UNIT 15: A.G. GARDINER: "ON LETTER WRITING"

UNIT STRUCTURE

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15. 1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

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

- define the hallmarks of a good essay
- discuss the life and works of A. G. Gardiner
- discuss the finer points of the essay, *On Letter Writing*
- grasp the techniques, style and language used by Gardiner
- appreciate the essay in its totality

15.2 INTRODUCTION

This unit aims, first of all, to identify the key areas that will help to make you acquainted 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 to you the features of A. G. Gardiner's writing that gain him such popularity. It also establishes the learning objectives so that you can identify the areas you need to focus on when you are studying this particular essay, *On Letter Writing* by A. G. Gardiner.

Since this unit aims to acquaint you with an essay, it is desirable that you have some idea as to what an essay is. After all, the essay is a widely practiced form of literature. Moreover, since there are almost as many varieties of the essay as there are essayists, you may find the sheer variety a little bewildering. The essay, as a form of literature, has been in existence since ancient times. The introduction gives you a brief history of the essay as a form of literature and introduces you to some great names associated with essay writing. It also tells you what the characteristics of a good essay are.

Most importantly, this unit gives you an introduction to A. G. Gardiner and it also provides you with a detailed study of the man, his life and his work. This unit further gives you an explanation of the essay you have just read. Over and above this, it seeks to acquaint you with certain issues that are linked with our total understanding of a work of literature. These are 'technique' and 'style'. Two separate sections deal with Gardiner's technique and his style. The unit then sums up all that we have done in the course of our study of this lesson. This is followed with a list of reference books that will help you know more about Gardiner and his work. Finally, a number of questions are provided to help you prepare for your examinations.

15.3 ESSAY AS A LITERARY FORM

The essay, as a form of literature, has been around since ancient times. Just see how Bacon, one of the greatest of English essayists puts it, "the word is late, but the thing is ancient". Do you know who Bacon was? Well, he was one of the most famous of the English essayists who wrote during the late sixteenth and the early seventeenth centuries. You have been provided with more information about this person, immediately after this unit. It was another writer called Montaigne who coined the name for this particular form of writing when he gave the title *Essais* to his first publication in 1580. That was in France. In England, in the year 1597, Bacon described his *Essays* as 'grains of salt which will rather give an appetite than offend with satiety'. In a manner of speaking, the French essayist, Montaigne, may be considered to be the father of the essay as we know it today.

The essay is a rather loose form of writing that can range from highly learned writings in philosophy or the sciences to very personal ruminations on trivial, everyday issues. They may be only a few pages in length, as are the essays of Bacon, or they may be the length of a book, as is Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. In style, too, they may show marked differences. Montaigne, for instance, wrote in a style that was discursive, informal and intimate. Bacon on the other hand chose a style that was terse, didactic and aloof. Montaigne wrote on topics such as Liars, The Custom of Wearing Clothes and The Art of Conversation. Bacon, on the other hand, wrote on such topics as Of Envy, Of Riches, Of Negotiating, among others. If, on the other hand, one were to pick up a volume of essays by someone like Charles Lamb, one would get to read essays that are very different. Lamb's essays talk mostly about his personal life, feelings, or desires. They are usually written in a rambling style in very informal language.

After Bacon, the next great English essayist was Sir William Cornwallis whose *Essays* were published in 1600-01. He was followed by Abraham Cowley who followed Montaigne's tradition of personal and reflective informality. He wrote on such subjects as liberty, solitude, avarice, the brevity of life, and the uncertainty of riches.

Towards the end of the seventeenth century it was clear that the essay was becoming an increasingly popular form of diversion. Although he was better known as a novelist, (you must certainly have heard of *Robinson Crusoe*) Daniel Defoe's journalistic essays and pamphlets certainly influenced the growth and development of the English essay. However, it was with Addison and Steele that the essay in England truly came to its own. They wrote a type of essay which has come to be known as the periodical essay. Ranging from such subjects as the Tombs in Westminster Abbey to Ladies' Head-dress, and from the Cries of London to Recollections of Childhood, these appeared in the *Tatler* (1709-11) and in the *Spectator*.

