Origin And Development Of ‘The English Essay’

Dr P Sreenivasulu Reddy, Asst. Professor, GITAM University, Visakhapatnam, Andhra Pradesh.
V Parimala Venu, Associate Professor of English, GITAM University Visakhapatnam, Andhra Pradesh, India

Introduction

The essay is a long piece of composition on a theme or subject. It is self contained that is, it has a beginning, middle, and an end. The beginning usually introduces the subject in general terms. The middle of the essay develops the theme and presents the writer’s thoughts on it. Then the essay is brought to a close in a suitable concluding passage. In the words of A.C.Benson.

“The essay is a little criticism of life at some one point clearly enough defining”.

The development of the essay can be said to go back to the cultivation of good sense, tolerance and moderation. With the developments in the field of periodicals i.e., news papers and the development of the coffeehouse developed its (essay) form and style. With the first advantage of clarity and brevity, the essay has appeared entirely in periodical form and it has continued to reproduce faithfully the good sense and good conversation the wit and ridicule of eccentricity.

The word “essay” has come from the French word ‘es-say’ which means an attempt. Different critics have given different definitions of the word ‘essay’ but no signal definition could be termed satisfactory. Dr. Johnson defined the word ‘essay as a loose sally of the mind, an irregular, indigested piece, not a regular and orderly performance. The word ‘sally’ refers to the aimless movements of the mind here and there within the limits of the subject matter and the mind does not search for the depth of the knowledge of the subject.

The Oxford English Dictionary defines the word ‘essay’ as “a composition of moderate length on any particular subject, originally implying want of finishing but now said of a composition more or less elaborate in style.”

Modern critics seem to lay emphasis on the personal element in the essay. According to W.H.Hudson,

“The true essay is essentially personal. It belongs to the literature of the self-expression. Treatise and dissertation may be objective, the essay is subjective.”

The essay differs from the other literary forms from the point of view of content and form. First of all the essay should be usually short otherwise it suffers artistically from overloading. In other words it reveals to us how the author can express his views precisely. Secondly it is essentially an expression of one’s own thoughts and emotions. This requires intellect, imagination, and exercise of feeling and some elevated thoughts. Montaigne in French literature pioneered different types of themes in these essays. The essay model of Montaigne seems persistent, and he certainly did much to rouse general interest in the Essay as a form of literary production. Nashe in England was at the very outset of his career wrote essays in the grotesque and satirical style. He wrote critical essays too. Next in the development of English Essay, Bacon is rightly considered to be a pioneer. As Hugh Walker rightly observes,

“Bacon is the first of the English essayists, as he remains, for sheer mass and weight of genius, the greatest.”

Bacon never speaks of religion except with the respect and seems himself to have been religious, for he wrote several very beautiful prayers for his own use and professed the Anglican faith. But his work had no connection with theology or even with Christian morality. It is the product of a free spirit, of thought which adventures in new paths discovered by itself. He is the first in date of the English philosophers and one of the most eminent and characteristic of them. He is one of the pioneers of modern philosophy in all countries. Bacon by his Essays proved himself a great writer of his own language. Their title, although not their spirit, recalls Montaigne is copious, familiar, prodigal of confidences, interested in everything, phone to philosophize on whatever relates to man.

Bacon is curt, almost sibylline, entirely impersonal, and averse to pure speculation. He deduces general maxims only from the observations he has himself been able to make. He writes only for courtiers and statesmen like himself. He supplies short dissertations wholly sententious in form, supported by quotations borrowed by the ancients, but founded on direct observation. Like a good lawyer, Bacon with an air of complete impartiality, balances opposing arguments before he draws his conclusion.

Bacon points man to the part he should play on the stage of social life, as is indicated in the subtitle of his book: Counsels: Civil and Moral, Bandouin, its first French translator, was right to call it. L’Artisan de la Fortune. With in these limits the Essays have singular force and weight. No one has ever produced a greater number of
close wisdom. Many of them have become current as proverbs. Other maxims, either coined by Bacon directly or translated from his Latin, can be extracted from all his works and added to those in the Essays. Thus Bacon’s Essays are characterised by his philosophical content brevity and aphoristic style. There were a few writers in the age of Bacon who introduced the personal view in their essays. Among them Ben Jonson was unique.

