

Historical Development Of Essay

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What is an essay?

Professor Hugh Walker in the Introduction to his famous book “ The English Essays and Essayists” (1934)¹ mentions two notions about the definition of an Essay, (a) a composition comparatively short and (b) something incomplete and unsystematic. The second notion was Johnson’s conception who was himself an essayist of no mean a stature. He defined essay as a loose sally of the mind, an irregular undigested piece, not a regular and orderly performance². He was guided by the essays of his times. These notions, continued for many many years, even today after nearly two hundred years from Johnson’s times (1709-1734), they hold the floor which is very clear from the definition given in “The Oxford English Dictionary” which runs thus “ A composition of moderate length on any particular subject or branch of a subject; originally implying want of finish, an irregular, indigested piece but now said of a composition more or less elaborate in style though limited in range”.

This definition fits not all but a majority of the essays appearing here and there. For example Hume’s A Treatise of Human Nature or Lock’s An Essay concerning Human Understanding are examples of serious, systematic and profound essays.

Essay was not necessarily in prose. The Essays on Criticism or Essay on Mind are both in verse written respectively in the 18th and 19th centuries. ‘About the content’ it can be convincingly stated that there is no subject from stars to the dust-heap and from amoeba to man, which has not been dealt with in an essay.

The range with respect to manner of treatment is also very wide, there is lightness and superficiality on one hand, and reality and seriousness on the other. Along

with light, airy and graceful trifles we find lyrical intensity, passionate outburst, suggestions of deeps unfathomed plum net³.

Length of the essay also oscillates between too short and too long or moderate. Essays may be called complete and comprehensive (e.g. Essay on Human Understanding) and telegraphic and extra brief (like Bacon's 10-12 line essays).

It is, of course a fact that "the essayist does not usually appear early in the literary history of any country, he comes after the poet and the chronicler⁴.

Essays have been usually descriptive, expository (or narrative) and reflective.

The essay differs from a Treatise or Dissertation (which are research reports usually critical and fact based) in its lack of pretension to be systematic and complete exposition, and is being addressed to a general rather than a specialized audience. In other words essay discusses its subject in non-technical fashion and with liberal use of devices like anecdotes, illustration and humour.

As regards types, "formal" and "informal" types are two main divisions. The formal essay is impersonal, authoritative, highly knowledge saturated and ordered. In the informal essay the author assumes a tone of intimacy with the audience, tends to be concerned with every day things rather than with public affairs or specialized topics, the writer is relaxed, self revelatory and often whimsical.

Moreover, the formal essay is characterized by qualities of dignity, serious purpose and logical organization. Carlyle's Hero and Hero Worship is the best example of this type of essay.

The informal essay, also called TRUE essay includes brief instructive essays such as Bacon's periodical essays. Addison's and Lamb's essays are mostly personal essays. T.S. Eliot has written such essays in the modern times. Swift, Pope, Johnson, Goldsmith, Stevenson and Newman are his notable predecessors.

The Birth of the Essay-

The earliest essay-anonymous and trivial-Remedies against Discontentment appeared in 1556. But we owe to Bacon and 1557 both the birth of English Essay. Bacon published ten small pieces of the most concentrated literary polemical ever presented in 1597. It will be of

interest to note that the Greeks, Theophrastus and Plutarch and the Romans, Cicero and Seneca wrote essays long before the genre was given its standard name by Montaigne's great French Essayist in 1580⁵

But as Bacon rightly said: There are certain hollow blasts of wind and secret swellings of the sea before a tempest, there must have been anticipations of the essay before the Essay was born in 1597. Casaubon's translation of Theophrastus appeared in 1592. This translation of George Eliot's creation. Casaubon⁶ gave a great stimulus to the school of essay writing. But in concept of character writing as an art had caught its roots already in England. Of course The Fraternity of Vagabonds is slightly older than Herman's Coveat or Warning of Cursetors, vaguely called Vegabonds seems to have appeared in 1566.

