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Section 1:Historical Background

In the last decades of the 17th century, the glory of English literature looked somewhat diminished as the literary output of post-Restoration Britain did not quite match up to the standards set by authors of the Elizabethan and Jacobean periods. Though English theatre was revived by King Charles II, it differed greatly in terms of character and style from the popular drama of Shakespeare, Marlowe, Webster and Jonson and catered to a more elite, upper class audience. The English society itself was undergoing significant structural changes with an increasing number of people opting for professions outside the church and the farmland, which led to the emergence of a sizeable middle class. As more and more people could afford formal education, the rate of literacy rose sharply and there was a pressing demand for literature that would cater to the tastes of this newly emergent section of readers. In London society, clubs and coffee houses, which attracted people from various walks of life, became centres of political and commercial discussion, religious and philosophical debate, and exchange of news and gossip. It was in this context that the periodical essay emerged as a major literary genre in 18th century England. Newsletters and pamphlets had been appearing sporadically in England in the first half of the 17th century but their publication was often irregular and short-lived as editors lacked substantial subject matter and a loyal readership. In addition, the Parliament imposed a tax on such publications in 1647, which effectively rooted out the possibility of their evolution into a regular literary feature. The Puritan government of the time also sought to censor everything the public read, which hindered the creation of a discriminating audience with the freedom of choice to read and believe what they liked. It was only towards the turn of the century that publishers ventured to bring out magazines that carried not only news reports and advertisements but also more critical and imaginative pieces of writing that offered social commentary.

The first major publication of this kind was Richard Steele's *The Tatler*, which first appeared in 1709. Steele's stated agenda was "to hold a mirror" up to society, "to expose the false arts of life, to pull off the disguises of cunning, vanity, and affectation, and to recommend a general simplicity in our dress, our discourse, and our behaviour". Evidently, the magazine was meant to guide its readers in matters of social and moral etiquette and reform the common errors of the age. The extravagance and indulgence that marked the previous decades were perceived as requiring correction and a general ethic of moderation was held up as a model in all domains of

public and private conduct.With regular contributions from Addison, *The Tatler* gained immense popularity in a very short span of time. Most of the popular coffee houses in London subscribed to *The Tatler*(and subsequently to other magazines too) as a result of which the periodical essay reached out to a large number of people. Practically every notable author of the age – Samuel Johnson, Jonathan Swift, Alexander Pope and Oliver Goldsmith, to name a few prominent ones – tried his hand at the periodical essay, thereby giving the form literary respectability. In terms of frequency of publication, subject matter, style and brevity, the periodical essay offered the perfect reading material to the public. The authors of periodical essays, especially Addison and Steele, mostly dealt with topical issues relating to manners and morals without sounding pedantic or preachy. In 1711 Steele discontinued the publication of *The Tatler* and started publishing a daily magazine,*The Spectator*. While the former consisted mostly of news articles and a few pieces of political and literary criticism, the latter focused more on mundane concerns of social life and often dedicated an entire issue or sometimes a series of papers to the exploration of a single theme.*The Spectator* became very popular and rapidly evolved into a distinctly modern magazine, carrying more critical and moral pieces than informational news items.The essays featured a motley group of characters: Sir Roger de Coverley, Sir Andrew Freeport, Captain Sentry and Will Honeycomb, representing the landed gentry, the commercial class, the army and the town respectively. The narrator, Mr. Spectator, was himself the authorial voice of reason and refinement, commenting subtly on the virtues and oddities of each of these characters in a way that encouraged the reader to identify with his perspective. *The Spectator* sought to initiate a public discourse about social morality beyond the limits of juridical and religious institutions by “reprehending those Vices which are too trivial for the Chastisement of the Law, and too fantastical for the Cognizance of the pulpit” (Steele, *Spectator* No.1).Addison and Steele successfully implemented their social agenda through this magazine, which was "to enliven morality with wit, and to temper wit with morality. . .to bring philosophy out of the closets and libraries, schools and colleges, to dwell in clubs and assemblies, at tea-tables and coffee houses". Through the periodical essay, they aimed to elevate public opinion and taste in matters of “manners, morals, art, and literature”. Yet, in spite of the reformist ideology underlying them, the *Spectator* essays never seemed prescriptive or dull. In fact, one of the chief features of *The Spectator* was that it managed to strike a delicate balance between its instructive import and its gentle, accessible style that made for light reading about very pertinent matters of social conduct

and morality.*The Spectator* ran for 555 issues before being temporarily discontinued in 1712; another 80 issues were brought out by Addison in 1714.

