
UNIT 52 ESSAYS AND EVALUATIONS

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52.0 OBJECTIVES

This unit will enable you to,

- Write your sessional essays better;
- Take the term-end examination satisfactorily; and
- Score high marks by knowing about the usual pitfalls and the marking system in advance.

52.1 INTRODUCTION

While welcoming you to the present course on *British Poetry* I had told you that we expected you to write three essays or term-papers for your counsellors on this course. Besides these you will be required to write an examination after you have completed your study of this course. In this unit we will discuss these in some detail.

52.2 SESSIONAL ESSAYS

I assume that you would want to know why we have decided to ask you to write long essays in 2500–3000 words and not the sort of questions that you answered at the B.A. level on your EEG courses. You may recall that we asked you to write a critical appreciation of a poem on a course such as *Understanding Poetry* (EEGO6) or asked questions critical.

Partly the reason is that we don't want to ask the same type of questions once again. Different types of questions make different kinds of demands on our study and understanding. To say this does not mean that we could ask students at the undergraduate level to write long essays and you to appreciate a poem in about 1200 words. On this course quite a few poems are long or are excerpts from long poems. Hence there would not be any point in pretending to 'critically appreciate' an excerpt.

Critical questions of the type you met in units 35 and 36 are asked at your level and you are encouraged to remain prepared to answer such questions also. However, if you combine broad study with close critical explication of texts then you would be able to answer any critical question effectively. The *vice versa*, I am afraid, is not true.

So we've planned three essays (each in 2500-3000 words) for you on three different types of topics. They are as below :

- 1) an essay on an age or a movement or a literary group;
- 2) an essay on a British poet; and
- 3) a critical appreciation of a poem.

Now we will discuss each type in some detail separately.

52.2.1 The First essay

The first essay that you have to write will be on a literary movement or a group or some period. A few topics are given below :

1. Old English Poetry
2. Medieval English Poetry
3. The Scottish Chaucerians

Now if you decide to write on the first topic you will be required to show your awareness of works such as *Andreas*, *Guthlac A and B*, *The Phoenix* and *The Dream of the Rood* and the four poems of Cynewulf (a Northumbrian or Mercian poet of the late 8th or 9th century) - *Juliana*, *Elene*, *The Fates of the Apostles* and *Christ II*. You would get a few more tips for this period from the introduction to the first block of this course.

The third unit of block I gives you a good background of the age i. e Medieval English poetry. However, if you are writing on the third topic above you will be required to gain some familiarity with the life and times and works of William Dunbar (?1456-?1513), Robert Henryson (?1424-? 1506) and James I (1394-1437) king of Scotland and author of *The Kingis Quair* ('The King's Book').

Now if you want to write your term paper on any of the above you will have to have access to some good history of English literature books as well as some of the better known poems of each poet.

If you don't like this idea look for some topic on the Renaissance :

1. Early Renaissance English Poetry
2. The Metaphysical poets
3. The Cavalier Poets

The first topic above can be a really interesting. If you decide to write on it you will gain knowledge of not only Spenser and Sir Philip Sidney but many of their contemporaries such as Sir Thomas Wyatt (1503-42) and Henry Howard Surrey (? 1517-47), Michael Drayton (1563-1631), Thomas Campion (1567-1620) and of course Ben Jonson (1572/3-1637). You will find several of their poems in Palgrave's *Golden Treasury* which should be available at your study center also.

At this point I may tell you an important fact. You must show your sensitiveness to the title of your essay. If you are writing, for instance, on the second topic you may focus your attention on the poets such as Donne, Herbert, Marvell, Vaughan, Crashaw and Traherne but if you are writing on the 'Salient Features of Metaphysical Poetry' then the focus should shift to the features rather than the poets. The following essays should illustrate my point :

Salient Features of Metaphysical Poetry Deb Ratna

The Metaphysical poets were writing mainly during the reign of James I and Charles I. This was an age of drama and this particular genre influenced other branches of literature as well.

