UNIT 2: JOSEPH ADDISON: "SIR ROGER AT HOME" I

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2.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

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

- describe the life and writings of the famous essayist, Joseph Addison
- define the form and significance of the periodical essay as reflected in the essay "Sir Roger at Home"
- gain an interest towards exploring the text of the essay

2.2 INTRODUCTION

This unit aims to acquaint you with the essay titled "Sir Roger at Home" penned down by one of the popular essayists of the eighteenth century Sir Joseph Addison. As an essayist, Addison's essays were guided towards the society of his time. Although classical literature was his initial love, yet his literary career was rooted to the depiction of Englishness and the English society. The most impressive quality of Addison as an essayist is his use of

mild humour as reflected through his essays and what is distinct in the use of his wit or humour is that it is not acerbic critical or mean and is not used to slight others in anyway. You will certainly like reading his literary essays which are very informative and at times didactic or instructional in nature.

2.3 THE FORM OF THE ESSAY

Before reading this essay you must be familiarised with the form of the 'periodical essay' which was one of the most popular literary forms published in the periodic magazines from time to time in the seventeenth century. Towards the end of the seventeenth century, it was clear that the essay was becoming an increasingly popular form of diversion. It was Daniel Defoe the popular novelist, who also wrote journalistic essays and pamphlets that significantly influenced the growth and development of the English essay. However, it was with Joseph Addison and Richard Steele that the essay in England had truly arrived.

Their periodical essays ranged on subjects starting from as the title suggests, the "Tombs in Westminster Abbey" to "Ladies' Head-dress", from the "Cries of London" to "Recollections of Childhood", which appeared in *The Tatler* (1709-11) and in *The Spectator* (1712).Both, Addison and Steele enjoyed a creative fulfilment through their co-writing as well as co-editing for *The Tatler* and *The Spectator* which also reflects the social history and literary tastes of the period. Richard Steele equally contributed to *The Englishman*, *The Guardian*, *The Lover* (which contained a total of his 40 essays), *The Reader*, *Town-Talk*, *The Plebeian* and a biweekly periodical *The Theatre*. 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. *The Tatler* had first appeared in 1709 and was a tri-weekly periodical which contained crisp writings on informative ideas, entertainment, poetry, politics, changing fashions and tastes and a range of subjects circulating from the popular coffeehouses 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. Life in London during the seventeenth century was stirred by a sense of political and intellectual curiosity and the coffeehouses were abuzz with enlivening discussions, serious debates and in general the sharing of useful information of the day. The coffeehouse was thus, a place that was frequented not only by writers, politicians or leading thinkers but also by the general public. And to be in the knowledge of current affairs and a variety of other subjects, apart from one's interests was the trend of the intellectual climate.

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 Gazetter 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, it was a joint effort of the two essayists Steele and Addison who developed the form of the periodical essay. Let us now, briefly discuss the life and works of Joseph Addison.

2.4 JOSEPH ADDISON: THE ESSAYIST

In the following subsections we shall first discuss the life and literary contribution of Joseph Addison to the genre of non-fictional prose before moving onto the discussions of the text of the essay.

2.4.1 His Life and Works

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.

Addison, however, regained power with his appointment as the chief secretary for Ireland as soon as the power returned in the hands of the Whigs. He also served as a lord commissioner for trade. Regarding his conjugal life, you must note that the countess of Warwick was his wife. Often rumoured to have led an unhappy marriage, Addison retired from service in 1718.He was laid to rest the following year in the Westminster Abbey.

Basically a classical scholar, Joseph Addison has to his credit many works. 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 and political tracts. 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).

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 the English people. In fact, its

aim was to "to enliven morality with wit, and to temper wit with morality". *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 manner and yet making them a pleasant and interesting reading.

Some of the essays by Addison are "Sir Roger at Church", "On Ghosts and Apparitions", "The Spectator's Account of Himself", "Character of Will Wimble", "On Witchcraft—Story of Moll White", etc.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 1: How would you describe Sir Joseph Addison as an essayist?

Q 2: Addison's association with Richard Steele led to the production of two famous periodicals. What are the titles?

Q 3:What is the significance of coffee-houses in the eighteenth century?

Q 4: Mention the name of a few essays written by Addison.

2.5 READING "SIR ROGER AT HOME"

The following subsections will help you to discuss the essay in terms of its different important aspects and issues.