It was Dekker who in the reign of James-I succeeded Greene and Nashe as a prose-writer, although his best comedy was inspired by Deloney. He wrote Social Studies and pictures of London life. He began with occasional tracts, like his wonderful years, which had for subject the year 1603, in which Elizabeth died, James I succeeded her, and one of the great plagues of London occurred. Dekker commemorates these events in a style of which imagery and truculence recall Nashe and which often is near parody. It is almost like a poem in mock heroic prose and the author’s seriousness is always in doubt. It is true that he paints the plague in all allegory which does not lack grandeur. Death is shown encamped with his army of scourges in the sin-stained outskirts of the city. His troops attack, seize the town, massacre men, women, and children, loot and waste. Dekker who aims at producing a strong effect, is prodigal of macabre description, a postrophes of plague, and hyperbole, not omitting pedantic reminiscences.

Dekker’s sketches confirm and complete the pictures of London life in the comedies of the time, particularly those of Johnson and Middleton. His prose has lost its heaviness and is excellent. His irony hardly ever flags, is always good humoured, and is relieved by numerous details of fact of which the presentment is lively and accurate and original by force of its very accuracy. Dekker in direct contact with reality, preserves actual proportions, and respects line and colour. He is on the road which leads to the humorists of Anne’s reign. From afar he heralds Swift, and chiefly Steele and Addison, for he is a less bitter writer than Swift. Not for a whole century did another author thus combine realism and humour.

In the early part of the 17th century, writers like the Aubrey with his satirical essays. The search for pointed phraseology and curious turns of speech and the wish to condense led to the advancement of prose. The art of portraiture in words was thus developed in England at the same time as in France, although in a different way. The English did not pursue it in drawing-rooms but made their sketches in solitude, their style had consequently a quaintness unknown to the French and often lacked good taste, but in compensation they allowed themselves considerable play of fancy, often with a happy effect.

In the 17th century Abraham Cowley is more interesting than pioneer than qua poet. He stands midway between the metaphysical verse writers and the common-sense School of Dryden. His prose, more remarkable on the whole than his verse, will be considered elsewhere. His Essays are different from those of Bacon. He expresses personal feelings. He guided great essayists like, Addison, Steele and Lamb. With him William Drummond Sir Thomas Browne and Edward Hyde appeared on the scene.

Next came Joseph Addison, Lamb. Thackery and R.L.Stevenson. A new variety of essay called “critical essay was introduces in the Restorattion period (1660-1700). There were two other writers, Lord Halifax and Sir William Temple who also contributed to the development of the essay in their own way.

The form of the ‘essay’ evolved in periodicals during the early years of the 18th century. Eventhough Daniel Defoe introduced the periodical. Review first, the real credit goes to the periodicals. The Talter (1709) and The Spectator (1711), published by Richard Steele and Joseph Addison respectively. After Steele and Addison, appeared Pope and Swift as the two most important prose writers. Next comes, Dr.Johnson whose essays appeared in The Rambler (1750) and in The Idler (1758-60). His essays were more appreciated and read by the educated class rather than by the ordinary people. Then Oliver Goldsmith appeared on the scene in the 18th century. His essays which were published in The Bee and The Citizen of the world achieved a tremendous success because of their style and model that impressed all the classes of readers like the educated class and ordinary people.

The periodical essay declined in the beginning of the 19th century. It paved the way for the emergence of critical journal, commonly called The Review, which was mainly concerned with social, political and personal topics. Among them were the The Gentlemen’s Magazine, The Quarterly. At this juncture appeared Charles Lamb and Hazlitt. In the Essays of the Elia (1933), Chales Lamb followed the style of rhythm and eloquent style of Montaigne and Cowley and thus has was called “The
Prince of English Essayists”. His essays reveal to us his sweetness of heart, pathos humour, and his day to day experiences in life. His theoretical and conventional style is not so clear and not easily understandable to common people or ordinary readers. Lamb is amusing paradoxical, ingenious, touching and eloquent.