- a. Happiness is but only an occasional episode in the general drama of pain.
- b. Alas ! it is not meat of which the refusal is cruelest or to which the claim is validest. The life is more than the meat. The rich not only refuse food to the poor, they refuse wisdom : they refuse virtue, they refuse salvation. Ye sheep without shepherds, it is not the pasture that has been shut from you but the presence.
Ruskin, *Unto this Last*
- c. Is not a patron my lord one who looks with unconcern on a man struggling for life in the waters and when he has reached ground encumbers him with help ? The notice which you have been pleased to take of my labours, had it been early had been kind...

The sources of the three poetic passages cited above are in that order from above:

- a. *Far from the Madding Crowd*
 b. *Unto this Last* and
 c. Dr. Johnson's letter to Lord Chesterfield.

They are taken haphazardly from different genres of English prose and they convey emotion of grief, pity and hurt feelings in no way less acutely than would poetry have done the work. Wherever one goes in English prose – Dryden or Dr. Johnson's criticism, Dr. Johnson's or Keats's letters, the novels of Emily Bronte or Graham Greene, the essays of Lamb or Forster one can find emotions expressed in prose that is in no way less powerful than the same in poetry. Verse need not always be good poetry and prose unpoetic.

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51.3 LET'S SUM UP

Dear student. I hope you enjoyed reading the views of some of your friends. As I had begun this course with a fairly long discussion on the subject of poetry and its appreciation i.e. in the first block I would not proffer my views on the papers of the presenters or on poetry in general once again.

Nonetheless, it may be proper to point out that the students have a good habit of illustrating their points with the help of quotations. However, profuse quotations drown the voices of the presenters themselves and often it was not clear what they themselves thought on the subjects they spoke. Would you yourself like to examine the views of some poet on poetry in a seminar? Hope you would. Wish you good luck in your term-end examination.

51.4 FURTHER READING

It would be a good idea to read essays by W. K. Wimsatt, Donald Davie, Dylan Thomas, Ernest Fenollosa, Murray Schaffer and William Empson printed in this block. They will enrich your own ideas on poetry in general.

The poetry of the metaphysical poets such as Donne, Herbert and Marvell is dramatic. Donne's following lines will exhibit this fact :

Goe, and catch a falling starve,
Get with child a mandrake roote,
Tell me, where all past yeares are,
Or who cleft the devils foot,
Teach me to heare Mermaides singing,
Or to keep off envies stinging,
And finde
What wind
Serves to advance an honest minde.

Never before, not since Chaucer, do we find this predominance of drama on poetry in the same measure. The same can be observed in Herbert's 'The Pulley' :

When God at first made Man,
Having a glass of blessings standing by;
Let us (said He) pour on him all we can:
Let the world's riches which dispersed lie,
Contract into a span.

God stands like a scientist in a chemistry laboratory with a beaker containing a solution. In Marvell's 'Thoughts in a Garden' we notice the same dramatic spirit in gods chasing one another and even in the tone of the opening lines :

How vainly men themselves amaze
To win the Palm, the oke, or Bayes;

Vaughan unlike Marvell, possessed some other qualities but not a dramatic spirit.

For the translation of action into the simple flow of lines it is necessary either to have the Dramatic Monologue as we have in Browning's 'My Last Duchess' or an introduction of far fetched ideas which give a startling quality, which has been called the metaphysical conceit. Marvell in 'To The Coy Mistress' wonders what he did till he met his beloved. Donne did not like to kill a mosquito that had sucked the blood of both lovers and thus became their bridal-bed. In another poem he sees a drop of tear picturing both lovers on its spherical surface and thus creating a world constituting only of these two lovers. Somewhere else lovers are compared with a pair of compasses which incline towards each other more as they are pulled apart. In another poem this is how he addresses the person who comes to put the shroud over him :

Who ever comes to shroud me, do not harme
Nor question much
That subtle wreath of haire, which crowns my rme;
The mystery, the signe you must not touch,
For'tis outward Soule,
Viceroy to that, which then to heaven being gone,
Will leave this to controule,
And keepe these limbes, her Provinces, from dissolution.