2.5.1 Explanation of the Text

'Sir Roger' is the outcome of Addison's imaginative zeal. In fact, "the creation of Sir Roger is Addison's masterpiece. The man is not only an excellent figure of comedy with his **eccentricities**, his peculiar expressions, his attitudes, his mental leaps, but he is foremost among the characters who are not only loved but respected even while they are loved at." (Legouis)Addison's comic bent of mind is fully revealed through of a character like Sir Roger. The present unit deals with the essay "Sir Roger at Home" and as the title implies,

this essay is a reflection of Addison's own choice of a free society based on the cultivation of effective qualities. Addison presents the character of Sir Roger as a Tory; the Tories are usually conservative in their approach towards political reforms. But this character by Addison is a lovable person who is at times funny in his outlook. Himself a Whig, Addison brilliantly represented Sir Roger as a Tory who loves to cling to the traditional ways of life.

Let us discuss the essay in details. On reading the first line of the text of the essay, it is noticed that Sir Roger is Mr. Spectator's friend; you must note that Mr. Spectator is a fictional character whom Addison used as a medium to outline his own philosophies.

Sir Roger had invited his friend and thus Mr. Spectator joined with him for a month-long programme at Roger's country-house. In this essay Mr. Spectator was overwhelmed by his friend's kind hospitality. He was taken care of very well and his ideals were also respected. For example, the Spectator reflected how he was given freedom in matters as "go to bed when I please" or "dine at his own table", etc. Sir Roger was well acquainted with his friend's humour and shyness, so he paid more attention to comfort his guest in those matters. As a result, Spectator, according to his wish, led his life there in the country-house of his friend, Sir Roger.

Spectator was impressed by his good-natured host, Sir Roger, for his polite behaviour and his understanding nature. Spectator's privacy was well maintained during his stay at Sir Roger's home. Addison did justice to the humour-filled nature of Sir Roger in presenting his attitude towards his guest. As mentioned in the essay, Spectator was not very favourable in terms of meeting with strangers. Hence, the host made every effort so as to comfort his guest by keeping the visitors away from him. However Spectator found out strangers peeping at him over the hedges to take notice of him.

In the next section of the essay Spectator highlights how the **ambience** of Sir Roger's household made a positive impact on him. He was impressed by Roger's family with several servants.

However, those servants were treated by Mr. Roger as his own people and so the goodness of their master could be found in them. What appeared interesting to Spectator was that each of those servants was of sober nature and their loyalty and long companionship with their master could be predicted from their advanced ages. Indeed, Mr Roger's personality and goodness was reflected in his family. The servants were so much attached to their master that "you would take his valet de chambre for his brother; his butler is grey-headed; his groom is one of the gravest men that I have ever seen; and his coachman has the looks of a privy-councillor". Spectator also observed Roger's kind-hearted nature on seeing the love and care given to his old house dog, which was of great service in the past. Sir Roger's family was faithful towards him; they were very much concerned about Roger's health and took great care of him. In fact, at the slightest sign of Mr Roger's ill health or signs of ageing, they expressed distress. As a whole, the master and his servants were bounded by a common thread of trust, respect and humility.

Mr. Spectator was left to the care of Roger's butler, who like his other 'fellow-servants', was very particular with the task of pleasing his guest. Roger must have discussed the arrival of Mr. Spectator to them. However, when Mr. Roger was not 'at home', his chaplain accompanied Mr. Spectator. The Spectator was full of praises for the chaplain who had been serving his master since thirty years. His personality was quite impressive given the balance of reason and scholarship. The chaplain is loved by Mr. Roger who in turn obeyed his master. Thus, the chaplain "lives in the family rather as a relation than a dependant."

Roger's humourous personality is also focussed in the essay which is very unique in the sense that his good qualities as well as his imperfections are highlighted. Keeping in mind this character trait of Roger, you must note that in the essay he is shown to be deficient in the knowledge of Latin and Greek. Meanwhile, Mr.

Spectator expresses his liking for the chaplain who is a sensible man. To point out the humourous side of Sir Roger, it is worth mentioning how he plainly expressed his desire of finding "out a clergyman rather of plain sense than much learning, of a good aspect, a clear voice, a sociable temper, and, if possible, a man that understood a little of backgammon." All these qualities are, however, present in the chaplain whom both Sir Roger and Mr. Spectator admired. Roger further appreciates the chaplain's honesty and notices no such demand or favour on his side. The chaplain was provided with many good sermons when he first came to live with Roger; his main aim was to make the chaplain pronounce those verses on all Sundays. Roger is thus pleased to see that the chaplain's references or citations are so spontaneous that it was as though he had memorised the sermons.