Section 2: The Lives and Works of Addison and Steele

Richard Steele was born in Dublin in 1672. He had a difficult childhood as his father died when he was only five years old. He studied at Charterhouse School and then joined Merton College, Oxford in 1690. Thereafter, he joined the British army as a cadet and was promoted to the post of Captain when he wrote a funeral poem for Queen Mary. He made his first foray into the world of literature with *The Christian Hero* (1701), a prose work that had for its hero an idealized man whose virtuous nature reflected the author's reformist zeal. He also wrote three comedies for the stage, *The Funeral* (1701), *The Lying Lover* (1703) and *The Tender Husband* (1705), none of which were commercially successful. His literary career took off in 1709 when he started publishing *TheTatler* with the help of Addison; subsequently, the two also collaborated on *The Spectator* and made the periodical essay a popular literary form in England. Steele followed this up with the publication of *The Guardian* and *The Englishman* in 1713. In the same year, he was also elected to the Parliament from Stockbridge. Following the accession of King George I to the throne, Steele was appointed as the supervisor of Drury Lane Theatre and was awarded a knighthood in 1715. He published his last comedy, *The Conscious Lovers*, in 1722. He died in Carmarthen in 1729. Though considered by many to be a lesser writer than Addison, Steele's contribution to the formation of a popular, genteel, middle class sensibility through his plays and essays was significant enough for him to be remembered as a master of 18th century English literature.

Joseph Addison was born in 1672 in Wiltshire. He was educated at Charterhouse School, where he first met Richard Steele, with whom he shared a lasting professional and personal association. He attended Queen's College, Oxford, where he achieved distinction in classical studies, and subsequently studied at Magdalen College. His first major literary work, *An Account of the Greatest English Poets*, was published in 1694. Through the 1690s, Addison published several Latin poems, which brought him to the notice of John Dryden. Between 1699 and 1703, he toured the Continent, where he met many political leaders and diplomats. In 1705 he published a poem called *The Campaign*, celebrating the recent victory of the allied forces over

France in the Battle of Blenheim, which secured him the position of the Commissioner of Appeals and subsequently Under-Secretary of State in the ruling Whig government. His political career reached its zenith in 1708 when he became a member of the Parliament. Addison's literary career entered a productive phase in 1709, when Steele started publishing *The Tatler*. Addison's regular contributions to the periodical soon became indispensable to its success. In fact, though Addison contributed fewer essays to *The Tatler* than Steele, his reputation soon overtook his friend's. In 1711, they co-founded *The Spectator*, which was an instant hit with readers and ran to a total of 555 issues. Addison also wrote a neo-classical tragedy,*Cato*, which was produced in 1713. He died in 1719 at the age of 48 and was buried in Westminster Abbey.

Section 3: Characterization of Sir Roger

One of Addison and Steele's most enduringly popular creations is the character of Sir Roger, a benign old landlord whose good nature and odd habits make him the subject of Mr. Spectator's kind yet humorous observations. In 'A Sunday at Sir Roger's' (*Spectator* No. 112), Mr. Spectator draws a character sketch of Sir Roger as the well-meaning but eccentric leader of a small village community. Sir Roger is characterized as a man who is sensible of his duties towards his parishioners in his capacity as their landlord. As a figure of authority to his tenants, Sir Roger combines qualities of firmness and generosity in dealing with them. Thus, he takes the initiative to decorate the interiors of his church with Biblical texts, in addition to railing in the communion table and buying a beautiful pulpit-cloth at his own expense. This reveals his attention to good form and his willingness to contribute to the improvement of the church in order to inspire in the villagers a sense of admiration and respect for it. He also implements simple but effective plans to make his parishioners attend church more regularly: he gives each of them a hassock and a Common Prayer Book and employs a wandering singing master to instruct them correctly in the tunes of the psalms. In addition, he rewards children who answer well on catechism day with a copy of the Bible and sometimes sends a portion of bacon to their mothers by way of encouragement. He also increases the clerk's annual salary by five pounds and promises to consider further increments in order to encourage young people to offer their services to the church. These constitute Sir Roger's subtle strategy of encouragement to his villagers to attend church, as he refrains from using his position of authority as their landlord to

enforce compulsory attendance and instead makes church-going a more attractive proposition for them. His keen attention to their material needs also indicates a very pragmatic approach to the actual practice of religion rather than a theoretical understanding of it.These strategies reflect his determined, commonsensical, enterprising approach to his responsibilities as the landlord and establish him as a man who is capable of using his superior economic and social power to the advantage of his villagers.