In the age of Elizabeth, drama was an obsession, translation was a hobby in the making, the prose was largely lawless, essay was in its infancy, literary rubbish was shot and though in the heap of all those, there were gems to be found here and there, yet they were invariably rough. Yes, criticism had made a feeble beginning and Caxton's Prefaces may be regarded as early essays in this art.

Stephen Gosson's (1554-1624) School of Abuse (1579) dedicated to Sir Philip Sidney (1554-1586), Apology For Poetry (1595) are notable examples of exercise in this new art.

Bacon regarded the essay as a receptacle for detached thoughts, which is evident from his own words about them. Of studies (1597) and Of Adversity (1625) are glorious examples commented and commended by Macaulay in the nineteenth century. Montaigne and Lamb also belong to Elizabethan age. In their essays subject is often unimportant. For them every road leads to the end of the world, the title promises only some graceful triviality, it may cover deep feelings if not profound thought.

And Bacon wrote extensively and on almost all abstract subjects and real situations such as Poor Relations. Nevertheless there is not even one essay which does not show that Bacon had mastered the principle which probably no contemporary had grasped.

Hooker and Raleigh who preceded Bacon also wrote essays of merit but they were not masters of style.⁷ So till closing years of the 16th century, no one had shown a mastery of principle of prose; only Bacon showed such mastery.

William also showed such mastery, his essays were published in 1600 and Robert Johnson who published his essays in 1601 could not reach Bacon's profundity. John Seldon (1584-1654) the author of Table Talk deserves a place beside Johnson and Bacon.

Essay in the Seventeenth Century :-

The sixteenth century had established in the Essay standard of high order. Johnson and Bacon were both unlimitable in many ways. But growth and development is the law of nature, be it the field of finance, agriculture, politics, religion or literature.

The author of Resolves : Divine, Moral, Political Mr. Owen Felltham (1602-1668) was the pioneer essay writer of the seventeenth Century. Felltham published this work when he was barely 18 years old. The essays were short but thought provoking and appreciation winning. The book became very popular after revision in 1628 after 8 years of the first edition, twelve editions had come by 1709. The book is written not without ease, certainly with care⁸. The author's discipleship to Bacon is clear.

William Drimmond (1585-1649) the author of A Cypress Grove comes near the top-most heights of literature, next to Falltham. Cypress Grove an eloquent meditation upon death was published in 1623. It is perhaps the first conscious and sustained effort in English to write poetical prose. In "Irene"(1638) Drummond becomes rhetoric. Had he been born a century later, he would have captured the fame of Steele and Addison.

Sir Thomas Browne (1605-1682) is an honourable successor of Drummond. On the ground of his Tracts and Miscellanies (1716-1729) he is entitled to a place among top essayists. But his works are long and closely articulated. Raligio Medici is his greatest work, it is mostly autobiographic. Johnson speaks of Browne's style as a "tissue of many languages"⁹.

Next in line are Edward Hyde whose Contemplations and Reflections upon the Psalms of David is a good collection of essays, perhaps nearly all essays are full of

reflections of a man rich in experience, and Clarendon whose work Divine and Moral is a famous collection of good essays. These authors are more close to Montaigne than Bacon. But Abraham Cowley (1618-1667) is a Baconian.

Then comes James Howell (1594-1666) with his paper on “ The Spectator” which is voluminous, published in four volumes. Dryden (1631-1700) is another notable essayist of Seventeenth Century. His famous work are Epistle Dedicatory of the Rival Ladies (1664) and the Preface to the Fables (1700). Among the earliest of his essays was Of Dramatic Poetry (1668) which is still the best known essay and contains the most elaborate exposition of his critical principles.

