

## “Sir Roger At Home”

Joseph Addison, *The Spectator* No. 106, July 2, 1711.

- The essay begins with an **epigraph** from Horace (Classical Roman lyric poet, 65 BC-8BC):

“Here plenty’s liberal horn shall pour  
Of fruits for thee a copious show’r,  
Rich honours of the quiet plain”

Derived from the Greek word *epigraphēin* meaning “to write on”, an epigraph is usually a quotation taken from an existing text which sets the tone and context of the narrative that is to follow. In the case of the *Spectator* essay, Horace serves a dual purpose- Firstly at a metatextual level Addison registers his **neoclassical inspiration** by borrowing lines from a Horatian text which paints the picture of an idyllic, pastoral realm of plenty as a complementary metaphor for Sir Roger’s plentiful estate in 18<sup>th</sup> century Worcestershire; Secondly, Sir Roger’s rural countryside existence marked by quiet and an abundance of Nature’s wealth stands as a symbol of the squire’s benevolent guardianship as the lord of the manor. At the same time, the epigraph also serves a nostalgic purpose in presenting Sir Roger as the emblem of a class of landed gentry which has already lived past its prime and is now in decline.

- **The role of the “Spectator”**: *The Spectator* series centers around the figure of the Spectator as the authoritative observer of the society within which he moves. In fulfilment of the educational role of the periodical essays, the Spectator figure uses **reason, rationality and a sense of moral purpose** to study human characteristics and manners, and to deliver judgments on the same. The first person narrative voice adopted for each of the essays in the series is never beset by doubt regarding the legitimacy of this “voice”. Using a combination of **wit and an elegant and controlled prose style**, the Spectator operates as the eyes and ears of 18<sup>th</sup> century English middle class members of society in order to sharpen their senses and make them more wholesome as social and moral beings.

In the essay “Sir Roger At Home” the figure of the Spectator is presented as a distinct personality. He informs the readers that he has been invited by his “friend” Sir Roger de Coverley to stay for a month with him at the latter’s country-house, “where I intend to form several of my ensuing speculations”. It is clear that the Spectator is a reserved man, deeply contemplative, averse to being observed by others because that is a role by which he defines himself. The role of the Spectator as the observer of human behaviour is presented here as very serious official business, and his need to maintain a certain social distance from Sir Roger’s guests at the country-house appears necessary to his task. Sir Roger understands this aspect of the Spectator’s nature and does not impose his own or his guests’ hospitality or curiosity on the Spectator. It therefore seems that the Spectator and Sir Roger share quite a harmonious and flexible relationship, where Sir Roger’s exuberant jolliness is contrasted with and balanced by the Spectator’s introvert nature. It is also quite obvious that the Spectator is a “city man” and hence there is a lot of curiosity about him among Sir Roger’s gentlemen friends from the country. Often the city man

becomes a spectacle for the country folk, and vice versa, following a long tradition in the development of human civilisation which has evolved binaries of the “rural” and the “urban”. The cultural and political divide between the city and the country characterising the transforming socioeconomic landscape of 18<sup>th</sup> century England is played out in this reference to the curious gentlemen.

- **The influence of Sir Roger de Coverley:** Although he has his peculiarities/ eccentricities, Sir Roger is never caricaturized or held up for ridicule among Addison’s middle class readers. On the contrary, the friendship between the Spectator and Sir Roger, based on an easy co-existence, is defined by a great deal of mutual respect for the very different worlds from which they both come. However, what appear to impress the Spectator about Sir Roger are his values and attributes recognized by the Spectator as universal human ideals - “I am the more at ease in Sir Roger’s family, because it consists of sober and staid persons; for as the knight is the best master in the world, he seldom changes his servants and as he is beloved by all about him, his servants never care for leaving him...” This is an example of **Sir Roger’s benevolent paternalism**, understood as a virtue in a thoroughly class-conscious social order where the efficiency of the “servant” and the status of the master are the two dominant concerns. Sir Roger is appreciated within this system as a more humane master in that he believes in retaining his servants and treating them justly by securing their service for life. According to the Spectator’s observation, the *valet de chambre* could be mistaken for Sir Roger’s brother because of the nature of relationship between the domestic help and his master. Citing this master’s “goodness”, “care” and “tenderness”, the Spectator suggests that the squire is not solely driven by utilitarian motives, but truly cares for both the men and the animals within his household and under his authority. This authority is never lost or questioned even by the Spectator, but it is perceived in more humanitarian terms. Instead of portraying Sir Roger as an exploitative soulless lord of his estate, Addison humanises the character. At the same time, he breaks from the pattern of Restoration Comedies where country squires were symbolic of unsophisticated and simplistic mannerisms. The Spectator stresses instead on the emotional bond between the master and his dependents- “I could not but observe with a great deal of pleasure, the joy that appeared in the countenances of these ancient domestics upon my friend’s arrival at his country-seat. Some of them could not refrain from tears at the sight of their old master”. Sir Roger becomes **a New Testament Godly figure**, an epitome of kindness triggering great passionate outbursts in his servants who are cast in the role of the faithful congregation within this Biblical imagery (The Old Testament God in contrast is an angry, punishing figure of authority). He is both the father and the master, thereby legitimizing the traditional master’s rule within a feudal agricultural economy by configuring it as father-child relationship, where the father has to necessarily play the role of authority. The Spectator further notes that the general mood of the household is dependent on the health and humour of the master, signalling Sir Roger’s all-embracing influence over his estate and its inhabitants. It is as though the estate is an extension of its owner’s spirit.
- The other character briefly introduced in the essay as the Spectator’s chief companion in the absence of Sir Roger is “ a very venerable man, who is ever with Sir Roger, and has lived at his house in the nature of a **chaplain** above thirty years” (A chaplain is a member