This impulse to help his dependents also characterizes Sir Roger's conduct with his servants in the private domain of his home. In 'The Coverley Household' (*Spectator* No. 107), Mr. Spectator observes with admiration the mutual regard and affection that exists between Sir Roger and his staff in his country house, evident from the way they eagerly wait to perform some service for their master rather than dread or resent being assigned some work:

> A man who preserves a respect founded on his benevolence to his dependents lives rather like a prince than a master in his family; his orders are received as favours, rather than duties; and the distinction of approaching him is part of the reward for executing what is commanded by him.

Mr. Spectator believes that it is Sir Roger's calm and kindly disposition, as well as his efficient management of his finances, that ensures the smooth running of the household. The fact that unlike many men in his position, Sir Roger never treats his servants with contempt and is always reasonable in his orders to them inspires in them a feeling of respect rather than fear towards their master. Thus, even when they are summoned by Sir Roger, the servants do not fear being reprimanded for some slight error on their part but know that he means to ask after some of his tenants. Sir Roger's general attitude of paternal concern for his household staff and his parishioners is indeed the basis of a harmonious atmosphere at his home as well as in his village. Sir Roger's genuine desire to assist the lesser privileged improve their lot also manifests itself in the way he rewards his staff for their good service. Mr. Spectator observes that contrary to the practice common to many men and women of his social class, Sir Roger does not distribute discarded clothes to his servants by way of rewards; rather, he helps them find independent livelihood should they so desire. Sir Roger's economical management of his estate gives him the financial liberty to settle a tenement to an ambitious servant eager to make a living in the world outside or to pay him better for his services should he choose to stay back in the household. As a result, many of Sir Roger's old servants have been in the employ of his family for generations,

and many of his tenants are his former servants or their children, all of whom owe to him a sense of reverence and allegiance. Sir Roger is also presented as a man who does not boast of his acts of generosity to his servants – thus, though he introduces one of his tenants to Mr. Spectator as a "a very worthy gentleman", he does not reveal that the man used to be his servant before being given the position of a tenant. The unassuming fashion in which Sir Roger takes on the responsibility of promoting the welfare of his dependents indicates the genuineness of his concern for them.Sir Roger is thus portrayed as a benevolent father-figure who holds the entire village community together.

Section 4: Language, Style and Tone

Both Addison and Steele use the English language in a way that sets their essays apart from the floral style adopted by many British prose writers of the 16th and 17th centuries. As their target audiences were ordinary middle class men and women, these writers adopted a simplicity of vocabulary and syntax that did not task the readers' skills of comprehension nor abused their sense of genteel propriety. Addison's style in 'A Sunday at Sir Roger's' is representative of his usual manner of writing in most of the Coverley papers. He portrays Sir Roger as a well-intentioned and affable if slightly eccentric man, who has many typical behavioral traits of a country knight. Through the acutely perceptive voice of the narrator, Addison brings to the fore the little follies that distinguish Sir Roger's social conduct and make him a more believable character than he would have been without these slight imperfections to set off his virtues. Thus, for instance, Mr. Spectator notes that Sir Roger "will suffer nobody to sleep in [the church] *besides himself*", and "if by chance he has been *surprised* into a short nap at sermon, upon recovering out of it he stands up and looks about him, and if he sees anybody else nodding, either wakes them himself, or sends his servant to them" (emphases added). The tone of these lines is so gently ironic that one can almost visualize Mr. Spectator smiling to himself as he makes these humorous observations. There is no admonition or sarcasm in these lines, only a mildly amused indulgence that makes the narrator's voice the prism through which the reader sees the world inhabited by Sir Roger and his villagers. In another instance, the narrator describes how Sir Roger loudly chides one of his parishioners for being distracted while the whole congregation was praying. By thus pointing out the contradictions between the intent of his words and the

effects of his own actions, the narrator subtly describes, in a tone that is discerning yet not reprimanding, funny yet not mocking, Sir Roger's conduct as marked by odd foibles that make him all the more likeable. As an outsider in Sir Roger's world, Mr. Spectator serves as the perfect mouthpiece for Addison to express his assessment of the squire's character in a manner that is neutral and objective without being overly critical or indifferent. Addison also highlights the importance of church-going in the communal life of villagers without sounding prescriptive or dull. Thus, even when he emphasizes the alleviating influence of the church on its members, he prefers to use a simple, homely metaphor – "Sunday clears away the rust of the whole week" – that effectively conveys his meaning without sounding overburdened with the seriousness of the lesson he seeks to impart. The careful choice of words here represents Addison's larger purpose in writing such essays: that is, to instruct his readers in matters of manners and morals without sounding distant or condescending. In fact, this fine balance between the seriousness of meaning and the simplicity of form has been famously described by Samuel Johnson as Addison's "middle style" and is indicative of his awareness of the tastes of his readers, a majority of whom were middle class people who wished to learn about proper social conduct.