In the nineteenth century numerous great essayists such as Lamb, Hazlitt, Thomas de Quincy, Coleridge, Macaulay, Carlyle, Ruskin, Matthew Arnold, Walter Pater and R. L. Stevenson carried forward the tradition of the English essay. In the nineteenth century the medium became indispensable

for literary critics, reviewers, journalists and columnists. Of course, the subject matter no longer remained confined to light, informal diversions only.

Later essayists have included such great names as Max Beerbohm, Chesterton, T. S. Eliot, George Orwell, Graham Greene, Aldous Huxley, and W. H. Auden.

The essay we shall be reading here is, of course, the informal essay. Such essays are not very easy to write, although they seem to be so very simple and they deal with the most general of subjects. You must remember that the essayist has deliberately made certain choices (the choice of using the simplest of language, for example). He must consciously achieve the result he desires on the basis of these choices. Consequently, it is in the effects of the essay that we are able to determine its worth. A few pertinent questions can help us determine whether any personal essay we happen to be reading is worthwhile or no. These questions could be somewhat like:

- Has the author been able to grip my attention from the very beginning?
- Do I find what he is saying interesting?
- Does he make me feel that I am actually listening to him rather than reading him?
- Is he saying things in such a manner that I feel my emotions being moved? Do I feel like laughing, grinning, crying or any such emotion?



LET US KNOW

Francis Bacon was an English philosopher and essayist. He is famous for his ***Essays***, ***The Advancement of Learning***, ***Novum Organum***, ***The History of the Reign of King Henry the Seventh***, ***The New Atlantis*** and others. His works are written in a concise and succinct style. Michel de Montaigne is the most influential writer of the French Renaissance, and is known for popularising the essay as a literary genre. Modern literary non- fiction has been inspired by Montaigne.

15.4 A.G. GARDINER: THE ESSAYIST

Let us discus the life and warths of A. G. Gardiner

15.4.1 His Life and Works

In the preceding section we had formulated a few questions that can help us determine the quality of an essay. A.G. Gardiner's essays have always drawn very positive answers to these questions. This is the reason why he has been rated so highly among English essayists. In fact, such essays as *All About a* Dog or *On Saying Please* have been so popular, that anthologies of English prose for students invariably contain one of these essays. Gardiner always uses an easy conversational style that makes one feel that one is actually 'chatting' with him over a cup of tea.

A. G. Gardiner was better known in his own day as one of the most powerful of editors in Edwardian England—an England ruled by King Edward VII, after the death of Queen Victoria. His entire name was Alfred George Gardiner, but, because he thought Alfred George too commonplace, as names go, he preferred A. G. Gardiner. In fact, in one of his essays, he actually praises the English habit of calling people by their surnames. He certainly did not like the American habit of calling people by their first names. Gardiner was born in 1865. He 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 the first fifteen years of the twentieth century and then, unfortunately, lost his job owing to a feud with Lloyd George. The Cadbury family, you see, decided to support Lloyd George rather than their own editor.

His differences with the owner of his paper led to Gardiner's career as an editor being over. Gardiner now started a new, and perhaps a gentler phase, in his life. He started writing essays under

the name of 'Alpha of the Plough'. He had a long and a successful career as an essayist. Gardiner died in the year 1946.

We have already seen that Gardiner had been a very successful newspaper editor. However, once that phase of his life was over, he took to writing essays. He chose the pen-name 'Alpha of the Plough' for the purpose. He also wrote the biography of Sir William Harcourt. Of all the books of compiled essays perhaps *Mary Furrows and Prophets, Priests and Kings* are the best known (although *Pebbles on the Shore* and *Leaves in the Wind* have also proved extremely popular over the years). The first contains essays of a more general nature, whereas the second is certainly more political in nature. The essay *On Smiles* in the latter book is a good example of Gardiner's political writing and shows a more acerbic or critical side of his tongue than is seen in the more genial essays.

By the time he died in 1946, A. G. Gardiner had created for himself a name, and had left behind a body of work, that has found a place from such commonplace books as school or college level English readers to such scholarly work as Edward Pearce's contribution in *History Today.* A. G. Gardiner's charm, unfading and enduring, continues to lure readers long after his form of the essay has been removed to make way for other forms of the English essay.

