

**SELF-LEARNING
MATERIAL**



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MEN 203 : ENGLISH PROSE

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MEN 203
ENGLISH PROSE

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FRANCIS BACON : “Of Travel” and “Of Truth”

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OBJECTIVES

After a careful reading of this unit, you will be able to: define the essay as a literary form; trace its origins and growth; analyse Bacon's essays “Of Travel” and “Of Truth” with regard to its theme and prose style

INTRODUCTION

In this Unit, we shall first discuss the form of the essay and then give you a note on its history with special reference to its growth and development in England. Our focus will then shift to Bacon's essay “Of Travel” and “Of Truth”. A short biographical note on the author and an introduction precede the actual essay and a glossary succeeds it. After you have read the essay, we briefly discuss its theme and style. We shall also give you some exposure to writing explanations of passages from the essay. We have prepared some exercises for you. Please complete these before moving on to the answers provided by us at the end of the unit. You must have read many articles in the daily newspapers and found that they are prose compositions usually written on single subjects. The word 'essay' comes from the French word *essai* (first used by the French writer Michel de Montaigne for his *Essais*, published in 1580), which means 'to attempt' or 'to try out'. This suggests that an essay is an individual's attempt to look at his/her subject in a personal way. Samuel Johnson (1709-1784) called an

essay "a loose sally of the mind.. . not a regular and orderly performance". The Oxford English Dictionary (OED) defines it as 'a composition more or less elaborate in style, though limited in range'. Both definitions differ from each other. What is loose, irregular and disorderly for Johnson, is minutely worked out and highly developed for the OED. The latter definition, moreover, gives us some idea about the length of an essay but Johnson's definition does not. The essay is usually short and compact but it can, occasionally, also be of book length, like "Essay on the Human Understanding" written by John Locke (1632-1794). As stated above, essays are prose compositions. However, some have also been written in verse like "Essay on Criticism" (1711) and "Essay on Man" (1732-4), written by the English poet Alexander Pope (1688-1744). The essay is, thus, difficult to define as it is one of the most flexible and adaptable of literary genres. It can loosely be described as a composition, usually in prose, that attempts to discuss a subject. A further dimension was added by the nineteenth century English writer, Matthew Arnold (1822-1888), who said that an essayist humanizes knowledge, i.e; presents it in familiar terms, divesting it of all that is harsh, uncouth, abstract, exclusive, etc., so that it is of common interest, and is written in a style that appeals to us. Hence, we can conclude that an essay, as a literary form, is a short prose composition, treating a subject in a general manner, so that it can be of interest to many readers. Essays can be written in formal as well as in informal style, depending on the purpose they are meant to achieve. A formal essay tends to be serious in tone, objective in presentation, more expository in nature, giving the reader new perspectives on the subject, and even persuading him to a particular point of view. The informal essay, on the other hand, is written in a lighter vein, reading more like a conversation, affording pleasure in its reading, or at times, amusing the reader if the tone adopted by the essayist is humorous or even sarcastic. Of the three essays included for your study in this Block, Francis Bacon's "Of Great Place" is an example of a brief, formal and objective essay; "On Seeing England For The First Time" by Jamaica Kincaid illustrates both Doctor Johnson's definition of the essay being "a loose sally of the mind and the OED definition of it being 'limited in range'; Charles Lamb's essay "A Dissertation upon A Roast Pig" is a good example of an informal essay. Its style is conversational, subjective and humorous. While reading each essay, it will be helpful if you keep in mind its theme and style and relate it to the author's life and times.

THE ENGLISH ESSAY : A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

The essay began with Montaigne (1533-1592) in France and with Francis Bacon (1561-1626) in England. Bacon is credited with giving the English essay the status of a literary art. Since