The Queen Anny Essayists

Richard Steele (1672-1729) is the initiator of Anne’s period of essay writing but the true ball ringer was Daniel Defoe (1661-1731). He is often described as an honourable predecessor of Steele. They were both good writers but neither of them can be ranked with the greatest except the area of power of origination. Defoe was an essayist, more the disciple than the master of Steele. “ There are few things in literature more astonishing than Defoe’s. Review of the Affairs of France¹⁰. Addison (1672-1719) made himself known by his The Tatler (around 1712). Between Steele and Addison, Steele was a more richly cognitive mind of the two.

Then comes Carlyle who is immeasurably beyond Addison’s highest flight as eagles flight is beyond Sparrow’s¹¹. Addison could never rise to the highest rank. He erred while separating form from the substance. But it was Addison alone who taught the lesson of neatness, lucidity and precision.

Some other noted essayists of this age were Swift (1667-1745), Pope(1688-1744), Berkeley (1685-1753) and Arbuthnot (1667-1735). Alexander Pope contributed 8 papers to the Guardian and Berkeley as many as fourteen. Berkeley ranks next after Addison and Steele in quantity of contribution and his writings are mostly in the defence of Christianity ¹².

Essay in the Eighteenth Century.

The century begins the infamous period of imitators of Steele and Addison. Swift’s Journal to Stella notes that “ The Observer is fallen, the Medleys are

jumbled together with Flying Post; the Examiner is deadly sick, the spectator keeps up and double its price”¹³.

In addition to the great Spectator and The Rambler (1750) and several more journals came up and they mostly carried imitations. The new Journals became less literary and more attached to political parties. The new journals included the Champion (1739-41) The Bee (1733-35), The Free Thinker (1718-19), The Plain Dealer (1724-25), The Female Spectator (1744-1746), The Parrot (1746), The Convent Garden (1752), The Genius (1761-62), The Lounge (1785-87), The Observer (1785-1790), The Looker on (1792-1794), The World (1753-58), The Citizen of the World (1760-61) and many more.

The eighteenth century’s first hero is Henry Fielding (1707-1734). Prior to the publication of the Convent Garden Samuel Johnson (1709-1784) had appeared on the scene as a famous essayist. His Rambler (1750-52) was ranked as the first classical periodical after the Guardian (1713).

Then came the Idler (1758-60) and Hawkasworth’s Adventure (1752-54). The themes of the Rambler were very different from that those of the Spectator, and it never became popular.

John Hawkasworth (1715-1773) is remembered as the saviour of the Adventurer for a few years before its death. Other essayists of this period were Oliver Goldsmith (1728-1811) Richard Cumberland (1732-1811) and Boling broke(1678-1751). But Swift, Addison, Steele and Fielding have written many things that refuse to be forgotten. So have their successor like Jonson and Goldsmith.

The Journal enlisted above produced more than a hundered essayists but most of them were imitators, hence the name of this age, And creators like Pope, Addison, Swift, Jonson and Burke are the modern parallels to Hoarse, Virgil, Cicero and all that brilliant company¹⁴.

ESSAY IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

The period of first thirty years of this century is an extension of Romanticism which begins in 1780 and continues up to 1830. These thirty years were largely devoted more to poetry than prose writing.

The century, in the field of essay writing begins with the appearance of new magazines such as Edinburgh Review (1802), The Quarterly Review (1808), Lockwood's Spectator (1828), The Athenaeum (1828) and Frazer's Magazine (1830). They began with critical writings on poetry and began publishing great essayists like Hazlitt (1772-1830) Charles Lamb (1775-1834) and Leigh Hunt (1784-1858). They discovered the chief mission of the modern magazine, which is to give every writer of ability the opportunity to make his work known to the world. Hazlitt wrote several essays treating all reading as a kind of romantic journey. There is force and reason in his writing and he has poetic romance in his prose. Lamb also wrote extensively but all the conventional approaches of the Essay are boldly ignored by him. He is enchantingly easy and with no suspension of vulgarity, simple in his choice of subjects, never trite in his treatment and he can trifle delicately without being trivial¹⁵. Shakespeare's Stories and The Tales are regarded as his best in the literature. His style was unique, can be called Lambian.

