aims to acquaint you with the themes that form a crucial part of the essay. Besides this, the unit also tells you about the technique, style and the language used by Gardiner in this essay.

5.3 KEY ISSUES IN THE TEXT

This essay by A.G. Gardiner explores the issue of politeness as an extremely important and indispensable feature of civil society. Politeness, he argues, is that which keeps the social life of civilised man well oiled and friction free. Good temper gives rise to naturally pleasant behaviour that

radiates pleasantness all around. Conversely, bad temper breeds uncouth behaviour that poisons the stream of life. Both good and bad behaviour are highly infectious. The problem is that good behaviour cannot be enforced by the law. This is so because the manifestation of good behaviour depends on the tone of one's voice, the cast of one's lips, the expression on one's face - and such things that the law can never regulate. Finally, Gardiner argues that one may get the sweetest revenge against boorish individuals by being excessively polite towards them.

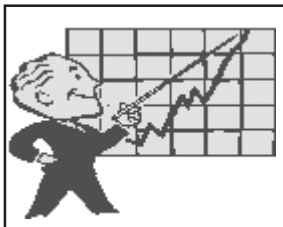
5.4 EXPLANATION OF THE ESSAY

The essay begins with the author recounting an incident of a lift attendant who threw a passenger out of his lift. The problem was that the passenger, rather rudely, demanded to be taken to the top floor. The liftman wanted a more polite request prefaced with the word 'please'. Since the passenger refuse to use the word, the liftman threw the passenger out of the lift. Commenting on the incident, Gardiner points out that the action of the liftman cannot be condoned. He thinks so because impoliteness is not considered to be legally punishable offence. Should a person use violence against a robber who has entered his house, or against anyone who has assaulted him, the law will side with him. This is so because both robbery and assault are forbidden by the law. However, there can be no law against rude behaviour. Gardiner feels that, although we may feel sympathetic towards the liftman, we must agree that the law is right in not giving us the freedom to use violence against people whose manners or expression we do not like. For if we were given such liberty, our hands would be always busy hitting people and the drains of the city would run blood all the time.

The author says that the only penalty one has to pay for being rude or arrogant is that people will call him a rude fellow. The law, on the other hand, will protect rather than punish him. The legal system does not impose any restriction on manners, just as it does not impose any restrictions on one's personal appearance. The hurting of a person's 'feeling' is not considered a case where the person who inflicts the hurt must be made to

pay for damages. The law has no provision for defending people from moral or intellectual damages inflicted by uncouth people.

Despite this, however, Gardiner asserts that such damages are in no way negligible. The rude person's behaviour towards the liftman must have seemed to the latter as an insult to his social position. This must hurt more than a kick on his shins because he may get the law to act against the one who has kicked him and, in any case, the pain of a kick soon passes away. The wound caused to one's self respect, on the other hand, does not heal easily. Gardiner imagines how the liftman must have brooded over the insult day and how, upon returning home, he must have given vent to his anger upon his wife in the evening. Bad manners easily infect people who come across it. The author gives an example from a play, *The Rivals*, by Sheridan to illustrate the point. In the play Sir Antony Absolute bullies his son who gets annoyed and passes on his annoyance to his personal servant who, in turn goes and kicks one of the lower servants in the household. Trying to trace the root of the lift passenger's rude behaviour, Gardiner guesses that the problem might have begun with a housemaid who had been rude to the cook who, as a result, might have been rude to his mistress who, in consequence might have passed on her annoyance to her husband who ultimately passed on his annoyance by being rude to the liftman. Bad manners, in his opinion, are highly contagious and poison our life in general than the entire list of legally recognised crimes. If a woman is boxed by an otherwise gentle husband, there are many more who suffer in silence from bad temper. Yet the law cannot do anything in this regard. No Decalogue could make a list of all the harm inflicted by manners, moods, facial expressions and the like. Nor can these be dictated by any law.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q1: Why did the liftman throw the passenger out of the lift?

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Although everybody must necessarily support the law in the case of the liftman, people will paradoxically feel sympathy for him. Just because the law cannot compel us to use expressions such as 'please' does not mean that we can do away with customs that are more sacred than even the law. One such custom of civilised man is to acknowledge a service. Gardiner says that words like 'please' and 'thank you' are the small coins we pay on our journey through life as civilised human beings living in a civil society. These courtesies allow us to live in society without friction. Besides, these words help to keep cooperation between human beings on a level of friendliness and goodwill, instead of dividing us into superiors who order and inferiors who are ordered about. The author says that only a very vulgar person will order for a service which he can have by merely asking. This is so because, whereas a request will provide the service with goodwill, an order might provide the service - but only with resentment.