In comparison to Addison, Steele has a more direct approach to his subject matter. The subtle irony and humour that characterize Addison's style assume a more analytical edge in Steele's hands. Thus, in 'The Coverley Household', Mr. Spectator makes several deductions about Sir Roger's character based on the equation he shares with his servants rather than simply reporting what he sees. He begins with a general observation that sets the tone of the essay:

> The reception, manner of attendance, undisturbed freedom, and quiet, which I meet with here in the country, has confirmed me in the opinion I always had, that the general corruption of manners in servants is owing to the conduct of masters.

The narrator presents a series of similar observations throughout the essay, using Sir Roger's management of his household as an exemplary case to defend his central thesis, that goodness in a servant reflects the goodness of the master. He infers that Sir Roger's equanimity in his dealings with his servants arises from his careful management of his estate, which ensures that he is never anxious or frustrated about the performance of his duties as landlord. Steele is more unreserved than Addison in praising Sir Roger's performance of his duties as the lord and master of his household, just as he is more forthright with his censure of those gentlemen who are inconsistent or unfair in their conduct with their servants. Thus, Mr. Spectator reminds the reader

of “the sense that great persons in all ages have had of the merit of their dependents, and the heroic services which men have done their masters in the extremity of their fortunes”. The balanced structure of the sentence here is typical of Steele’s style in the essay and reflects his appreciation of the mutual respect and harmony existing between social classes and his idealization of the master-servant relation in the specific context of Sir Roger’s household. The tone of the narrator is approbatory but not patronizing, as Sir Roger is held up as a role model for men of his position who often fail in their duties towards their servants and consequently lose the respect they consider to be due to their class.

Section 5: Social Commentary

In these essays, Addison and Steele paint a picture of everyday life in 18th century rural England, which would have had a certain appeal to the curiosity of their London readers. Both authors present a view of a small community in which class distinctions are maintained through the diligent performance of specific roles by the landed gentry as well as working class people and agricultural labourers. Thus, in both the essays, Sir Roger is characterized in the context of his relations with his social inferiors, either in the private domain of his home or in the public domain of the parish church, which gives the reader an insight into the customary beliefs and practices that defined power relations between the aristocracy and the landless folk. The almost competitive zeal with which Sir Roger’s servants perform their duties towards their master in ‘The Coverley Household’ is indicative of the degree to which their individual and social worth depends on the favour they receive from him. While the narrator concedes that fortune is often the only factor that distinguishes a master from his servants, he also reinforces the belief that it is the duty of the rich to set an example for their servants in matters of social conduct. Mr. Spectator’s appreciation of Sir Roger’s frugal management of his household and of his cordial generosity towards his servants reveals Steele’s essential conservatism, as he highlights the merits of a social structure in which the markers of class difference are clearly maintained. Thus, at the very outset, Mr. Spectator refers rather despairingly to “the general corruption of manners in servants”, which he then proceeds to contrast with the exemplary case of Sir Roger’s country house. The implied contrast here is between the changes in the social fabric the narrator witnesses in the city and the preservation of the traditional ways of communal life that he observes in the country. Though he approves of Sir Roger’s promotion of several of his servants

to tenancy, Mr. Spectator still emphasizes how this “benevolence”ensures the continued loyalty of the servants to their master:

> This manumission and placing them in a way of livelihood, I look upon as only what is due to a good servant, which encouragement will make his successor be as diligent, as humble, and as ready as he was. There is something wonderful in the narrowness of those minds which can be pleased, and be barren of bounty to those who please them.

Thus, while Steele admires Sir Roger for his willingness to let his servants move up the social ladder, he seems more impressed with the way in which such upward social mobility leaves the fundamental class structure of the village intact. In fact, the harmonious environment that the narrator enjoys so greatly in Sir Roger’s household and his village results from the common allegiance that its members feel towards the landlord. The fact that Sir Roger enjoys the loyalty of his dependents, some of whom belong to a long line of servants employed in the house for generations and others who owe their living as tenants to his financial support, firmly establishes him at the centre of social power. The “silly sense of equality” between master and servant that the narrator detects and condemns in other households is kept at bay in Sir Roger’s estate precisely through the squire’s performance of his duties as the leader of the village community.