Leigh Hunt is as much unique as Lamb. His prose synchronises with his verse. He is akin to Lamb, same sprightness, intimate ease and whimsical charm. The second half of the nineteenth century opens with robust and argumentative, yet explicit essay writers. The famous ones are Macaulay (1800-1850) Carlyle (1795-1881), John Ruskin (1819-1900), Mathew Arnold (1822-1888) and Newman (1801-1890). The essay writers of this period were a step further in diction and treatment. Macaulay's art is that of a public speaker rather than a literary man. He has a wonderful command of language and he makes his meaning clear by striking phrases, vigorous antitheses, anecdotes and illustration. From the beginning to the end, he does not lose the reader's attention. Gladstone said, "Macaulay is always conversing on or recollecting or reading or composing but reflecting never"¹⁶ "Essay On Milton is his master piece. It will always be a debatable issue. Taller, who? Macaulay or Carlyle. Carlyle impresses different people differently and his expression varies greatly as do Macaulay's arguments. At times he is calm, persuasive, grimly humorous, at other times widely exclamatory, as if he were sharing and waving his arms at the readers. He had none of Addison's delicate satire and in his fury as he was unsympathetic and often harsh. French Revolution (1837) is his great historical work.

John Ruskin (1819-1900) is like his friend Carlyle but he is broader in his sympathies and in every way more hopeful, helpful and humane. Ethics of the Dust, Crown of Wild Olive and Sesame and Lilies, appeal the most to men and women alike. Among his numerous books, The Seven Lamps of Architecture (1849) Stones of Venice (1851-1853) Modern Painters (1843-1846) are famous. He is more known for his ethical lecturing. For a full half a century he was “the apostle of beauty” in England and the beauty for which he pleaded was never sensuous or pagan, but always spiritual appealing to the soul of man rather than to his eyes leading to better work and better living¹⁷.

Mathew Arnold (1822-1888) was another bright star of the Victorian age; more like the cultivated Greek his voice is soft, his speech is suave, but he leaves the impression that you must be deficient in culture. His chief works include Sohrab and Rustum, Essays In criticism and Culture and Anarchy. His work is intellectual rather than inspirational. His is one of the great master’s in literary criticism.

John Henry Newman (1801-1890) is known for keeping constantly before man’s mind the religious ideals. He is at No. 1 in this field. His chief works include Apologia Pro Vitasua , Via Media, the Grammar of Assent and Idea of a University.

Other essayists include John Addington Symonds, Walkar Peter and Leslie Stephen.

The Characteristics of Essays of this age.

All essayists were equally intent on discovering the truth of life.

Literature had become the mirror of truth and the first requirement of every serious essay was to be true to the life or the facts which it represented.

Every author was not just to create or attempt an artistic work; the work must have a definite lesson for humanity. Milton’s famous sentence sums up the purpose. A good book is the precious life-blood of a master spirit.

Essay in the Twentieth Century.

After Stevenson (1850-1894) the essay flourished until the thirties when it was affected by a declining number of periodicals, the pressure on newspapers space and their attraction of their radio. Further, the temper of an age led away from rhetoric and

the essay's self sustaining elegance.¹⁸ Sir Winston Churchill alone retained the grand manner. Like Macaulay he knew how effective his short and simple sentence could be amid elaborative periods. Outstanding in the final phrase was G.K. Chesterton (1874-1936). He was followed by Hilaire Belloc (1870-1953). His certain essays such as Path to Rome were fine examples of perfection and performance. Then Sir Max Beerbaum's (1872-1956) essays reveal their 18th century's wit and Essays in Biography still untarnished. In Essays in Persuasion (1931), Lord Keynes (1883-1946) showed his imaginative qualities. Then there are two glittering names of G.K. Ogden and I.A. Richards. The Principles of Literary Criticism and The Meaning of Meaning are illustration examples of their rich mind and flow of thought. D.H. Lawrence and T.S. Eliot were great writers of mid twentieth century. The Criterion (1922-39), a journal started by Eliot succeeded in changing the taste of his generation in imaginative thought.

