UNIT 3: JOSEPH ADDISON: "SIR ROGER AT HOME" II

UNIT STRUCTURE

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3.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through the unit you will be able to:

- highlight the important themes from the text of the essay
- appreciate the coffee-house culture developed during the period
- describe Addison's choice of language as well as his style of writing
- discuss the critical reception of Joseph Addison
- appreciate the text of the essay

3.2 INTRODUCTION

The present unit is a continuation of the previous unit and here we shall discuss the thematic aspects together with the style and language as well as the critical reception of Addison's essay titled "Sir Roger at Home".

3.3 MAJOR THEMES

The important themes of the essay can be summed up under the following headings.

"Sir Roger at Home" as a Periodical Essay: As a periodical essay, "Sir Roger at Home" stands among one of Addison's contribution in the gamut of English prose. As the name suggests, the periodical essays were meant to appear in magazines or journals at regular intervals. Addison through this essay emphasizes on his social aim of conversion in matters relating to the practices of clergymen and its relation to the society. Through this essay, he laid importance to the expressions that a clergyman should cultivate in order to allow the society avail and witness such powerful sermons. Thus, Addison did so as to reform the society. With the freedom of the press during the late seventeenth century, journalism came to the forefront and these periodical essays were used as a weapon to counter the political rivalries that basically formed the issues of that time. To be particular, you must note that the emergence of the Whigs and the Tories on the political front led to the rise of a literature that encompassed political pamphlets to a large extent. With the help of periodical essays, however, both Addison and Steele were able to divert from this kind of political writings and rather concentrate on entertainment of the public besides laying importance in its reformation.

Reformation of the Society: Both the editors of *The Spectator*, Addison and Steele emphasised on their aim of reforming the society. In this essay which is a solo contribution of Addison, he did the same. The writer noted that during his time there emerged a mechanical and political lifestyle that went with the situation of those days. He regretted that the clergymen busied themselves in writing sermons and thus that the pleasure the public used to witness in terms of listening sermons was lost. This is because the manner of public speaking was paid less attention. Addison noted this as a problem because it was not doing any good to the society. Rather than creating sermons, if the clergymen dedicated their valuable time in the art of public speaking, the society would be much more benefitted. Hence, in this essay, mixing humour and wit, Addison tries to relate to his readers such an issue in a bid to reform the society for its betterment.

Addison's Didactic Disposition: While laying down the aims of *The Spectator*, Addison has clarified that he intended to provide a learning

experience to the masses through his essays that were designed both to "instruct" as well as "entertain" them. As such in this essay under discussion, we have come across a didactic tone that has been subtly juxtaposed with his humour. The best example of such a disposition can be cited from the text:

I could heartily wish that more of our country clergy would follow this example; and, instead of wasting their spirits in laborious compositions of their own, would endeavour after a handsome elocution, and all those other talents that are proper to enforce what has been penned by greater masters. This would not only be more easy to themselves, but more edifying to the people.

Through this essay, Addison directs the clergymen of his time, who were busier in creating sermons themselves, to spend more time in preparing themselves towards enriching the masses. For Addison, the society would be benefitted much if the clergymen concentrated on their presentation rather than creation of sermons. As far as sermons were concerned, there was no dearth of compositions created by great masters in the past.

The Essay as a Mirror of its Age: Though England during the eighteenth century was engulfed with political parties and their respective tensions, Addison while writing The *De Coverley Papers* was also obliged to stay away from it. Hence, his papers were mostly focussed on the social mores and manners of the age. It was not only London and its urban advancements that found entry into his papers, but also the countryside that occupied the writer. "Sir Roger at Home" is one of the essays in where Addison focussed on the country life. In this essay he talked about open fields, manners followed in the countryside as well as the domestic life of country people. In doing so, Addison pictured the manners of the country folks that were juxtaposed with their simplicity.