It has been formed at the time of the French Resolution and Regency period, under the influence of a philosophy of progress through reason.

Lamb wrote essays on different themes. He was quite at home when he recorded his personal experience in his office but he was alive to some of the literary and academic issues of his times. Through he did not offer piercing critical insights on English literature in general and the literature of his times in particular he expressed his deep felt convictions and opinions on a few literary texts and authors. The following essays belong to this category.

a) Oxford in the vacation
b) On the Artificial comedy of the Last century, and
c) Sanity of true Genius.

Let us discuss these in detail. “So formidable” a judge, A.C. Bradley said of Lamb thus:

“He was the greatest critic of his Age. The estimate is an extravagant, one, the more because what might be called the canon of Lamb’s actual criticism must be gathered mostly from statements made by the way and would make but a slim volume; yet it may serve to suggest something of the effect that the unexpected authority of Lamb’s intelligence might have upon a perceptive and responsive reader”.

In “Oxford in the Vacation” Lamb discusses a few literary figures, who contribute their genius to the world of letters. Here he has devoted half of the essay to the character of George Dyer’s scholarship, his proclivities towards research, his love of creative writing, his absent mindedness etc. This portion of the essay reads almost like a story. The following lines show his excellence.

‘And D. has been under-working for himself ever since; - druding at low rates for unappreciating booksellers, - wasting his fine erudition in silent corrections of the classics, and in those unostentatious but solid services to the learning which commonly fall to the lot of laborious scholars, who have not the heart to sell themselves to the best advantage. He has published poems, which do not sell, because their character is unobtrusive, like his own, and because he has been too much absorbed in ancient literature to know what the popular mark in poetry is even if he could have hit it. And, therefore is verses are properly, what he terms them, crotchets’.

In these lines, Lamb says that the labour of exploring manuscripts should be left to a man like George Dyer; He (George Dyer) pours over books so diligently that he himself has grown almost into a book. He is assiduous in his visits to the seat of learning like the universities of Oxford and Cambridge. Much of his fortune has been spent in his Journeys from his dwelling to these two universities and back. He has been investing into the dispute as to which of the two universities was founded first. The enthusiasm with which he has been pursuing this investigation has not been shared by heads of colleges and other administrators of the two universities. He looks startled even when accosted by a person of long acquaintance. He is so absent minded that one day he made a second call at a house where he had already called and been told that the occupants of the house were away to the country and were not expected for a week at least. Most of the time he is pre-occupied with his meditations and with his imaginative flights.

After a course of hard study at Cambridge, Dyer worked as an usher to a knavish fanatic school master at a meager salary. Subsequently he became an author but without much commercial success. His poems do not sell because he is too absorbed in ancient literature to understand the demands of modern taste. He is a writer of excellent prose.

Lamb concludes the essay by observing that Dyer is delightful anywhere but that he is at his best at such place as the universities of Oxford and Cambridge. The rivers of Oxford and Cambridge universities are more to him than all the waters of Damascus. He feels most at home at these seats of learning.

On the Artificial comedy of the last century is another literary essay of Lamb. Macaulay comments on this essay. Its argument was ingenious but “altogether sophisticated” “In the name of art as well as in the name of virtue” he said “We protest against the principle that the world of pure comedy is one in which no moral enters”. And an eminent American critic the late Joseph Wood krutch, in his comedy and conscience in the Restoration, says thus.

“Lamb, in the view he took of Restoration comedy, had been blinded by its brilliance… and (saw) only the wit.”