Gardiner then goes on a state that he wishes to hold up the example of a friend of his whom he calls 'the polite conductor'. He hastens to add that by calling a particular conductor polite, he does not mean to imply that all other conductors are impolite. In fact, he says, given the difficult nature of their jobs, most conductors go about their work in a very good-natured manner. There are, of course, exceptions. Here and there one meets resentful conductors who look upon the passengers as their enemies who have to be kept in check through aggression. But such specimens are fewer than they used to be, and Gardiner thinks that this is because the Underground Railway Company, who manages the bus service, imposes a certain standard of polite behaviour in the men who work for them. This, he feels, is an important bit of social service that also benefits the passengers.

Having made it clear that he has nothing against conductors in general, Gardiner tells us about his first interaction with the polite conductor. It happens one day when he boards the bus without realising that he has left home without any money in his pocket. This being an experience common to most people, the author feels that the reader will know the feeling such a situation evokes. One feels either like a fool or a crook. One

almost expects the conductor to look at him suspiciously and imply that this is a common trick played by crooks and be asked to get off the bus. Even if the conductor believes him and is kind, he is still left with the necessity of going back home for his wallet, wasting a lot of time, and not being able to do what he had set out to do.

Finding no coins at all in his pockets, Gardiner tells the conductor that he must go back home to fetch some money. At this the conductor tells him that he does not need to get off. Flourishing his bundle of tickets, he offers to give the author a ticket to wherever he may want to go. When the author told him the destination the conductor handed him the ticket, but when the former wanted to know where he should send the money, the cheerful reply he got was that he was bound to meet the latter some day on some bus. Luckily for Gardiner, he found a coin in his pocket at last and managed to pay the fare. The joy, however, that such pleasantness on the part of the conductor gave him, did not diminish even a tiny bit.

Soon after it so happened that the same conductor accidentally stepped on the author's toe, causing him much pain. The cheerful conductor was quick to apologise, saying that he had got those heavy boots on because his toes were often trod on, yet, ironically, he himself was now stepping on people's toes. When he asked Gardiner if he were hurt the latter reassured him that he was not - even though in point of fact he was what is illustrated here is the effect of politeness and how good behaviour evinces good behaviour. From that incident onwards the author begins to take note of the polite conductor and his actions. He seems to have a limitless supply of patience and goodwill towards his passengers. As caring as a son to the elderly and as a father to children, he goes out of his way to make passengers comfortable. Be it by letting people on the top know that there are seats lower down when it rains, or by cracking jokes with young people to make them laugh, or to set down a blind person up on the footpath and safely on his way, the polite conductor always exuded such good-temper and kindliness that Gardiner says that a journey with him taught one what natural courtesy and good manners were.

Gardiner then goes on to show us the benefit of such behaviour. The polite conductor never had any difficulty in doing his work. Just as rudeness begets rudeness, likewise a sunny disposition begets pleasantness in others. The poet Keats had claimed that he always felt cheerful when the weather was sunny, and, says Gardiner, cheerful people come to us like the blessing of sunny weather. Consequently, the atmosphere inside this particular conductor's bus was always pleasant. His politeness, his readiness to accommodate, his pleasant manner of conducting himself resulted in making his passengers happy, which, in turn, made his own work easy. That is why Gardiner points out that his politeness was not a waste but a very good investment.

Although sad that the polite conductor is no longer on his route, the author hopes that it means that he has carried his cheerfulness to another route. The world at large is a rather dull place, he says, and so such cheerfulness needs to be spread as widely as possible. Moreover, Gardiner is not apologetic about writing a piece in praise of an unknown conductor. He feels that just as William Wordsworth, the English romantic poet, could learn lessons from the humble leech gatherer and the lonely moor, ordinary people too could learn from a man who elevated his modest job through good temper and kindness.

There is a general feeling that the World War has taken away from man's daily life the use of civility that had made life sweet earlier. Gardiner asserts that those civilities must be restored to make life with one another easier. This cannot be done with the help of policemen or the law - which are necessary for creatures like man who are far from perfect. Whereas the law can only protect us from physical injury, the liftman's way of retaliating against rudeness with physical violence too is ineffectual. Gardiner suggests that if rudeness were to be replied to with excessive politeness, sweet revenge might be had while retaining one's moral superiority. He calls it the victory over oneself - the only victory that matters to end the piece, he recounts the story of the witty Lord Chesterfield for the edification of the liftman. There was a time when the streets of the city were very muddy and the only way of keeping one's shoes clean was by walking as close as

possible to the wall, where a very narrow strip of ground was a little higher than the rest of the road. Here Chesterfield came face to face with an uncouth fellow who refused to step into the mud to allow Chesterfield to pass. "I never give way to a scoundrel', is what he said. Immediately Chesterfield stepped into the mud with a bow saying, "I always do". Gardiner hopes that the liftman will understand that this revenge was much better than throwing the fellow into the mud.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 2: Narrate the episode of the bus conductor and Gardiner as mentioned in the essay. (Answer in about 100 words)

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Q 3: What does Gardiner suggest at the end of the essay?