Cyril Connolly (1903-64) in his journal Horizon (1939-50) sustained in war time the graceful image of an earlier western civilization.¹⁹ Many of his contributors shared his wit and irony and nostalgia for the days gone by. An other notable name of the period among good essayists is that of T.E. Lawrence. His Hint (1955) dominates with realism over his romanticism. Then we have great pen in Ralph Fox a communist writer. J.S. Priestly (1894-1959) was many in one. He had recourse to their radio, to the theatre to journalism, to novel, to essay and to many other fields let he refused to be hedged in by restriction and routine of an exclusive performance.²⁰ His famous essays are : English Journey (1934), The Secret Dream (1946) , Delights (1949), Literature and Western Era (1960), The Moments and Other pieces (1966).

George Orwell (1903-50) born in India, educated at Eton, was a great essayist . His Famous work include The Road to Wigan Pier (1937), Homage to Catalonia (1938), Inside the Whale (1940), The Lion and the Unicorn (1941), James Burnham and the Managerial Revolution (1946), Critical Essays (1946), Shooting an Elephant (1950), England your England (1953). Orwell's work as a whole is the citizen's main force against the power that be a sort of despairing cry from the individual crushed by an onrushing and technocratic age, the voice in the desert of an outsider who believes in human nature bent expels very little from man.²¹

As their Kestlar (1905-64) was as other effective amongst of the late middle twentieth century. He had a wide sweep so far as topics were concerned. His famous essays are the Yogi and the Commissar (1945) and Pronise and Fulfillment 1959. There were a few women essayist who have left an indelible print on the sands of time. The notable among them are Dorothy Richardson (1873-1957), Sheila Kaye Smith (1887-1956), Rose Macaulay (1891-1958) and John Wani (1925-75). John Wani's works include Essays on Literature and Ideas (1963), The Living of Shakespeare (1964) and Wild Track (1965).

The mid Twentieth Century is known for variety of essays; Variety in length, content, style, language, criticism and emphasis. What is missing is brevity, compactness and perfection and literary treatment of the topic(s). Essayists are more concerned with the age for which they are writing and lose with the depth and breadth of the subject and its various dimensions as was the case with Bacon, Steele and Addison etc. There is journalistic tinge in all essays except the ones written in the earlier part of the twentieth century. The Chief writers of the post mid twentieth century are: John Didion (Slouching Towards Bethlehem (1967)), The White Album (1979), Susan Sontag (In Interpretation and other essays (1966)), Under the sign of Saturn (1980), and Calvin Trillin in-Uncivil Liberties (1982) Too Soon to Tell (1995). The beauty of this age is that writers who are not primarily essayists have also turned their attention to this form. The poet Nikki Giovanni and British novelist Julian Barnes have recently published book-length collection of essays entitled Racism (1994) and Letters from London (1995) respectively .²²

Modern essay has seven distinct characteristics which distinguish it from the essays of the nineteenth or even eighteenth century essays. These characteristics include (a) global emphasis in content, (b) political tones, (c) slogan based (usually discussing the impact of globalization, liberalization, privatization and professionalisation, gender equalization, I.T. revolution, World peace, spiritualization and increasing health problems and need for poverty and ignorance elimination, democratic governance and disarmament issues, (d) unbalanced, one side supporters and (e) use of harshness and arrogant language and idiom, i.e. unfinished and hurriedly posted for publication, waiting for rejoinders and defence and (f) less attention to correctness of language and suitability of the idiom (g)

heavily laden with quotations and references and (h), by and large contemptuous in impression and impact.

With this background the 21st Century essay is likely to be a genre of its own type different from the present genre called essays. Usually authors are invited to deliver special lectures on topic of World Concern or on Historical, Political, Literacy, Religious Personalities and their speeches delivered on such occasion are printed in the form of essays which are only a shade different from Dissertation or brief reports, fully documented.

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