Both writers mean to suggest that the comedy of the Restoration represented manners and morals as they really were and should therefore be understood as offering an occasion for moral judgment. But this is to miss Lamb’s
intention, which has nothing to do with the congruence, or lack of it between what is actually the moral situation of the society and the representation of it on the stage, but reaches far beyond that to propose one of the possible functions of art.

The following lines illustrate this view of Lamb.

“The artificial comedy, or comedy of manners, is quite extinct on our stage. Congreve and Farquhar show their heads once in seven years only, to be exploded and put down instantly. The times cannot bear them. Is it for a few wild speeches, an occasional license of dialogue? I think not altogether. The business of their dramatic characters will not stand the moral test. We screw everything up to that.”

In this essay, Friedrich Von Schiller is the last man in the world to be accused of light mindedness and he took what essentially Lamb’s position is. In his far ranging work letters on the Aesthtic Education of mankind (1795) he says that the “mere play” which is what the experience of art can be and ultimately should be suggests to man the possibility of his freedom, giving him a taste of what it feels like to overcome the earnestness of duty and destiny. It makes the paradigm of man’s true being. It teaches him what he must hope word a human being, and he is only a human being when he plays. Lamb in his own unsystematic way, says the same thing in this essay.

J.Lewis comments thus.

“It might be a good idea to invite people, as a test of their literary sensibility, to say which they preferred, the essays or the letters. Those who pronounced for the letters should be immediately condemned. The letters are merely literature in the act of becoming. The essays are literature in being and are wrought constructed, fortified, by the very perfection of their structure, against the assaults of time.”

In Sanity of true Genius Lamb argues the view that the poet is mad. This is expresses by Plato in his dialogues. Socrates too takes the line that what poets say cannot be constructed as making, ordinary sense and that their utterances are to be understood as the expression as a noble madness. The intention of this view is chiefly ironic, a way of proposing the idea that poetry is not under the dominion of the rational intellect. Plato certainly did not mean to say anything more to the discredit of poetry than that is not philosophy. The idea that the poet does not speak in the voice of reason, or indeed, in his own voice, but is possessed or “inspired”, associates him with the prophet or the shaman through whom a God or a spirit communicates, often in language not comprehensible to human intellect. The madness of the poet became part of popular lore – as in Shakespeare’s. The lunatic, the lover, and the poet and the poetos eye in a fine frenzy rolling. (A Mid Summer Night’s Dream). It could, however be used to belittle the value of poetry in an age which, as Lamb felt, was increasingly concerned with fact and practicality. The question of how far the processes of creative fancies are abnormal became salient in the nineteenth century and continues into the twentieth. We may suppose that Lamb felt that he might claim a special authority in dealing with the question. Not only did he live intimately with the often realized threat to his sister’s reason, but he himself had brief episodes of insanity. The following lines illustrate the point.

“So far from the position holding true, that great wit (or genius, in our modern way of speaking), has a necessary alliance with sanity, the greatest wits, on the contrary, will ever be found to be the sanest writers. It is impossible for the mind to conceive of a mad Shakespeare. The greatness of wit; by which the poetic talent is here chiefly to be understood, manifests itself in the admirable balance of all the faculties. Madness is the disproportionate straining or excess of any one of them.”

Here in these lines Lamb refers to Dryden’s famous couplet in Absalom and Achitophel which means ‘Great wits are sure to madness near allied and thin partitions do their bounds divide. Here he also refers to Abraham Cowley, on the Death of Mr. William Harvey, and also to Paradise lost.

Let us make a study of Hazlitt’s literary essays. Among Hazlitt’s characteristics as a critic perhaps the first to be remarked is his comprehensiveness. In his essays and lectures he covers the whole range of English literature from the age of Elizabeth to his own day. His judgments are strict but seldom doctrinaire and partisan, a virtue the more to be praised because it was exercised at a time of warring critical creeds. What he chiefly sought in literature, as in painting, was the quality of “gusto”, which he celebrated in critical essays. He found it in pope as well as in Shakespeare3. Keats was right to speak of the depth rather than of the breadth of Hazlitt’s taste. His phrase suggests the activity by which Hazlitt sees beneath the merely adventitious attributes of the work of art to discern in its design and in its parts the energies which animate it.