Addison's Excellent Characterisation: You must consider the fact that the creation of Sir Roger de Coverley was initiated by Sir Richard Steele but this character found its lively representation in the hands of Addison. With his detailed and minute observation, Addison has glorified this character, be it in the representation of his physical traits or his personality. While reading the essay, one finds that the character of Sir Roger is presented as

generous and humble man. Various examples are provided in the text for enabling the reader to grasp the intent to which the spectator analyses his host, that is, Sir Roger. Also in the characterisation of the Chaplain, Addison has put in a lot of humour for the readers to be familiarised with the essayist's admiration for the chaplain. As the spectator notes the chaplain is a very good human being whose personality is marked by cordiality. In fact, the spectator was quite impressed by the chaplain whose oratory skill was amazing.

3.4 STYLE AND LANGUAGE

The most enduring of Addison's works are his famous essays...To an age of fundamental coarseness and artificiality, he came with a wholesome message of refinement and simplicity. -Long.

The essays of Addison were both informative and instructional in content and he was much bent towards the use of social satire in order to usher in a flurry of social reform along with his friend and collaborator Richard Steele. Both of them were more focussed on socio-critical aspects rather than the political and they subtly infused their writings with 'morality' through the use of mild wit and good humour, rather than drilling in a sense of compulsive morality in their readers. In general, the themes of the essays were based on the literary tastes, current affairs, contemporary social practices, manners and fashions of the day which were presented in an interesting and somewhat a crisp journalistic style. The style of his presentation had a relative ease to which even a lay reader could easily relate to and thus, it did not require a critical or literary expertise for one to comprehend the essays.

Another remarkable factor of the essays is his skill at'characterisation' as also seen in the present text, Thus, Addison in his development of the very nuances of the imaginary characters almost brought those creations to life. He had a moderate style of writing in which he established a familiarity with the reader like a friend but also maintained a balanced refinement in his descriptions playing the role of both an essayist and the social reformer. He

can be considered as one of the significant contributors to the modern prose style who through his use of elegant prose and social satire made a difference to the literary genre of essay writing. His use of humorous satire was not hurtful in any way and intended to examine and analyse or even throw light on significant aspects rather than 'attack' them with sarcasm. In this way, he aimed to make a pleasant difference to the general reception of the readers who had the potential to realise the follies and vices prevalent in society of that time which makes his humour more corrective in nature.

From your reading of the text of the essay, you will certainly find a relative ease in grasping and comprehending the conversational language employed by Joseph Addison. The use of the first person 'I' brings in a sense of familiarity in narration where the reader almost becomes the confidante (someone with whom one shares secrets) and is almost immediately taken into confidence. Dr. Johnson in his consideration of Addison's prose style found a sense of elegance even in his discussion of informal subjects, with crisp language and concise descriptions and said "[w]hoever wishes to attain an English style, familiar but not coarse, and elegant...must give his days and nights to the volumes of Addison."



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 1. Write a note on Addison's characterisation.

Q 2. Briefly describe "Sir Roger at Home" as a periodical essay.

Q 3. Comment on the language employed in the essay.

Q 4. The essays of Addison were both informative and instructional in content. Discuss.

3.5 CRITICAL RECEPTION

In his critical reception, K. Deighton remarked on both the use of humour and irony in the works of Joseph Addison which highlighted "[p]opular superstitions, personal whims, caprices, idiosyncrasies, social manners, pursuits, fashions" which were to be "examined, handled, caressed, rebuked,

sentenced" or in other words to be brought under the scanner, to be reviewed and reconsidered. Deighton had rightly opined on the refined and cheerful quality of Addison's literary style of presentation which was also appreciated by Dr. Johnson who in his analysis of Addison's works considered his refined literary abilities. Addison complemented the literary credibility of his collaborator Steele and vice versa, as is also reflected in the considerable efforts in the periodical essays of quality which is why critics down the ages discuss both the essayists together in the same breath.