Brief explanation of the key issues discussed in the essay:

The essay, as the title clearly shows, is on the art of letter-writing. There was a time when letters were the only mode of communication over great distances. Perhaps this was the reason why, in the past, letter-writing was considered an art. However, in course of time, science came up with other modes of communication such as the telephone or telegraph. Thanks to these developments in other modes of communication, letter writing has become a 'forgotten art'.

Gardiner begins, as he always does, by picking up a stray bit of conversation between two soldiers that he overhears in a railway station. They, Bill and Sam, seem to be brothers. The two young

men are discussing how difficult it is to write letters to one's parents and relatives from the battlefront. Bill says to Sam that the latter will have a lot of difficult letter writing to do to all their relations. He says that no one can be left out because if Sam writes to one relative and not to the others, then the others will feel offended. Rather helpfully, he offers the advice that one can always mention the other relations in the letter to a particular relation, and express the hope that they are fine. Both brothers are sorry that writing such letters are not as easy as writing love letters—which can be filled up with crosses (denoting kisses) when one has nothing left to say. As the train moves, Gardiner comes to learn that this soldier has participated in a number of exciting battles of the First World War. (This is the period in which the episode is set). This causes the author to feel the irony of the situation. Here are two soldiers participating in a momentous activity that is so terribly interesting to all, yet they claim they have nothing to write beyond "I hope this finds you as well as it leaves me at present".

Analysing the situation, Gardiner says that many letters are still being written today, and much of it is letters that have been well written. He comes to the conclusion that the two young men are simply unable to articulate their thoughts and feelings unless someone gives them a sort of opening. That seems to be the main problem here—and not the fact that there is simply nothing to write about. Moreover, it is not just these two young men who suffer from this problem. Many more young people all over suffer from it too.

Trying to get to the root of the problem, Gardiner says that letter writing has become a 'lost art'. In the past, people used to write beautiful letters. He mentions the names of writers of great letters such as Cowper, Horace Walpole, Byron and others. He feels that there are two main reasons why these people wrote such beautiful letters. In the first place, the world had more leisure in comparison to the hurry experienced by the modern world. In the second place, sending letters was such an expensive piece of

business that letters could be written and sent only once in six months or so. This ensured that the letter writer wrote letters befitting the trouble and the expense. Humourously, Gardiner recounts De Quincy's account of some people who often looked at the address for a certain sign that told them who had sent the letter—and then simply refused to accept it. In this way they avoided paying the high postal charges. It is because of this that the writer feels that the cheap 'penny post' is greatly responsible for having destroyed the habit of writing good letters. Carlyle, he says, foresaw this when he asked people to forget about writing good letters because letters had become so cheap. Gardiner feels that this degradation, begun by the 'penny post' was taken to worse levels by the telegraph, the telephone and the typewriter.

A well written letter is not an essay. It is a very personal form of communication and, as such, should follow the patterns of communication one normally uses in conversation. Small details of one's day to day life, seemingly trivial incidents that bring home vividly the homely picture of the activities of the one writing the letter, a conversational tone in the language—all these serve to recreate on paper a living picture of the writer and his everyday life. This is what, Gardiner feels, every letter writer should aim for.

Unfortunately, the 'penny post', the telegram, the lack of leisure and the sheer lack of interest in letter writing has made this fine form of communication a 'lost art'.

15.5. EXPLANATION OF THE TEXT

The essay begins, as it usually does in A. G. Gardiner, with the author describing a scene upon a railway platform. In a carriage of a waiting train is a soldier who is talking through the window to another soldier who is standing on the platform. They appear to be brothers.

The soldier on the platform begins the conversation by asking his brother, Bill, not to forget to write letters. Bill asserts that he will definitely

write the next day, and ruefully recites the whole list of relations to whom he has to write. Apparently, Sam, his brother on the platform has had to write letters too. The tone of the comment suggests that both brothers find it a very tedious task to write letters. Bill adds that the task is made even more difficult by the fact that all relations expect to be written to, and that, if one is missed out on, they are offended. He, however, has devised a cunning way around this problem. He simply makes it a point to mention each of them—even when he does not write to each of them personally. His main problem seems to be that, once he has finished saying that he is well, and that he hopes that the person to whom he has written is well too, he cannot think of anything more to say. Sam agrees saying that all he can do is scratch his head, unable to think of anything more to write. Bill says that writing love letters is easier because on does not really have to write anything. All that is needed is a page full of crosses—that stand for kisses—and the letter is finished soon enough. The problem is that letters to one's wife or mother or brother cannot be filled up with crosses.