My first Acquaintance with poet Wordsworth is one of the best known of Hazlitt’s essays. It is a purely literary essay in which Hazlitt describes his impressions of two great poets, namely Wordsworth and Coleridge, who might be described as the founders of the Romantic movements in English poetry and whose joint publication called the lyrical Balladns was an epoch-making
event. When Hazlitt met Coleridge and Wordsworth for the first time in 1798, the lyrical Ballads had not yet actually been published through they were ready for publication. Only a few months later, the book actually saw the light of day. In this essay, Hazlitt expresses his profound admiration for Coleridge’s talent for conversation and also supports most of Coleridge’s opinions about various persons in the spheres of literature politics and religion. This essay contains a vignette of Hazlitt’s own father who offered a striking contrast to Coleridge. George Sampson thinks very highly of this essay and says thus:

The many who date an epoch in their own lives from a first reading of Biographia Literaria and Lyrical Ballads will always feel a peculiar affection for this essay which wonderfully recaptures the thrill of youth and mingles with its rapture. So much mature and humourous wisdom. From his poetry and criticism we can measure the ecstasy with which young Hazlitt made his first acquaintance with poets and drank in the utterence of their own living lips. It is Coleridge who is the hero of the story, as he always will be to ardent youth. At that date it was gloriously apparent that his feet were in the mire of a road down to ignoble sloth and moral suicide. Wordsworth is less attractive to the youthful mind. He seems gait, frigid, and set as if he had never been young we have to turn often to those delightful early book, of the prelude to remind ourselves of Wordsworth’s fiery, volcanic youth.

In the following lines, Hazlitt gives Coleridge’s comments on the Lyrical Ballads and some more writers. Hazlitt said that Thomson was a great poet, rather than a good one; his style was natural. He spoke of Cowper as the best modern poet. He also considers Lyrical Ballads an experiment to find out how far the public taste would react to poetry written in a natural and simple style, he and Wordsworth had totally discarded the artifices of poetical diction and had made use only of such words as had been common in the most ordinary language since the time of Henryll. He also made a comparison between Shakespeare and Milton, saying that he hardly knew which of them to prefer.

Hazlitt expressed a much higher opinion of Burke as an orator and politician than of Fox or Pitt. He said that he liked Richardson, but not Fielding. From all this, Hazlitt got the impression that Coleridge was profound and discriminating in his judgments of authors whom he liked that he was capricious, perverse, and prejudiced in his opinions about authors whom he disliked.

In “On reading old books” Hazlitt tells us that he has a preference to books written by authors of the past and that he did not like to go through the books written by the authors of his own time. He also gives us his reason for this preference. He then goes on to name authors and their works which he had enjoyed reading. Some of these works transported him to the days of his childhood and, therefore, enabled him to look at the world once again with the eyes of a child.

Logo: How is it, General? Have you not hurt your head? Othello: Dost thou mock me? Logo: I mock you! No, by heaven, & C.13

To conclude, like Lamb, Hazlitt has also produced literary and academic essays. Lamb did not offer piercing critical insights on English Literature in general but the literature of his times in particular. He expressed his deep convictions and opinions on a few literary texts and authors as we have seen in the literary essays of Lamb, Hazlitt as a critic covers the whole range of English literature from the age of Elizabeth to his own day. This is evienced from his essays like My first Acquaintance with Poets, On reading old books. On actors and acting, ‘Logo’, On the conversation of Authors-II. A.C. Bradley comments on Lamb thus: “He was the greatest critic of his age, to estimate is
an extravagant one what might be called the canon of Lamb’s actual criticism must be gathered mostly from statement made. George Sampson says: “My first Acquaintance with poets expresses his view thus; the many who date an epoch in their own lives from a first reading of Biographia literaria and Lyrical Ballads will always feel a peculiar affection for this essay.

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