Bacon, the essay, as literary prose, has been used for a variety of purposes by seventeenth century writers like Abraham Cowley (1618-1667), John Dryden (1631-1700), Daniel Defoe (1660-1731) and others. Alexander Pope (1688-1744), as mentioned earlier, added a new dimension to essay-writing by using verse to write his "Essay on Criticism" and "Essay on Man." The eighteenth century also saw the rise of the periodical essay of which the chief exponents were Richard Steele (1672-1729) and Joseph Addison (1672-1719), who published their essays in their periodicals or magazines *The Tatler* (published by Steele) and *The Spectator* (published by Addison). Their essays hold a mirror to the eighteenth century social and political life of England, dealing with subjects like fashions of the day, superstitions, rural and urban manners, political rivalries etc. The English essay really came into its own in the early nineteenth century with the Romantic Revival in English Literature. As in romantic poetry, so also in the essay the individual became the measure of all things and there appeared a group of essayists such as William Hazlitt (1778-1830), Charles Lamb (1775-1834) and Thomas de Quincey (1785-1859), who are termed as personal essayists. The word 'personal' here may appear repetitive since the essay, by definition, is personal in character as stated earlier. But whereas in the eighteenth century, the essay became a vehicle of social, political, literary and cultural criticism, in the early nineteenth century, in the hands of the personal essayists, it became a record of the essayist's personal emotions and feelings and, sometimes, even his whims and fancies. Because of the quality of freshness in them, we still enjoy reading the personal essays of Hazlitt such as "On Going on a Journey" and "The Fight"; Lamb's "A Dissertation upon Roast Pig" and "Dream Children"; and de Quincey's "Confessions of an English Opium Eater" and "The English Mail Coach", to mention only a few of their many essays. Some other outstanding essayists of the early and late nineteenth century like S.T. Coleridge (1772-1834), Thomas Carlyle (1795-1881), John Ruskin (1819-1900), Matthew Arnold (1822-1888) and R.L. Stevenson (1850-1896), chose to employ the genre to write formal and objective pieces on literature, aesthetics, philosophy and history rather than for writing personal essays. The essay may not be as popular or dominant a literary form of expression today as it was in the early eighteenth and the early nineteenth centuries, yet it has become indispensable to our times largely because of the extensive growth of knowledge and that of magazines, periodicals and newspapers. Twentieth century essayists like A.G. Gardiner (1865-1946), G.K. Chesterton (1874-1936) and Robert Lynd (1879-1949) have delighted us with many of their instructive and entertaining essays such as "The Rule of the Road", "On Running After One's Hat" and "Forgetting", respectively, to mention one each of their many memorable essays. The great names of the twentieth century

who have changed the essay into a highly organized and perfected literary form for presenting their points of view and arguments cogently and systematically, are Hilaire Belloc (1870- 1953), Lytton Strachey (1880- 1932), ; E.M. Forster (1879- 1970), D.H. Lawrence (1885-1930), T.S. Eliot (1888- Non-Fictional Prose. Essays, Letters, Travelogues .I: 1965), Aldous Huxley (1894- 1964), George Orwell (1903- 1950) and Bertrand Russell (1872- 1969). The list of names is endless, but to know what an essay is and how it grew, and to enjoy its different flavours, it is best to read as many essays as you can from different periods. Check Your Progress-1 a. What is an essay? b. Name the chief exponents of the periodical essay. c. Who are the major personal essayists of the nineteenth century and why are they termed as such? d. Name four outstanding essayists of the twentieth century.

FRANCIS BACON: A BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Francis Bacon (1561-1626), the father of the English essay, was also one of the pioneers of modern philosophy and modern science. Born into an affluent family, Bacon studied law and took it up as his profession, making rapid progress in it. When twenty-three, he turned his thoughts to Parliament and entered it in 1584. Knighted in 1603, Bacon held many prominent offices in his public career. He became Solicitor-General in 1607, Attorney-General in 1613, Lord Keeper of the Great Seal in 1617, and, finally, Lord Chancellor of England in 1618. Within six months, he was elevated to nobility as Baron Verulam, and was made Viscount St. Albans in 1621. However, Bacon's career as Lord Chancellor came under a cloud with charges of bribery and corruption against him, leading to his removal from the post. Bacon died in 1626, five years after his disgrace and retirement from public life. Despite facing reverses in his public career, Bacon's literary career remained splendid and uninterrupted. His best known works on science and philosophy are: *Advancement of Learning* (1605), *Novum Organum* (1620), and *De Augmentis* (1623). He is also known for his *History of Henry VIII* (1621) and *New Atlantis* (1627), the latter being a kind of imaginary dreamland akin to Thomas More's *Utopia*. Bacon's fame, however, rests primarily on his work *Essays or Counsels Civil and Moral*. It may interest you to know that Bacon had a very poor opinion of the English language and was convinced that it would 'play the bankrupt with books'. He, therefore, took care to write all his serious works in Latin 'for greater permanence' as he put it. He used English for writing his essays because he considered them as being insignificant. In fact, Bacon referred to his essays as 'certain brief notes' or 'repositories of dispersed meditation' and 'receptacles for detached thoughts'. Their genesis lay in his jotting down, at random, any brilliant or suggestive thing he heard or any illuminating thought that came into

his mind, and then putting these together into a book, constantly augmenting the stock. Ironically, it is the essays Bacon wrote in English that have brought him lasting fame, while his Latin works are no more than historical curiosities today. Although equipped with great intellect and wisdom, Bacon sadly lacked moral principles. He did not hesitate to adopt unscrupulous means to rise in life or to betray the friends who helped him to rise. Perhaps Alexander Pope was right in calling Bacon "the wisest, the brightest and the meanest of mankind." Check Your Progress-II Fill in the blanks below with appropriate answers:- a. Bacon became Lord Chancellor of England in the year b. was the language Bacon used for writing all his serious works. c. Bacon is known today mainly for his work d. has called Bacon 'the wisest, the brightest and the meanest of mankind'.