of the clergy attached to a private chapel, institution, etc). This man is described in positive terms as a gentleman of “good sense” and “some learning”, maintaining a moderate life and being easy to converse with. These are the general attributes sought for by the Spectator in his social and moral role of commentator. Rationality, being an Enlightenment value, tempered by knowledge, is one of the central preoccupations of *The Spectator* series. Additionally, the reference to the “regular life” seeks to focus on the Protestant ethic of moderation binding the middle class and its criticism of a life of excess epitomized primarily by the Restoration court culture. The chaplain as a man of faith is a welcome companion to the Spectator whose secular subjects are also tied to moral concerns. This man too is a dependant of Sir Roger and attests to the squire’s extensive patronage and benevolence. Sir Roger’s own estimation of the chaplain to whom he has given the parsonage of his own parish is one of great regard. Here Addison outlines his preference for the kind of **country clergy** who would be most effective in reaching out to the more simple-minded people of faith. According to both Sir Roger and the Spectator, good scholarship is important in a clergyman, but it must not become so elevated that it’s meaning and purpose is lost in the obscure grandeur of “Greek and Latin”. What is desired primarily is “plain sense”, “a good aspect”, “a clear voice” and a “sociable temper”. These are in fact the practical values constituting *The Spectator’s* educational project of bringing the subject of social manners and knowledge of values out of the libraries and into the public spaces of coffee houses. In listing the achievements of the chaplain serving his parish, Sir Roger notes the practical improvements made towards strengthening the communication channels between clergy and his congregation and maintaining peace and order by counselling people in conflict resolution. The key to this improvement rests on the chaplain’s ability to use a more direct and relatable form of sermonizing which has brought him closer to the people of the parish. Sir Roger outlines his own contribution towards this favourable development by referring to the present he had made to the chaplain of “all the good sermons which have been printed in English” to be read out to the people during parish services. The term “practical divinity” applied to the method used by the chaplain by reading out from the texts of great Christian authors, suggests the practice of faith and the love of God and humanity in everyday life. The Spectator, having witnessed the “good aspect” and “clear voice” of the chaplain during one of his sermons before his congregation, approves of Sir Roger’s notion of the ideal country clergy. The Spectator in fact focuses on the performative aspect of the chaplain’s delivery and it might be possible to read into this *The Spectator* series’ overall agenda of marrying entertainment with education. The satisfaction of watching and hearing the chaplain- “the gracefulness of his figure and delivery, as well as the discourses he pronounced”- suggests a wholesomeness of experience symbolic of *The Spectator’s* desired role in the lives of its middle class readers in which sophistication of manners and literary knowledge go hand in hand. Additionally, the sacred and the secular are brought together in the Spectator’s comparison of the sermon with “the composition of a poet in the mouth of a graceful actor”. Outlining the lessons learnt from the example of Sir Roger’s chaplain, the Spectator suggests that all country clergies follow the same by improving their elocution skills in delivering the words written down by “greater masters” instead of wasting time on new compositions. There is a certain condescension for the country audience of the parsonage and the literary merits of the country clergy, the latter seen as probably less capable of originality of thought. It is an interesting irony

played out in the 18<sup>th</sup> century's literary landscape, where authors like Addison and Steele are seen to innovate and enrich the English language with a new genre and writing styles, while imitating the Classical aesthetic principles at the same time.

- **Sir Roger's singularity:** The Spectator defines his friend as "humorist" whose virtues as well as imperfections are characterised by a certain eccentricity or "extravagance" which distinguishes him from other men. An archaic term used for a person subject to impulses and fancies, and specializing in humour, Sir Roger as a "humorist" is hardly an object of middle class ridicule. Yet, the subtle tone of condescension whereby Sir Roger becomes a symbol of a declining rural class of aristocrats is visible in the Spectator's definition of Sir Roger's "innocent" cast of mind- less impressive in its narrow conservatism, lack of sophistication or an expansive knowledge, unless it is saved by his unique vibrant personality.