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LET US KNOW

Lord Chesterfield was not only a man of letters but was also very famous for his brilliant wit and pithy comments on the many aspects of life. You may read his quotations in this website, among others: www.famousquotesandauthors.com.

5.5 STYLE AND LANGUAGE

Can we, first of all, ask ourselves the question, what does technique mean? Well, 'technique is a broad term that indicates a range of measures that an author takes in writing, to achieve certain specific results that he desires. "Technique" may sometimes also include in its spectrum certain stylistic devices that the author uses quite consciously to achieve the results he desires in his readers. Then again, you find this particular author often beginning with a specific event from which he moves on to a broader

rumination on the matter. This too is a 'technique' frequently used by A.G. Gardiner. The following paragraphs will help you understand the style and technique of Gardiner better.

Most of the essays of A.G. Gardiner start with the reporting of a chance bit of conversation overheard, a small incident either experienced or read about or something similar that provides the author an opening to move on to more significant, though perhaps general, matters related to it. Here, too, he begins by telling us about an incident in the city where a liftman threw a passenger out of the lift when the latter refused to be polite.

This is usually Gardiner's technique. Thus, for instance, in the essay 'On Letter Writing', he tells us about a conversation between two brothers, Bill and Sam, on a railway platform. The two brothers are discussing the difficulties they face when they try to write letters, even though, apparently, both are soldiers in a momentous war. This becomes the starting point for Gardiner to move on to a meditation upon the art of letter writing and why the art is beginning to die.

"'All About a Dog" is another essay that begins in a similar manner. The author tells us about an incident that takes place one day on board the bus by which he is travelling. There happens to be a rather fashionable lady who boards the bus with a small Pekinese dog in her lap. The conductor of the bus - a rather unpleasant individual - refuses to let the lady travel inside the lower part of the bus, and insists that she go to the top although it is bitterly cold. He imposes this on the authority of his 'rules'. After describing the incident to its conclusion, Gardiner moves on to a rumination on 'rules', their necessity and their imposition. He talks about such things as the 'letter' and the 'spirit' of rules and gives his view on when and where rules may be imposed or ignored.

In this essay, while commenting on the appropriateness or otherwise of the liftman's action, Gardiner moves on to a thorough discussion on politeness and courtesy - why such things are necessary and how to deal with people who lack these basic traits of civil behaviour.

Such is his mastery over technique that the reader often does not even realise that his thoughts and responses are being cleverly manipulated

by the author. He achieves this by using a language that seems to be aimed at the particular reader who is reading the essay.

In other words, he uses a language that forms an intimate bond between him and his reader, giving rise to the feeling that the reader is actually sitting opposite him in an informal, intimate and cosy *tete-a-tete*. Thus the reader follows him readily and willingly through all the diversions from the main issue often realizing much later how these seeming side issues are important aspects of the main issue.

We see this, for instance, when he introduces 'the polite conductor' and then seems to go quite off track and speak about conductors in general and the contribution of the Underground Railway Company. It is only in hindsight that we realize that this is a very pertinent point relating not only to public behaviour of service personnel, but also to the necessity of using good behaviour to beget good behaviour.

That firm control can also be seen when one traces the development of the essay. In a seemingly desultory fashion the author begins with the anecdote of the liftman and then digresses to a discussion on manners in general. However, the fact that the 'digression' is only *seemingly desultory* can be noticed when one takes into account the controlled development of the entire piece of writing. Thus, the first half of the essay starts with the rude behaviour of the passenger and its repercussion, and then moves on to a discussion on uncouth behaviour and how it harms society by multiplying itself, as it were. Gardiner also uses an example from a play by Sheridan to prove his point. Then, adroitly, he turns the topic to polite behaviour and civility. To illustrate his point, he 'features' the polite conductor. And just when we thought that he was done, he brings back the liftman (who had begun all the rumination, in the first place) and recommends to him the anecdote about Lord Chesterfield. In doing so he brings beginning and end together in a neat circle, thereby completing his discussion and giving an 'organic' structure to his essay and a completeness that only a highly skilled and meticulous craftsman, with complete mastery over his technique, can show.