The beloved's hair is to be her viceroy over the lover's limbs and prevent them from dissolution. It is this quality which made Eliot say

Donne, I suppose, was such another
Who found no substitute for sense,
To sieze and clutch and penetrate;
Expert beyond experience,

A thought to the Metaphysicals was an experience. They felt their ideas. They present an undissociated sensibility. This was what Dr Johnson could not appreciate with his bias for clarity and classical simplicity. These things give an intellectual quality to the poems of the Metaphysicals. Donne addressed Death in a purely novel manner :

Death be not proud, though some have called thee
Mighty and dreadfull, for, thou art not so,
For, those, whom thou think'st, thou dost overthrow.
Die not, poor death, nor yet canst thou kill me.

Death will harm itself by killing someone because it cannot kill twice. The intellectual quality is still more pronounced in 'Riding Westward'

There I should see a sunne by rising set,
And by that setting endless day beget:
But that Christ on this crosse did rise and fall,
Sinne had eternally benighted all.

Good Friday is a symbol of a setting of a sun ; but this setting is to rise by its fall because it would spread the Christian faith. It was this quality which influenced the sensibility of modern poets. Eliot's 'The Journey of the Magi' bears a proof of this influence :

This: were we led all that way for
Birth or death ? There was a Birth, certainly,
We had evidence and no doubt. I had seen birth and death,
But had thought they were different; this Birth was
Hard and bitter agony for us, like Death, our death.

Christ's birth was a hard and bitter agony for the wise men because it was a herald of the death of the old order and the old gods.

In Vaughan as in Herbert this metaphysical sensibility appears most profoundly in their expressions of devotion. In Vaughan it sometimes gets combined with Platonic ideas. This was a dimension of the intellectuality of the poetry of the Metaphysical poets. In 'The Retreat' Vaughan expresses his desire to retreat his steps to that stage of 'angel infancy' when his home was in that 'shady city of palm trees'. Herbert expressed this intellectual quality in 'Virtue' and 'The Altar'.

Thus we find that the intellectual quality found expression in different ways in different poets. In Donne it was in the combination of the devotee and the debauchee; in Herbert in his unrestricted submission to God ; and in Vaughan in his hybrid of pagan and Christian faith. An intellectual quality, a prejudice for metaphysical conceits, an inclination for the dramatic spirit and a capacity for an undissociated expression of experience are some of the qualities of the metaphysical poets.

The above essay would illustrate the point that the writer's focus was on the salient features rather than the poets.

The essay above, however, can be a note not an essay such as we want you to write for us. A good term paper or sessional essay that we want you to write should have footnotes or endnotes, etc. as shown in unit 36 (in block 8).

We may not linger on with the Caroline poets much longer because you have learnt about them in block 3, already.

Some other topics on later poetry you could write upon are:

1. The Great Augustan Poets
2. The Neo-classical Poets
3. The late Eighteenth-Century poets (or poetry)
4. The Graveyard School of poetry
5. Poetry of the Romantic Revival
6. The Medieval Element in Romantic poetry
7. The Wonder of the Romantics
8. The Great Victorian Poets
9. The Minor Victorian Poets
10. Late Victorian Poetry
11. Georgian Poetry
12. Poets of the First World War
13. Poets of the Second World War
14. The Great Modernists
15. The Movement
16. The Poets of the fifties

The list above is only illustrative and not exhaustive and ideally you should be free to write on a topic you consider proper. For example the essay on 'The Religious Temper of the Victorian Age' that you read earlier (in unit 36) would fall into the first category of essays that you would be required to write upon.

Before we move on I should like to suggest just one point more. When you are writing this essay you will be required to show your awareness of certain cultural, historical, political, economic facts about the period. This may be clear from the essay that follows.