Just at that time when the two friends were **praising** the chaplain, he entered the room. On being asked about the programme for the next day, he informed them of the preachers who were to visit that day. He also showed them the list of preachers for the whole year who were meant to come. The spectator found the list exciting enough because it comprised preachers who were not only popular figures but many of them was also attributed with "published discourses of practical divinity". Praising his friend's favourable attitude towards the chaplain, Mr. Spectator was impressed by the 'gracefulness' of the chaplain's delivery of sermons. At once, he felt that his visit to Roger's home was enlightening in the company of the chaplain who mesmerised him with his strong, powerful delivery of sermons because "a sermon repeated after this manner, is like the composition of a poet in the mouth of a graceful actor".

To conclude, Addison left a mark of social concern by insisting on the need of other clergymen like the chaplain, who rather than creating new sermons, should emphasise on the improvement of their 'elocution'. Addison pointed out that there is no dearth of sermons that have been penned down in the past by great

preachers. For him the need of the society of that time was the chance to listen to the oratory power of the clergymen and thereby enrich themselves. So he laid importance to the cultivation of such skills by the clergymen who were mostly engrossed in the creation of their own sermons. Through this act of the clergymen, the society will be much more benefitted and intelligence would embrace the society in its wing.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 5: What was the Spectator's impression upon the chaplain?

Q 6: Give in brief the Spectator's reflection of Sir Roger's household.

Q 7: What is Addison's aim in writing the essay "Sir Roger at Home"?



2.6 LET US SUM UP

After having gone through the unit, you will certainly gain a familiarity with the life and works of the popular essayist Joseph Addison. The text of the essay supplemented with the detailed explanation or summary and the provided glossary will help you to easily grasp and appreciate Addison as an essayist.



2.7 FURTHER READING

1) Legouis, Emile.(1934).*A Short History of English Literature*.Trans. By V.F. Boyson and J. Coulson. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

2) Stapleton, Michael. (1983).*The Cambridge Guide to English Literature*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

3) Addison, Joseph. "Sir Roger at Home." (1711). in *Essays from Addison* by Fowler, J. H. (ed.).

4) Long, William. J. (2007rpt.).*English Literature: Its History and Significance for the Life of English Speaking World*. Delhi: A.I.T.B.S Publishers.

2.8 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Ans to Q No 1: As an essayist, Addison's essays were guided towards the society of his time. Although, classical literature was his initial love, yet his literary career was rooted to the depiction of Englishness and the English society. The most impressive quality of Addison as an essayist is his use of mild humour as reflected through his essays and what is distinct in the use of his wit or humour is that it is not acerbic or mean and is not used to slight others in anyway.

Ans to Q No 2: *The Tatler* and *The Spectator.*

Ans to Q No 3: Coffee-houses during the eighteenth century 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.It was frequented not only by writers, politicians or leading thinkers but also by the general public. And to be in the knowledge of current affairs and a variety of other subjects, apart from one's interests was the trend of the intellectual climate.

Ans to Q No 4:"Sir Roger at Church", "On Ghosts and Apparitions", "Sir Roger at Home", "The Spectator's Account of Himself", "Character of Will Wimble", "On Witchcraft—Story of Moll White", etc.

Ans to Q No 5: Mr. Spectator was impressed by the 'gracefulness' of the chaplain's delivery of sermons. At once, he felt that his visit to Roger's home was enlightening in the company of the chaplain who mesmerised him with his strong, powerful delivery of sermons because "a sermon repeated after this manner, is like the composition of a poet in the mouth of a graceful actor".

Ans to Q No 6: Spectator was impressed by his good-natured host, Sir Roger, for his polite behaviour and his understanding nature. He was also impressed by Roger's family who largely comprised servants. Spectator's privacy was well maintained during his stay at Sir Roger's home. Indeed, Mr Roger's personality and his goodness were reflected in his family.Mr. Spectator expressed his

liking for the chaplain who was a sensible man. To conclude, his experience at Roger's home was quite enlivening.

Ans to Q No 7: Through this essay, Addison tried to divert his readers' attention towards the need of other clergymen like the chaplain, who rather than creating new sermons, should emphasise on the improvement of their 'elocution' since the need of the society of that time was the chance to listen to the oratory power of the clergymen and thereby enrich themselves.



2.9 MODEL QUESTIONS

Q 1. How would you justify Joseph Addison's essays as a critique of the manners of his age?

Q 2. Write a note on Addison as a satirist with particular reference to his essay "Sir Roger at Home"

Q 3. Write a note on the form and significance of essay as a literary form

Q 4. Discuss the life and works of the essayist, Joseph Addison.