

Periodical Essays

A **periodical essay** is an essay which published in a magazine or journal in particular, an essay that appears as part of series. The 18th century is considered the great age of the periodical essay in English. 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."*

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 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."

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.

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.

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.

By, Arshad Khan
Dept. of English
J N College Madhubani