**Q-THE PERIODICAL ESSAY**

**Introduction:**

The periodical essay and the novel are the two important gifts of "our excellent and indispensable eighteenth century" to English literature. The latter was destined to have a long and variegated career over the centuries, but the former was fated to be born with the eighteenth century and to die with it.

This shows how it was a true mirror of the age. **A. R. Humphrey** observes in this connection:

"If any literary form is the particular creation and the particular mirror of the Augustan Age in England, it is the periodical essay."

Generally speaking, it is very difficult to date precisely the appearance of a new literary genre. For example, nobody can say with perfect certainty as to when the first novel, or the first comedy or the first short story came to be written in England or elsewhere. We often talk of "fathers" in literature: for instance, Fielding is called the father of English novel, Chaucer the father of English poetry, and so forth. But that is done, more often than not in a loose and very unprecise sense. This difficulty in dating a genre, however, does not arise in a few cases—that of the periodical essay included. The periodical essay was literally invented by Steele on April 12, 1709, the day he launched his *Taller*. Before *The Taller* there had been periodicals and there had been essays, but there had been no periodical essays. The example of *The Taller* was followed by a large number of writers of the eighteenth century till its very end, when with the change of sensibility; the periodical essay disappeared along with numerous other accompaniments of the age. Throughout the century there was a deluge of periodical essays. The periodical essay remained the most popular, if not the dominant, literary form. Men as different as Pope, Swift, Dr. Johnson, and Goldsmith found the periodical essay an eligible medium. As a matter of fact it was, unlike the novel for example, the only literary form which was patronised without exception by all the major writers of the century. It is hard to name a single first-rate writer of the century who did not write something for a periodical paper. **Mrs. Jane H. Jack** says:
"From the days of Queen Anne-who had The Spectator taken in with her breakfast-to the time of the French Revolution and even beyond, periodical essays on the lines laid down by Steele and Addison flooded the country and met the eye in every bookseller's shop and coffee-house."

Before tracing the history of the periodical essay in the eighteenth century and assigning causes for its phenomenal popularity, let us consider what exactly a periodical essay is.

❖ What is a Periodical Essay?

What is called the periodical essay was first of all given by Steele as The Taller. Nothing of this type had before him been attempted in England or even elsewhere. However, to attempt a definition of the periodical essay is neither easy nor helpful. George Sherburn in ‘A Literary History of England’ edited by Albert C. Baugh, avers in this connexion:

"Rigorous definition of this peculiarly eighteenth century type of publication is not very helpful...

The periodical essay has been aptly described as dealing with morals and manners, but it might in fact deal with anything that pleased its author. It covered usually not more than the two sides (in two columns) of a folio palf-sheet: normally it was shorter than that. It might be published independent of other material, as was The Spectator, except for advertising; or it might be the leading article in a newspaper."

❖ Reasons for the Popularity:

The periodical essay found a spectacular response in the eighteenth century on account of various reasons. Fundamentally this new genre was in perfect harmony with the spirit of the age. It sensitively combined the tastes of the different classes of readers with the result that it appealed to all-though particularly to the resurgent middle classes. In the eighteenth century there was a phenomenal spurt in literacy, which expanded widely the circle of readers. They welcomed the periodical essay as it
was "light" literature. The brevity of the periodical essay, its common sense approach, and its tendency to dilute morality and philosophy for popular consumption paid rich dividends. To a great extent, the periodical essayist assumed the office of the clergyman and taught the masses the lesson of elegance and refinement, though not of morality of the psalm-singing kind. The periodical paper was particularly welcome as it was not a dry, high-brown, or hoity-toity affair like the professional sermon, in spite of being highly instructive in nature. In most cases the periodical essayist did not "speak from the clouds" but communicated with the reader with an almost buttonholing familiarity. The avoidance of politics (though not by all the periodical essayists yet by a good many of them) also contributed towards their popularity. Again, the periodical essayists made it a point to cater for the female taste and give due consideration to the female point of view. That won for them many female readers too. All these factors were responsible for the universal acceptance of the periodical essay in eighteenth-century England:

The History of the Periodical Essay

"The Tatler":