On this note the conversation ends as the train begins to move. Bill lights a cigarette and relaxes in his seat. The author now lets us know that he, too, is sitting in the same compartment and has discovered that Bill was out in the battlefront twice, and had come home as he was ill. Gardiner then mentions the names of famous battles in which Bill had fought, adding that the soldier had participated in some of the greatest events in world history. (The period in which the essay is set is the First World War—one of the most significant periods in the history of modern man). Ironically, this very man was here, claiming that he knew not what to write of when writing his letters. He adds a funny story about a lady mentioned by Walpole whose letter to her husband contained only two sentences—both indicating that she had nothing to write about.

The author now states that letters are still being written and many of them are well written letters. This is seen in the newspapers. (The reference here is to letters written to the editor of a newspaper, which are printed regularly in the *Letters to the Editor* column of the daily newspaper). However, Gardiner says, many young men find out that they cannot express themselves

when they sit down to write letters. This, of course, does not mean that they have no brains. The author feels that, in conversation, if these young people are given a friendly hint as to what they could talk about, they can talk very well indeed; but, without that help, they simply do not know what to speak of. They cannot find the right words to describe the situation in which they live.

Gardiner then goes on to state that "letter-writing is no doubt a lost art". In other words, people no longer know how to write good letters. He squarely blames the 'penny-post'—the 'new' system of sending letters cheaply through the post office—and the fact that modern men is in too much of a hurry all the time. Recalling the names of great letter-writers like Cowper, Horace, Walpole and others, he tells us that these men lived in a world where there was plenty of spare time in which one could write to one's friends. Moreover, sending these letters was such a costly affair that one could afford to send a letter only once in six months. Because of this, those who wrote letters, treated letter-writing as a serious business. The poor people could not afford to send letters at all. He recounts how De Quincy reveals the method by which poor people avoided postal charges. In those days letters were delivered by stage coach—a horse-drawn coach that travelled from one 'stage', or point, of a journey to another, carrying passengers. When the letter was handed over by the coachman, the receiver would merely look at the envelope—on which the sender would put a mark to show that he was well—and hand the envelope back. This way the receiver did not have to pay any charges as he or she had effectively refused to receive the letter. This is how important letters were in those days.

The modern post-office has made it very cheap to send letters anywhere in the world. In fact, postmen nowadays make two rounds to deliver letters. With letters becoming so cheap and easy, people no longer take up letter-writing seriously. Carlyle, says Gardiner, realised that people would give up writing good letters because it had become such an inexpensive affair. That is why he wrote to his mother saying that he would send her a 'penny letter' next time. The author asserts that the telegraph, the telephone and the typewriter have completed what the penny-post began—the destruction of letter-writing as an art. Letters were treasured in the past because they were

rare. By becoming common, they lost their value—just as diamonds would be worthless if they were as plentiful as pebbles.

Moving back to the problem of young men like Bill and Sam, Gardiner tells us that their case is different. These young men do not want to write 'literary' letters. They merely want to communicate something about their lives in the middle of great events to their loved ones. Since these great events are too great for these simple young men, they cannot find words for them. This seems to be the problem. What they should do instead, says the author, is write home about small, insignificant things that they go through. Things like being tired, or losing a friend in battle, or the dropping off of a shoe-sole during a march… Such small details would ultimately draw up a wonderful picture of what these young men were actually going through.

He then goes on to show how a good letter is written. According to Gardiner, one should always concentrate on seemingly insignificant details, rather than on great ones. One can always remind oneself of the sort of things one talks about at home. That will provide the letter-writer with the right material for his letters. He gives the example of Carlyle, writing from England to his brother in Canada. Carlyle's letter is full of details about what each member of the family is doing at the moment, about the cold winter weather and the blazing, warm fire—things familiar to his brother; things that his brother would miss, being so far away from home. In the process, Carlyle draws up a living picture of the entire situation, thereby making his brother's heart fill up with deep emotion for his loved ones far away.