PROSE STYLE

In this section we shall discuss Bacon's prose style and the literary devices he has used. Style is the manner in which a writer presents his theme. It involves the effective use of language and literary devices like similes, metaphors, parallels, anti-thesis, paired and triple constructions of sentences etc. One of the striking features of Bacon's style is his opening statements which immediately take up the subject and engage the reader's attention. You must have been intrigued by the dramatic opening of the present essay: 'Men in great places are thrice servants', and been compelled to read the sentences following it to get at its meaning. Let us consider some more examples: "Of Revenge" begins with the words: 'Revenge is a kind of wild justice'; the opening line of "Of parents and children" is: 'The joys of parents are secret; and so their griefs and fears'; the essay "Of Marriage and Single Life" starts with: 'He that hath wife and children hath given hostages to fortune'. Francis Bacon : "Of Great Place Each of the above statements also shows Bacon's ability to compress abundant thought in extremely small space. This quality is called terseness. A terse speaker, as you know, is one who delivers very short but weighty lectures. All Bacon's essays are short and made up of terse and epigrammatic or aphoristic statements that say a lot in a few words, like the ones quoted above. An epigram or aphorism is a short, sharp and amusing saying, usually making a general observation. Bacon's essays are replete with epigrams that have universal appeal. Some instances from "Of Great Place" are: 'It is a strange desire to seek power and to lose liberty'; 'The rising unto place is laborious; and by pains men come to greater pains'. Bacon seems to have a natural instinct for neat and elegant proverbial expressions that highlight his ideas and concepts in the fewest possible words. He has furnished the maximum number of proverbs to the English language. A proverb or maxim is

a pithy saying expressing a supposed truth or moral lesson, or is a saying that requires an explanation. You may have heard the following proverbs which are often quoted from Bacon's Essay: Some books are to be tasted, others to be swallowed, and some few to be chewed and digested. ("Of Studies") Men fear death as children fear to go in the dark. . . ("Of Death) Suspicions amongst thoughts are like bats among birds, they ever fly by twilight. ("Of Suspicion") Severity breedeth fear, but roughness breedeth hate. ("Of Great Place") Bacon avoids using abundant words and drops conjunctions and linking words in his essays and yet his prose is clear and lucid. Can you think of a good reason for this? This is so because his prose is well-aided by similes, metaphors, analogies and quotations. In the essay under study, Bacon uses an interesting analogy. He writes: "All rising to great place is by a winding stair." He means to say that high posts are not achieved through fair and straight means but through dubious means, which is akin to climbing up a winding stair. Another statement from the same essay - "Imitation is a globe of precepts" persuades us to look for a different level of meaning suggested by the analogy. You must have also come across quotations, some of them in Non-Fictional Prose-I: Latin, which Bacon has used to elaborate his statements. He has quoted from Essays, Letters, various sources - the Bible, Tacitus, Solomon etc. Travelogues Although Bacon's essays emerge out of his own varied experiences in life, he is never subjective or personal in his expression. Sentences like "All rising to great place is by a winding stair" may hint at his own rapid rise in public life through questionable means, yet he adopts an objective and impersonal tone to convey it. Bacon's unit of structure is generally a short clause. Sentences are sometimes short, at other times they consist of a number of connected clauses, but they are always loose rather than periodic and 'come down like the strokes of a hammer' as Dean Church so aptly put it. After reading "Of Great Place" a few times, you must have observed that Bacon's sentences are symmetrically arranged in paired and triple constructions with their parallels and anti-thesis. Anti-thesis is a thesis or proposition opposing another. In other words, it is a statement in which thoughts or words are balanced in contrast. Read carefully the examples given below from a few of Bacon's essays, to understand how he arranges his sentences: Studies serve for delight, for ornament, and for ability. ("Of Studies") Some books are to be tasted, others to be swallowed, and some few to be chewed and digested. ("Of Studies") Travel, in the younger sort, is a part of education; in the elder, a part of experience. ("Of Travel") Certainly virtue is like precious odours, most fragrant when they are incensed, or crushed for prosperity doth best discover vice, adversity doth best discover virtue. ("Of Adversity")

LET US SUM UP

In this unit we have learnt that: an essay is a short prose composition dealing with a subject in a general manner so as to interest many readers; the essay began with Montaigne in France in the sixteenth century, while Francis Bacon is called the father of the English essay: the essays of Bacon reflect his practical wisdom; Bacon's prose style is terse, epigrammatic and lucid, well aided by similes, metaphors, analogies and quotations; and explanation of a passage focuses attention on its relative importance and contribution to the unity of the whole essay.

SUGGESTED READING

You would benefit by reading the following essays of Bacon:

Of Religion, Of Truth, Of Virtue, Of Studies, Of Friendship, Of Parents and Children, Of Marriage and Single Life Of Plantations