As in other essays, Gardiner writes this essay too in a language as simple as homespun. His style is very conversational, as though no printed page separates him from his reader. Indeed, he seems to treat the 'reader' more as an actual person he happens to be chatting with. This immediacy is a constant with this author, and he achieves this by taking us to the middle of an incident, into the thick of things, as it were, without much ado. In this particular essay this happens to be the case of the liftman who threw a passenger out of his lift for the latter's refusal to say 'please'. This provides him with the cue to open up a train of thought on polite (and impolite) behaviour.

Gardiner never uses difficult or cumbersome words. Nor are his sentences too long or tortuous. This is a deliberate decision, as he never wants his style to be anything but conversational. Yet this simple language is extraordinarily evocative. One notices this when he talks about 'the polite conductor'. Such is Gardiner's style that one can almost imagine oneself sitting inside that very bus, at that very moment, observing the very things that Gardiner describes.

Perhaps it is this conversational trait in Gardiner that allows him to move forward with great ease, even when he shifts his focus. Shifting of focus does not, of course, mean that Gardiner rambles. He never does. The central issue is always in sharp focus, but the smaller details used to illuminate the central issue keep on changing. That explains the fact that the reader barely notices the shift from abstract comments on the impossibility of enforcing polite behaviour to the concrete example of the polite conductor. Gardiner moves the reader with such adroitness to the company of this man that one realises and appreciates the smoothness of the transition only when one looks back after completing one's reading of the essay.

With such master over style, technique and language, it is no wonder that Gardiner continues to enthral readers with his scintillating essays even today— despite the fact that his essays are rooted in a bygone era. Perhaps the secret of his success is his ability to talk about universal issues that never lose their importance.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 4: What does the word 'technique' mean?

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Q 5: How does Gardiner use everyday incidents to illuminate his particular concerns?

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Q 6: What are the salient features of Gardiner's style?

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5.6 LET US SUM UP

In this unit, you have been made acquainted with one of his most popular essays where he talks about the importance of polite, civil behaviour in all aspects of our lives as social creatures. The essay has also taught you how good manners in ourselves can beget good manners in people we deal with - thus making our interaction easier and more pleasant. Similarly, you have also seen how bad manners can be equally contagious and can poison our lives. 'Please', 'sorry' and 'thank you' - you have seen - are the loose change we pay through life to keep the wheels oiled and smoothly moving.

You have also seen what is meant by such terms as 'style' and 'technique'. You have learnt how Gardiner uses a specific technique for a specific purpose, just as he uses a particular style to achieve a particular end.



5.7 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. Pearce, Edward. *History Today.*



5.8 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Ans to Q No 1: The problem was that the passenger, rather rudely, demanded to be taken to the top floor. The liftman wanted a more polite request prefaced with the word 'please'. Since the passenger refuse to use the word, the liftman threw the passenger out of the lift.

Ans to Q No 2: Refer to 5.4

Ans to Q No 3: Gardiner suggests that if rudeness were to be replied to with excessive politeness, sweet revenge might be had while retaining ones moral superiority. He calls it the victory over oneself.

Ans to Q No 4: A broad term that indicates a range of measures that an author takes in writing, to achieve certain specific results that he desires . . . also include in its spectrum certain stylistic devices that the author uses quite consciously to achieve the results he desires in his readers.

Ans to Q No 5: By reporting of a chance bit of conversation overheard, a small incident either experienced or read about or something similar Gardiner moves on to a more significant, though perhaps general, matters related to it. For example, in this essay, while commenting on the appropriateness or otherwise of the liftman's action, Gardiner moves on to a thorough discussion on politeness and courtesy.

Ans to Q No 6: His style is very conversational, as though no printed page separates him from his reader. Indeed, he seems to treat the 'reader' more as an actual person he happens to be chatting with.



5.9 MODEL QUESTIONS

Q1: What are Gardiner's views on the role of law in enforcing polite behaviour?

Q2: Show, after Gardiner, the infectious quality of manners, both good and bad.

Q3: Why does Gardiner say, "Bad manners probably do more to poison the stream of general life than all the crimes in the calendar"?

Q4: Attempt a detailed report on the behaviour and activities of the 'polite conductor' based on your reading of the text.

Q5: Find an interesting piece of news of human interest in the newspaper. Try to write an essay using this as your starting point, in the manner of Gardiner.

Q6: Which particular aspect of A.G. Gardiner's technique do you find most appealing? Try to pick out instances from the essay where that particular technique is displayed.

Q7: Compare the essays of Gardiner to those of Bertrand Russell. What difference do you notice in their respective styles?

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