

The Spectator

Background :-

- The character of **Sir Roger de Coverley** is representative of the old-fashioned country gentleman. He is first mentioned in the essay titled “**The Spectator Club**” whose purpose was to introduce the central “characters” as “men intended to represent the entire range of public opinion and enlightened bias”. The imaginary members of the Spectator Club were mirrors on to which the authors’ own ideas about society were reflected. The ‘members’ included representatives of the army, of commerce, of the town and of the country gentry (Sir Roger). Sir Roger is defined as a gentleman of ancient descent, a baronet (a member of the lowest hereditary titled British order). He is marked by the singularity of his character as a 56 year old mirthful bachelor, loved by the people around him rather than esteemed.
- **Social History of The Spectator essays** (publication years- 1711 to 1712):
 - A daily periodical published in London.
 - Main contributors- Sir Richard Steele and Joseph Addison. Addison took the lead with *The Spectator*. It was published every day except on Sundays. In fact, before the birth of this periodical, Steele had started *The Tatler* in the year 1709, publishing three times a week. This could be seen as a precursor to the kind of innovative, imaginative periodical writing which made *The Spectator* so popular and left its imprint on the literary world.
 - Aim- “To enliven Morality with Wit, and to temper Wit with Morality”.
 - The purpose of the fictional framework of the periodicals was to teach politeness to a transforming society and to bring the topic of morality into the everyday conversations of people. *The Spectator* was meant to make its subjects a normal pastime of the “nouveaux riches” (the newly rich), and the rising middle classes in general. In this, it was seeking to substitute the moral authority of religious discourse and political hegemony with its own brand of literary intervention in the lives of its readers.
 - **The significance of the 18th century-**
 - ❖ This period saw a huge number of **political writing**, particularly **periodical journalism** (also known as pamphleteering), and the “**essay**” (from the French infinitive *essayer*, meaning to “try” or “attempt”; the history of the “essay” encompassing the *Essais* of French essayist Michel de Montaigne, published in 1580, and the English essays of Francis Bacon published in book form in 1597), appearing on the literary horizon of English society. The primary objective of both Addison and Steele was to introduce a corrective to the moral laxity of the Restoration years. The Restoration of King Charles II saw the reopening of the theatres, and the influence of the French court culture

which had been the King's and his Royalists' refuge during the years of exile, found its release in the Restoration Comedy of Manners primarily. These comedies focused on the exercise of wit and intrigue while largely neglecting the question of actual moral standards and their adoption by the greater English society. Therefore, *The Spectator* sought to purify and reform social and family relationships of the urban middle class. According to the 10th issue of *The Spectator*, **the moral and educational purpose of the periodical** was to recover their reader from "that desperate state of vice and folly into which the age is fallen". Addison claimed that *The Spectator* succeeded in bringing philosophy out of the closets, libraries, schools and colleges, to dwell in clubs and assemblies, at tea-tables and coffeehouses.

- ❖ Therefore, the significance of these essays was that it inaugurated the **"bourgeois public sphere"** as a domain of society identified in terms of its separation from the state and the royal courts. This bourgeois public sphere became the space for the middle class to come together as a collective and engage in debates pertaining to social issues ("bourgeois" understood as characteristic of the middle class as a sociologically-defined category). The expression of this secular public social domain was most visible in the **coffeehouses** which sprung up all over London primarily between the 17th and the 18th centuries. The first recorded coffeehouse in Oxford, England opened in the year 1650. The "coffeehouse culture" signified a crucial meeting-place where a large part of British culture was shaped, debated over, and which also provided a slightly more democratized access to "culture" and "society" than the royal courts allowed. It was also a space which recorded the social ascent of the middle class. It gave them a certain social character and the "social capital" (the power to make social pronouncements with authority) to influence this society through literature of various kinds. Like the public theatres in the Renaissance and the Cromwellian era particularly, these coffeehouses were often seen by authorities as dangerous and threatening to the order of society. In 1675, Charles II tried shutting down the coffeehouses because these were seen as sites where political and literary exchanges occurred freely and news circulated unchecked. It was threatening as a "counter-site" to official state authority which liked to believe that it had absolute monopoly over the creation of "news". Quite importantly, the coffeehouses were seen to replace the Courts as the meeting-ground for literary men. Consequently, **London became the centre of literature and intellectual life** in the later part of the 17th century. With this concentration of power in the city, writers started viewing "polite" London society as their target audience.
- ❖ **Gentility replacing aristocracy?** -The shift in power wherein the aristocratic class no longer enjoyed absolute authority and were substituted by the merchants and tradesmen of the town, happened gradually. In the early 18th century the middle classes were still not the real rulers of the country. Politically, the landed aristocracy, the country gentlemen and the big estate owners remained in control of power, but now they needed to work in collaboration with commercial interests. As David Daiches points out,