It was Steele's Tatler which began the deluge of the periodical essays which followed. The first issue of The Tatler appeared on April 12, 1709, at that time Addison, Steele's bosom friend, was functioning as Secretary to the Lord Lieutenant of Ireland, in that country. Steele had not informed Addison of his design, but if he desired to write in secret he was not lucky; a single month detected him and Addison's first contribution appeared on May 26. Though Addison contributed to The Tatler much less than Steele, yet he soon overshadowed his friend. Of the 271 numbers, 188 are Steele's and 42 Addison's; 36 of them were written by both jointly. The rest were penned by others like Tickell and Budgell. Steele spoke of himself as…

"a distressed prince who calls in a powerful neighbour to his aid,"

and added:

"I was undone by my auxiliary [Addison]: when I had once called him in, I could not subsist without him"
'The Tatler' appeared thrice a week—on Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Saturdays, that is the days on which the post went to the country. As regards the aim of the paper, we may quote the words of Steele in the dedication to the first collected volume (1710):

"The general purpose of this paper is to expose the false arts of life, to pull off the disguises of cunning, vanity, affectation, and recommend a general simplicity in our dress, our discourse and our behaviour."

All the material of 'The Tatler' was purported by Steele to be based upon discussions in the four famous coffee-houses, and was divided as follows:

(i) "All accounts of gallantry, pleasure and entertainment"-White's Chocolate-house.
(ii) Poetry-Will's Coffee-house.
(iii) Learning-the Grecian.
(iv) Foreign and domestic news-St. James' Coffee-house.
(v) "What else I shall on any other subject offer"-"My own apartment"

The chief importance of 'The Tatler' lies in its social and moral criticism which had a tangibly salubrious effect on the times. Both Addison and Steele did good work each in his own way. Addison was a much more refined and correct writer than Steele whom Macaulay aptly calls "a scholar among rakes and a rake among scholars." Addison's prose is, according to Dr. Johnson, a model of "the middle style." And this is his famous suggestion:

"Whoever wishes to attain an English style, familiar but not coarse, and elegant but not ostentatious, must give his days and nights to the volumes of Addison."

Steele, on the contrary, was a thing of moods and moments. His writing has a look of spontaneity and human warmth which Addison's lacks. Comparing Steele and Addison, George Sherburn maintains

"Steele's prose never attained the elegant ease and correctness of Addison's, and yet it is probable that his
tendency to warm to a subject and to write intimately and personally, as the reader's friend, contributed much to the success of the paper. Addison's best essays are the result of his slightly chilly insight into the typical mental attitudes of his day."

Later critics are apt to place Steele higher than Addison. Thus Leigh-Hunt, for instance, affirms that he prefers "Steele with all his faults" to "Addison with all his essays."

❖ "The Spectator":

Without any warning to his readers, Steele suddenly wound up The Taller on January 2, 1711. But two months later-on March 1, 1711-The Spectator began its memorable career of 555 numbers up to December 6, 1712. Whereas The Tatler had appeared only three times a week. The Spectator appeared daily, excepting Sundays. The new paper became tremendously popular among English men and women belonging to all walks of life. The best of all the periodical essays, it is an important human document concerning the morals and manners, thoughts and ideas, of the English society of the age of Queen Anne. Addison's fame chiefly rests on The Spectator papers. As A. R. Humphreys puts it:

"Were it not for his essays, Addison's literary reputation would be insignificant; into them, diluted and sweetened for popular consumption, went his classical and modern reading, his study of philosophy and natural science, reflections culled from French critics, and indeed] anything that might make learning "polite"."

A particularly happy feature of The Spectator was its envisagement of a club consisting of representatives from diverse walks of life. Among them Sir Roger de Coverley, and eccentric but thoroughly lovable Tory baronet, is one of the immortal creations of English literature. The Spectator drew a large female readership as many of the papers were for and about women. Though both Addison and Steele were Whigs, yet in The Spectator they kept up a fairly neutral political poise and, in fact, did their best to expose the error of the political fanaticism of both the Tories and Whigs. Further, The Spectator evinced much interest in trade and, consequently,
endeared itself to the up-and-coming trading community which had its representative in The Spectator Club-the rich Sir Andrew Freeport. However, much of the charm of *The Spectator* lay in its style-humorous, ironical, but elegant and polished. The chief importance of *The Spectator* for the modern reader lies in its humour. As A. R. Humphrey reminds us, *The Spectator* papers are important much more historically than aesthetically.

**Q- Compare and contrast Addison and Steele as essayist on the basis of their essays prescribed for study. (May-2010)**

❖ **Introduction:**

“Steele was the more original and Addison the more effective. As a comparison between the two writers is almost inevitable.”

- H.V. Routh.