Gardiner then moves on to cite the example of another great letter-writer—John Keats. Keats, in his letter to his brother and sister-in-law, who were in America, describes how his mother laughed at his bad jokes, how they went visiting neighbours and how beautiful was the scenery. He tells them that he has so much to say that everything will be said in a haphazard manner, without any order, simply as the thoughts flow into his mind.

To Gardiner, this is one of the best ways to write letters. He calls it a 'recipe' provided by one who was a master in the art of letter-writing. According to him, such letters remove the distance separating the writer and his reader. It acts as a continuation of a conversation between the two

that was interrupted because one of them has had to go away. It acts as the presence of the person who is absent. Such letters are always very simple, talking about everyday things and are written in very colloquial language. This easiness of address is the greatest virtue of such great letters—not their weakness. For, if a letter is too well ordered and painstakingly elaborate, that would make it a good essay, but a very bad letter.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q1. : What was A. G. Gardiner known for in his time?

Q2. : Name the best known works of A. G. Gardiner.

Q3. : What was the name that A. G. Gardiner chose when began writing his essays?



ACTIVITY 15.1

1. Make a list of all the difficult words you have encountered in the essay *On Letter Writing* and find out synonyms for each.
2. Imagine yourself to be Bill and that you have just read the essay and found to your surprise that your conversation with your brother, Sam, has been recorded. Write a letter to Sam expressing the amazement you feel.

15.6 STYLE AND LANGUAGE

Before we move on to a discussion of A. G. Gardiner's technique, let us understand what 'technique' is all about. The word technique is a rather broad term. It covers certain specific steps undertaken in the writing by the author for specific results. It may mean certain traits of style too that are deliberately adopted by the author. Thus, for instance, Gardiner's beginning most of his essays with the reporting of an event or situation, is a technique commonly used by this writer. Read on to find out more.

Gardiner usually begins his essays from a seemingly trivial incident that opens up a line of thought in him. Here, too, he begins by narrating a snatch of conversation that he overhears in a railway station. The conversation is about the difficulties in writing letters that the two young men, who are conversing, encounter. Using this bit of conversation as a 'case study', Gardiner probes the issue and tries to come up with specific problems and specific remedies pertaining to the situation of the two young men.

This is usually Gardiner's technique. Thus, for instance, in the essay 'On Saying Please', he opens the essay with an instance of a young lift-man in the city who threw a passenger out of his lift for not saying the word 'please'. The latter wanted to go to the top floor of the building, and he would not say "Top, please". This annoyed the lift-man, who threw the passenger out of his lift. The act cost the lift-man his job. Gardiner then discusses the merits and demerits of the particular case and then, in his usual manner, moves on to a discussion on politeness and its importance in the social life of man. In another essay, 'All About a Dog', the particular instance happens to involve a lady who boards a bus with a little dog. Unfortunately, a surly conductor will not allow her to sit in the comfort of the lower compartment of the double-decker bus, even though it is very cold. He insists that the bus will not move until the lady carries her dog to the upper level. Justifying his decision, the conductor quotes his 'rules'. From this, Gardiner meditates on the general principles behind rules—the 'letter of the law' and the 'spirit of the law', as it were. On the basis of this he gives us his opinion about why rules exist and how they should be implemented or ignored.

In a similar manner, in this essay, from describing the difficulties of Bill and Sam, he moves on to more general thoughts relating to the art of writing letters—as though pondering on the problems of the two young men has opened up a new train of thought in him.

Gardiner always writes as though he were in casual conversation with the reader and, seemingly, allows his thoughts to wander from one aspect of the matter to another. However, it only *seems* so. A master of his craft, this technique is used to lull his readers into a sense of cosy intimacy

of a one-to-one informal conversation. In actual terms, Gardiner is always in control, manipulating the direction of the flow of thought, so that the train never strays far from the main issue and yet touches upon those secondary issues that are relevant to a clear exposition of the primary issue.

This becomes evident when we note that he moves on, with apparent abruptness, to the reasons why he considers letter-writing to be a lost art. From the present, he seems to move away to the world of history, the penny-post and to Carlyle. The reader is left with the feeling that Bill and Sam have suddenly been consigned to a space that may be forgotten without any loss. But that is hardly Gardiner's intention. As soon as he finishes digressing onto factual details of history that were to prove detrimental to letter-writing—facts corroborated by statements of Carlyle—he returns to the present issue.