gradually the landed aristocracy got absorbed in the upper levels of the middle classes and did not really exist as a completely separate political group anymore. Therefore, aristocracy developed into plutocracy (a government by the wealthy). In fact historically, it was the “Glorious Revolution” of 1688 when James II was replaced by William of Orange and his wife Mary in a political movement engineered by the middle class Protestant forces of England that the victory of the town over the Court was sealed. From henceforth, the urban middle class would have greater bargaining power at the political table. However, this victory also exposed a certain crisis for the new emergent class. While the Court culture and its moral-ethical standards were rejected, it was equally imperative that the middle class now find their own specific standards, their own social and ethical codes of behaviour with which their society could be led in the right direction. Therefore the simultaneous education and entertainment of the middle classes become a central preoccupation of the kind of literature that began to appear at around this time of shifting powers. This is where Addison and Steele gained recognition as the great educators of the English middle class.

- ❖ The 18th century is also the **Age of Enlightenment or the Age of Reason**- It signified a shift towards rationality and the situating of the human subject (typically the man) as the embodiment of reason and judgment. Knowledge itself was believed to be finite and within the capacity of the thinking, reasonable human being to conquer. It could be said that literature itself often became the tool for the advancement of knowledge. A great amount of significance was attached to the concept of “civilization” as the product of refinement and social etiquette, as well a sense of morality binding society, all of which could be achieved through education. For the authors of *The Spectator* series, man’s raw primitive instincts/impulses needed to be submitted to the conventions of society and this was the only way in which this particular middle class could be tutored in civility. The notion of “**bourgeois morality**” emerged at around this time as a very specific class-dominated attitude towards man’s moral role within his society. However, it must also be noted here that this term itself was often the target of satire, depicting this middle class rigidity of morals as hypocrisy. Later “Victorian morality” was also subjected to similar satirical critiques, exposing the anxiety of irrelevance felt by this new class in the cultural sphere. Anyway, the purpose of *The Spectator* was to instruct men on manners, morals and literature, because it was felt that there were many such individuals who had a healthy passion to take on more responsible public roles in society, but were held back by a weak intellect. Such men needed the guiding hand of the authors of *The Tatler* and *The Spectator*. In the latter, these authors appeared as the narratorial figure of the “Spectator” who observed a situation or a character and gave their expert opinion on them with a certain moral authority.
- ❖ The 18th century was also called **the Neoclassical Age** in literary historiography, although Neoclassicism as an entire movement spanned a much longer period- It was heavily influenced by the aesthetics of Classical