Similarly, in ‘A Sunday at Sir Roger’s’, Mr. Spectator states that the rural society that Sir Roger lives in needs to be brought under the order of the church so that its members do not descend into uncivilized behaviour. Thus, the parishioners' role is to not only attend church but also to perform the civilizing labour of appearing in their best clothes, engaging in polite conversation with their neighbours, encouraging fellow parishioners and family members to attend church regularly (like Sir Roger) so as to lead by example. The church functions not only as a religious institution but also as a space within which the parishioners learn the rules of proper social conduct and etiquette. By drawing a parallel between a city dweller at the stock exchange and a country fellow at the church, the narrator emphasizes the social significance of attending church in the lives of the villagers; the church serves – over and above its obvious religious function as a place of worship – as a secular, public space where the civic performance of belonging to a community is carried out by each individual parishioner. The narrator portrays Sir Roger's parishioners as a fairly disciplined lot who are willing to be guided by their landlord, but who are not sophisticated enough to discern the peculiar contradictions between his own words and actions. Thus, when Sir Roger speaks up in the middle of a prayer, warning one of his

parishioners not to disturb the congregation, his odd behaviour goes unremarked. Similarly, though the village community excels in singing psalms, they do not seem to mind the fact that the landlord himself occasionally draws out a song longer than the rest of the congregation. Such reverential acceptance of Sir Roger's amusing eccentricities by the villagers suggests that they lack the critical acumen – displayed so subtly by the narrator himself through his ironic observations – to question the landlord or even detect the humorous aspects of his conduct. In fact, the authority of the church is conflated here with that of Sir Roger, who, by example, instils the virtue of regular attendance despite the peculiarities of this attendance.By way of offering a contrast to the harmonious state of affairs in Sir Roger's parish, the narrator cites the instance of the neighboring village, where an ongoing feud between the landlord and the parson has resulted in an impasse, with the former discouraging his tenants from attending church and the latter taking jibes at him during the weekly service. The ordinary villagers, the narrator observes, are unable to adhere to religious faith or social discipline, when their betters set such bad examples. The implied social message here is that figures of authority in the village, whether they be respected for their wealth or their learning, ought to work in close cooperation in order that the common run of men and women follow the rules of proper conduct laid down for them by their superiors. The church is represented as a microcosm of the village community itself, where members/patrons can only contribute to its advancement and, more importantly, to the preservation of social order through a pledging or exerting of their best, most agreeable and acceptable “forms”.

Section 6: Conclusion

The turn of the 18th century was popularly perceived as marking a significant shift away from the decadence that characterized King Charles II’s reign and the beginning of a new “Augustan” age. Addison and Steele emerged as the social prophets of this new age, guiding their readers in matters of good manners, taste and morals in a mode that avoided the formality of a sermon and substituted it with the appeal of identifiable character ‘types’. Through the periodical essay, Addison and Steele addressed as well as created a new readership for literature in 18th century England, one whose members were mostly London-based professionals who desired to be entertained as well as instructed in matters of social decorum. By addressing issues

that were topical and relevant to this emergent audience, Addison and Steele transformed the genre of the essay itself from a serious, lengthy, classical mode of philosophical or literary deliberation into something that was quick and easy to read and comprehend. These authors can also be credited with the evolution of a distinct prose style that eschewed the complexity of philosophy, law and religion and introduced a lighter register devoid of crudeness. The famous 18th century scholar and critic Samuel Johnson praised Addison's prose style and said, "Whoever wishes to attain an English style, familiar but not coarse, elegant but not ostentatious, must give his days and nights to the volumes of Addison". While Addison's style was certainly more technically refined than Steele's, later critics like James Leigh-Hunt and George Sherburn have indicated a preference for the latter's passion and spontaneity. Others like JurgenHabermas have suggested that the *Spectator* essays effected a "structural transformation of the public sphere" in 18th century England through their persistent engagement with matters concerning the emergent middle class. Scott Paul Gordon has argued that by presenting their subjects through the discerning gaze of Mr. Spectator, Addison and Steele introduced a form of modern subjectivity based on the readers' anxiety about being constantly monitored and their resultant impulse to improve themselves. While critics like Stuart Sherman trace the evolution of a new form of private identity by examining the structural similarities between the periodical essay and the Puritan diary, others like Scott Black focus on the literary form as a site of confluence of print technology and urban culture that led to the creation of an urban "civil society", one that was based on the transformation of a "private ethos of friendship" into a "public discourse of sociability".

Points to Ponder

Influence of periodical essays on 18th century British urban culture

Representation of gender in 18th century periodical essays

The contribution of the periodical essay to the evolution of English literary criticism

Do You Know

Joseph Addison and Richard Steele appear as minor characters in William Makepeace Thackeray's novel *The History ofHenry Esmond*.

Richard Steele wrote over 400 letters to Mary Scurlock in the course of their courtship and marriage.