The Left Wingers of the Twentieth Century Poets Deb Ratna

Wars change life. They change economic conditions. But they change values more than anything else. The poets of the thirties – W. H. Auden, Stephen Spender, Cecil Day Lewis and Louis MacNeice specially – present one aspect of this changed outlook. The destruction during the First World war and the needs produced by it, engendered, frustration, bewilderment, faith in God and the value of sacrifice on the one hand and on the other a desire to rally with the cause of the most prominent section – the proletariat – of the society. The left wingers, or 'New Country' poets as they were also called, chose the latter line.

They were influenced by Marx and they were admittedly propagandists but they were also influenced by Freud. Thus they took to explore simultaneously in two directions – 'without' and 'within'. Paralleling these two intellectual influences were the artistic influences of Donne and the Romantics. The social consciousness was expressed in bold, concrete and startling images and moods *a la* Donne. The 'within' was explored in the evocative, dim, remote and vague imageries reminding us of the Romantic poets.

Their social consciousness made them respond to the Spanish crisis of 1937. Auden, Spender and MacNeice went to Spain together with Ralph Fox, Julian Bell, Christopher Caudwell and John Cornford. The latter four died in the turmoil and the former three returned to England with deep indignation. Auden's 'Spain' Day Lewis's 'Nabara', Spender's 'The Still Centre' and MacNeice's 'Autumn Journal' are some of the best poems of the thirties.

Auden in 'The Dance of Death' put 'Marxism in rhythm'. It was called propagandist, and the change was accepted by Auden with the remark that he wished to create the society in which the ideal poet could write. In his poetry of this period we find

constant references to Abyssinia and Poland, where, as in Spain, humanity was being uprooted. But before the Second World War he left England, to live in America and with this he left his leftist views also. The persons who influenced his later poetry were Nietzsche, Kierkegaard, Kafka and Rilke; the values which he wished to preserve were those of capitalist democracies. The people themselves were to be blamed for their hapless lot. So according to his new creed the poet should aspire for humility and faith and 'privacy and isolation' instead of fighting against the 'exploiters' and the corrupt.

His later poetry shows a mystic quality, as in 'Musée Des Beaux Arts':

About suffering they were never wrong,
The Old Masters: how well they understood
Its human position; how it takes place
While some one else is eating or opening a window or just walking dully
along:

Auden, later in his meditations upon the permanent aspects of human nature and endeavours conformed more to the literary culture of the times.

Stephen Spender published his poems along with others of his group in *New Signatures* 1932 and *New Country* 1933 and in one of those poems exulted in the approaching triumph of communism:

They speak of the world state
With its towns like brain centers and its pulsing arteries.

He tries to have faith in the future and takes pride in man's mastery of machines. In 'Ultima Ratio Regum', it is the gun; in 'The Landscape Near An Aerodrome' it is the aerodrome, in 'The Express' it is the night train which are expressed like the soft sweet harmonious dreamed objects of the romantics. But in each one of these poems Spender was striving against the grain in him. His optimism sounds contrived and his best poems are those in which he expresses sad compassion for the lot of those who must live surrounded by the ugliness of modern towns. Spender has been compared with the 'stricken romantic deer' which sounds correct when we examine his nostalgia for the romantic past, when things were beautiful.

Cecil Day Lewis voiced his early enthusiasm for the Spanish cause in 'The Volunteer' but obviously it was not sufficient as a creed to keep the poet involved all his life. *From Feather to Iron* is a series of Lyrics in which a single growing experience of marriage and parentage is viewed from several points of view. In the *Magnetic Mountain* he was under the twin influences of Auden and Hopkins.

Louis MacNeice was more eclectic and his social consciousness was not to be subdued by his pride in his intellectual attainments. He had translated Aeschylus's *Agamemnon* into English and was a brilliant critic of *Modern Poetry* (1938). In this book, he expressed his preference for poets who read newspapers, were interested in politics, economics and social relationships, were appreciative of women and were capable of laughter. These interests came out in *Plant and Phantom* (1941) and *The Spring Board* (1944) where we see the 'hard cold fire of the Northerner' (MacNeice was from Belfast).

Thus we find that these left wingers expressed their social consciousness very powerfully in times of crisis but as the conditions changed, they dissolved into their various colours and currents more true to their inherent natures.