Antiquity (the Classical period of Greek and Roman influence), reflected in art and architecture. In literature, the **Augustan Age** is the term often used to refer to the 17th and 18th centuries, commonly understood as the period covering the works of authors such as Samuel Johnson, Alexander Pope, Joseph Addison, Sir Richard Steele, John Gay and John Dryden, among others. It was influenced by the classical Augustan Age in Latin literary history consisting of the works of Virgil, Horace, Ovid, Sextus Propertius, and others, and what distinguished the later Augustan Age of writers was its imitation of the styles and principles of the classical period. The classical period signified “the Golden Age” of a literature marked by sophistication and a polished diction, and politically it was defined by peace and prosperity. Any period that was later called “the Golden Age” was a direct reference to the classical literary and social history. In the 18th century Augustan Age, certain **key “neoclassical” literary principles were wit, rationality and an elegant, unforced harmony of style and content (as called literary decorum)**. Although the periodicals were entirely new forms particular to the 18th century, both Addison and Steele imitated neoclassical modes of expression and style in their essays. The result was a style marked by its conscious elaborate nature, reflective of the original style of Cicero, the Roman orator of the classical age. They used complex sentences and preferred paradox and antithesis in explaining a social situation or while delivering a moral principle. By using paradox, the authors were able to portray the elegant manner in which balance might be achieved in literary constructions. This is the notion of “order” which neoclassicism symbolizes. For the creators of *The Spectator* series, the “order” and “balance” were also metaphors for their vision of the ideal society following the disruption and disorderliness of the Restoration Age. The way in which Addison and Steele used wit and irony, although in quite different ways, ultimately produced a tone of authority without becoming too controlling or overbearing. This too is an example of the significance of “balance” achieved by the writing of *The Spectator* essays- a witty playfulness balanced by the seriousness of the moral lesson. At the same time, these essays brought propriety and politeness into everyday social intercourse.

- ❖ **Politics-** Although *The Spectator* series consciously tried avoiding a direct association with any partisan political ideology or position, both Addison and Steele were Whigs in terms of their political allegiances. **The Whigs and the Tories** were the two major political parties in England. The Whig party rose in the 18th and 19th century and was in favour of a limited monarchy and did not desire the monarch’s absolute expression of power on account of his or her “divine right of kingship”. The Whigs represented the great aristocracy and the moneyed middle class who were gradually coming to recognize a mutuality of interest in their relation to society. The Whig philosophy focused on the positive and honourable virtues of the growing mercantile community. Toryism on the other hand was based on a British version of traditionalism and conservatism, believing in the Royalist position of upholding the existing social order. The philosophy of Toryism originated from the Cavalier faction during the English Civil War.

- Returning to **Sir Roger de Coverley**: He is representative of a social class that had not quite disappeared with the rise of the middle class. The **squirearchy** to which he belonged was still very much a part of the imagination of writers of the 18th century because England had not entirely made the transition from an agricultural to an industrial society and economy. [Squire: In the Middle Ages, it referred to the shield-or armour- bearer of a knight. Later, the term designated the lord of the manor or the village head, and was also used for the justices of peace. Squirearchy: Referring to landowners collectively, especially when understood as a class with political or social power.] During the Restoration period, particularly in the *Comedy of Manners*, it was fashionable for the courtly culture of the times to constantly ridicule the visiting squires as “uncouth”, “simple” and “unfashionable”. Addison and Steele were determined to change this. They were concerned by the divide created between the town and the countryside within English society because of this Restoration tradition. Their purpose as educators was also to unite the past and present and thereby, create a continuous history of England. Any kind of division was harmful to that project. Therefore, Sir Roger was never really symbolised as a ridiculous caricature of a dying class of men. As a symbol of a feudal Toryism, he does appear as an anachronistic figure, belonging to the past and more or less redundant in the present, but as an individual with a very distinct personality, Sir Roger never becomes superfluous. He has his foibles and eccentricities, but these are supported by his lovable nature. As a Tory squire, his follies are largely held up for the sympathetic amusement of a Whig audience. Even as Addison’s subtle use of satire in focusing on the conservatism of the Tory country squire surfaces at times, they are never allowed to consume the *Spectator*’s (the narrator/observer in all the essays) opinion of Sir Roger. As his character develops with each essay, Sir Roger becomes the emblem of an ideal feudal paternalism, in his relation with his servants and tenants. This particular character is presented in a soft, often sentimental, light which implies the authors’ efforts at bridging the gap created by the Restoration years, as well as healing the political wounds within a nation polarized by Whigs and Tories. At the same time, the sensitive handling of the character of Sir Roger points to the interpenetrations of squirearchy and middle classes, where wealthy merchants were buying estates previously owned by the landed gentry, and becoming landed gentry themselves. It has also been observed by critics that one of the reasons for the immortality of this fictional character is its realistic depiction. There is hardly any exaggeration in the way he is portrayed and as a Tory gentleman living in Worcestershire he is quite a “real” character.