J. B. Macaulay opined that, "it was due, above all to the greatest satirist who alone knew out how to use ridicule without abusing it; who without inflicting a wound effected a great social reform and who reconciled wit and virtue." This is also reflected in Addison's significant contribution to the very form of periodical essay in the seventeenth century 'periodicals' which were published at regular intervals and specifically aimed at social reform. His style had a characteristic sense of restraint and control with the effective combination of stylistic humour, wit and irony. It lent an interesting appeal to Addison's Coverley essays which were very well received by the readers of the time, particularly the creation and characterisation of the figures of Sir Roger de Coverley or even Will Wimble in these essays. W.M. Thackeray appreciated his efforts of characterisation in these essays which were good enough to form a novel saying: "What would be Sir Roger without his follies and his charming little brain-cracks? ...If he were wiser than he is, of what worth was he to us? We love him for his vanities as much as for his virtues."

Addison through his works introduced a rapport with the readers and what could be considered "the beginning of that general intimacy of the writer with the reader." Dr Johnson found in Addison a "describer of life and manners" who through his delightful portrayal of the seventeenth century society with an unwavering purpose of reform, also brought about an intellectual awakening in the contemporary society. J.H Fowler in his work *Essays from Addison* considered Addison as a worthy essayist saying: "It is good to read Addison first because he is full of charm; because we soon come to feel an affection for this silent, keen and kindly spectator of men;

because he brings to us vividly the vanished life of the early eighteenth century; because he creates in Sir Roger de Coverley one of the most delightful characters in the whole range of English literature."



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 5. What was J.B. Macaulay's opinion about Addison's essays?

Q 6. What kind of a style did Addison follow in writing the essay?

Q 7. Why was Addison's humour praised by the critics?



3.6 LET US SUM UP

After having gone through the unit, you will certainly be able to list some of the important themes pertaining to the essay, you will also find an easy reference to the context of the intellectual climate and the coffee-house culture during the seventeenth century. The unit will enable the learner to discuss and describe the style and language together with the critical reception of Addison's essays. Thus, the unit highlights the contributions of Addison as an essayist to the periodical essay and his lively and refined style of writing.



3.7 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. (2007 rpt.). *English Literature: Its History and Significance for the Life of English Speaking World*. Delhi: A.I.T.B.S Publishers.

3.8 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Ans to Q No 1: The character of Sir Roger found its lively representation in the hands of Addison. With his detailed and minute observation, Addison has glorified this character, be it in the representation of his physical traits or his personality. Also in the characterisation of the Chaplain, Addison has put in a lot of humour for the readers to be familiarised with the essayist's admiration for the chaplain. As Spectator noted the chaplain is a very good human being whose personality is marked by cordiality

Ans to Q No 2: As a periodical essay, Addison through this particular essay emphasises on his social aim of conversion in matters relating to the practices of clergymen and its relation to the society.

Ans to Q No 3: Conversational language has been employed by Joseph Addison. The use of the first person 'I' brings in a sense of familiarity in narration where the reader almost becomes the confidante (someone with whom one shares secrets) and is almost immediately taken into confidence.

Ans to Q No 4: Addison was much bent towards the use of social satire in order to usher in a flurry of social reform along with his friend and collaborator Richard Steele. Both of them were more focussed on socio-critical aspects rather than the political and they subtly infused their writings with 'morality' through the use of mild wit and good humour, rather than drilling in a sense of compulsive morality in their readers.

Ans to Q No 5: J. B. Macaulay opined that, "it was due, above all to the greatest satirist who alone knew out how to use ridicule without abusing it; who without inflicting a wound affected a great social reform and who reconciled wit and virtue."

Ans to Q No 6: His style had a characteristic sense of restraint and control with the effective combination of stylistic humour, wit and irony.

Ans to Q No 7: Addison's humour praised by the critics because his essays highlighted "[p]opular superstitions, personal whims, caprices, idiosyncrasies, social manners, pursuits, fashions" which were to be "examined, handled, caressed, rebuked, sentenced" or in other words to be brought under the scanner, to be reviewed and reconsidered.



3.9 MODEL QUESTIONS

Q 1. List down some of the important themes of the essay "Sir Roger at Home" and explain in your own words.

Q 2. Examine the role of *The Spectator* in representing the picture of eighteenth century English society.

Q 3. Give an account of the importance of the essay "Sir Roger at Home" by Joseph Addison.

Q 4. Comment on the language and style of Joseph Addison with particular reference to "Sir Roger at Home".