**Joseph Addison** (1672-1719) and **Richard Steele** (1672-1729) are the founders of the modern English essay as well as modern English prose. Both *Steele* and *Addison* aimed at easy and free flowing expression and that was the style the 18th century needed with the expansion of England’s trade and industry.

The Augustan view of life was almost wholly phenomenal **W.L. Phelps** says….

“Now, if there was anything the Augustan hated, it was enthusiasm; they were simply bored by it as the man of the world is bored by the native raptures off the unsophisticated….”

The first half of the eighteenth century, as a class, avoided any subject that demanded an appeal to cold intellect: and these were by far satirical, didactic and argumentative.

In each preceding age, the master pieces were poetry but before the middle of the 18th century we find prose far surpassing poetry….
“The elegant and reformed manners of the town dominated literature. Nature was methodized and both the universe and the state were set working with the precision of a well regulated watch.”

As regards the improvement of English prose Steele and Addison occupy an important position. They were the first to combine good style with attractive matter. And thus to convey a prose ideal to a much wider circle than had any one done before and further they diffused a taste for knowledge as none previously had done.

The contribution of Steele and Addison was of nearly equal extent. Addison wrote thirty-eight more than Steele, while forty-five were done by occasional correspondents. The lead was taken by Addison with his description of the “Spectator” and Steele followed with his six portraits of the members of the spectator club.

A new chapter opened when on April 12, 1709, the first number of a new periodical “The Tatler” appeared. It was specially intended for the frequenters of the coffee houses. Their numbers were eagerly read at these newly established centers throughout coffee houses.

On January 2, 1711 the last issue of “The Tatler” was announced and on March 1, 1711 appeared the first number of ‘The spectator’ to which Joseph Addison contributed many articles. We cannot but quote a wonderful passage from one of the articles which will bring out the philosophy of Addison and Steele:

“It was said of Socrates that he brought philosophy down from heaven to inhabit among men; and I shall be ambitious to have it said of me that I have brought philosophy out of closets and libraries, schools, to dwell in the clubs, at tea-coffee houses.”

In the spectator, the method of Addison and Steele is that of a preacher who does no violence to human nature. At bottom, the idea that they seek to inculcate is of the art of living together, the duties of family life, the status and part of women, in society, such are the subjects touched upon by this universal adviser. In the words of Cazamian…
“The variety of subject, a supple adaption to the preferences of the public at the same time sufficiently skillful reaction against certain habits, certain defects, a harmony with obscure instinct of middle class minds- such are the major reasons for the success of spectator.”

The most famous of Addison and Steele’s productions are their papers that appeared in the spectator describing a typical country gentleman, Sir Roger de Coverley who is over thirty. The character of Sir Roger forms the ground work of Coverley papers.

Sir Roger de Coverley is an idealized country gentleman of softened characteristics and broad sympathies. The outline of the figure was first traced out by Steele and filled in by Addison with delicate touches.

“The keen indiscrimination satire of the generic description has given away to the gentle atmosphere of humor that envelops and illumines the character of Sir Roger.”

Surrounding Sir Roger there are numerous other characters. There is captain sentry, a man of unquestioned energy and personal courage. There is a lawyer who is sick of his profession. The spirit of the coverley papers is most clearly seen in the figures of Sir Andrew Freepart, the merchant.

Addison is remarkable among satirists because he intended his humor to be ‘Remedial’, to induce human feelings to forsake the wrong, and to become more kindly. His humor is that kind that makes one smile rather than laugh aloud. His essays helps to impart a moral tone to British society, he castigated the manners and foibles of society. In fact, he was the most genial teacher of wisdom to the people of his age.

The contribution of Steele as an essayist may be considered superior to that of Addison in that it was Steele who initiated the joint venture ‘The Tatler’ and ‘The Spectator’. Steele stated the purpose of the Tatler as follows:
“The general purpose of this paper is to expose the false art of life, to puff off the disguise of cunning, vanity, and affection and to recommend a general simplicity in our discourse and behavior.”

Most of Steele’s essays are didactic in nature. He intended to bring about a reformation of contemporary society manners and life. Steele was able to produce originality in his essays. “The Tatler” was the result of his idea. His creative imagination resulted in the establishment of the Spectator club. Addison contributed to the development of the characters of spectator club.

❖ Conclusion:

In this way, the contribution of Addison and Steele through their joint venture of the periodical essays is of much importance with basic purpose of reform the contemporary society.