It is true that Bill and Sam have fulfilled their function. But they have not turned irrelevant. As such, even when his thoughts move away from Bill and Sam, in the next phase, we notice that they move on to the problems facing letter-writers *like Bill and Sam*. This provides an organic development in the essay with specific instances leading on to general ones. It also helps Gardiner to move on to the next issue, that is, how does one write a good letter?

Here, he allows his pen to run freely, from his own observations to examples provided by excellent letter-writers such as the poet Keats. Juxtaposing his own observations on what to put into a letter to make it intimate with examples of actual letters written by the greats, Gardiner draws up a complete picture on the art of letter writing.

A. G. Gardiner's style is always deceptively simple, as is his language. He opens his essay in a very conversational manner, as though he were 'sharing' a particular experience with us (not just 'telling' us about it). He grips our attention by repeating the conversation of the two soldiers in dialogue form and adds a sufficient amount of 'local colour' (the railway platform, the background, the train…) to make the picture a 'living' one. When he moves on from the conversation to give us his personal views on the sort of letters the young man might have written, he shows his ability to

evoke a complete picture with a careful selection of seemingly ordinary incidents from one's everyday life.

His language is always simple, approximating the language used in ordinary conversation. He consciously avoids using difficult words and keeps his sentences reasonably simple and short. This is a conscious choice, as he wants to keep a 'conversational' air throughout the essay. Yet, at the same time, he evokes such a living picture of whatever it is that he is describing, that the reader feels as though he is actually participating in the scene. Moreover, it is the sort of language that speaks directly to the heart—and this is what the essayist cleverly uses to manipulate his readers' emotions. (Look, for instance, at how he makes us 'feel' the life of the soldier at the front when he imagines how that young man may have written his letter home).

Besides this, Gardiner also has the ability to move effortlessly from one detail to another (notice, for instance, how he manages to move from Bill and Sam to the penny-post and back to the difficulties faced by the likes of the two brothers)

Style, technique and language all combine to make A.G. Gardiner among the most readable of English essayists.



15.7 LET US SUM UP

You have learnt what an essay is and have also been given a brief history of this form of literature. Along with this, you have also learnt the names of some great essay writers. From this, you have moved on to the writer of the prescribed essay, A. G. Gardiner. You have learnt about A. G. Gardiner's life and career and, in this particular essay, you have become acquainted with his views on letter writing. You have seen how a good letter can conquer distances and make the reader of the letter feel as though the one who has written it is actually there in person. A good style can make the reader feel as though he is actually sharing the experiences of the writer—such is the immediacy that can be evoked. Moreover, Gardiner has also shown us how it is the seemingly smaller details that are often more

important. This is so because these lesser details are what can conjure up the atmosphere of the writer's situation rather than the more significant details (details, for example, that a newspaper might consider more worthy of recording). Over and above this, an easy, conversational style makes a letter more interesting to read and lends a familiarity that a more formal style could never be able to achieve.

Thus, in the course of your study, you have learnt not only what a good essay is, but also how a good letter can be written. Questions have been provided at every step to help you evaluate your understanding. It is hoped that these will help you understand the lesson better. Besides this, additional information provided to you under the heading 'Let Us Know' should help you know more about people relevant to your study. The 'Further Readings' section that follows provides you with a list of books that you may read for further information on A. G. Gardiner and his work. Finally, you have been given a list of possible questions of both 'long' and 'objective' types. Reading these questions and trying to write out answers to them should focus your study on the key areas of the lesson.



15.8 FURTHER READING

1) Gardiner, A.G. *Mary Furrows*

2) Gardiner, A.G. *Prophets, Priests and Kings*

3) Koss, Stephen *Fleet Street Radical: A. G. Gardiner and the Daily News*

4) Pearce, Edward *History Today*

You can also surf the internet for articles on A. G. Gardiner. Google is possibly the best search engine for the purpose. You could also try Amazon.com for books on or by A, G, Gardiner. Do not forget to search for 'Alpha of the Plough' too. Remember, this is the name Gardiner wrote under.