



The Evolution of English Essay: From Bacon to Orwell

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Abstract

The English essay, as a literary genre, has developed a stunning trajectory from its neat, didactic origins in the Renaissance to its sophisticated, introspective, and frequently subversive forms today. The following paper follows the development of the English essay from Francis Bacon, generally considered the father of the English essay, to George Orwell, the most iconic essay writer of the 20th century. The research analyzes how the essay evolved in relation to shifting socio-political realities, literary modes, and personal sensibilities through the centuries. Starting with Bacon's aphoristic and impersonal writing, in which essays were pithy, moralizing thoughts meant to teach the reader, the genre developed from the flowery and chatty writing of the Restoration and Augustan eras. Essayists such as Joseph Addison and Richard Steele helped popularize the periodical essay through its use of wit and refinement to address the growing middle-class reader audience. The essay during the Romantic era became more subjective and personal, a fact demonstrated by Charles Lamb and William Hazlitt, who imbued their writings with sentiment, nostalgia, and philosophical rumination. The Victorian period introduced the serious, sometimes critical style, with Thomas Carlyle and Matthew Arnold utilizing the essay as a means for social, religious, and cultural commentary. In the 20th century, essayists such as George Orwell and G.K. Chesterton broadened the scope of the essay, combining journalism, personal narrative, and political commentary. Orwell, above all, practiced the skill of blending clarity, honesty, and intellectual seriousness to confront urgent problems of his day, including imperialism, totalitarianism, and the abuse of language. This paper also examines how the essay reflected the democratization of English prose, evolving from a mode more restricted to privileged readership to one open to more diverse populations. It brings out the essay's strength and its ability to integrate personal voice with general issues. In the end, the research demonstrates that the English essay is not merely a type of literature but a living stage for thinking, contemplation, and society's discourse across epochs.

Keywords

English essay, George Orwell, Francis Bacon, literary evolution, periodical essay, Victorian prose, Romantic essay, political essay, personal narrative, history of English literature

1 Introduction

The essay is the most widespread and long-lasting of English literary forms, over centuries shaping itself to reflect the fluctuating intellectual, social, and political scene in England. From its early days as a means of moral consideration and philosophical probing, the English essay has developed into a multifarious literary form fusing private voice and public discourse, responding to the whims and interests of successive generations. The title of this research, "The Evolution of English Essay: From Bacon to Orwell", encompasses the intriguing history of this style—from the aphoristic and didactic style of Francis Bacon to the politically responsive and personally confessional writing of George Orwell.

This essay aims to follow the evolution of the English essay as a literary and cultural form. It analyzes how the essay evolved from a formal and impersonal style of writing to that defined by intimacy, wit, satire, and critical thinking. It highlights key figures whose works not only shaped the essay as a form but also reflected broader movements in English prose: the Renaissance humanism of Bacon, the urbane wit of Addison and Steele, the introspective charm of Lamb, the fervent critique of Carlyle, and the moral clarity of Orwell. Examining this evolution, the paper will demonstrate how the English essay emerged as a vehicle through which authors interacted with the moral, social, and political concerns of their era. The paper also highlights the essay's versatility—how it transitioned from the chambers of aristocratic studies to the columns of mass-circulation journals, becoming finally an instrument of mass communication and intellectual interaction. By doing this, this research aims to contribute to the essay's value not only as a literary work but as a reflection of English society's intellectual past. From Bacon's contemplations about human nature to Orwell's denunciation of totalitarianism, the English essay shows how prose can act both as a reflection and as a determinant of public opinion.

1.1 The Origin of the English Essay

The English essay is the result of the fertile intellectual culture of the Renaissance and the rise of humanist thinking in England. It is certain that Francis Bacon (1561–1626) was the first English author to lend shape and substance to the essay in English prose. Influenced by Michel de Montaigne, the French philosopher who developed the form on the continent, Bacon transformed the essay to meet the English penchant for concision, reason, and moral teaching. His *Essays* (published for the first time in 1597, but enlarged in 1612 and 1625) established the

model for the English essay as a medium of contemplation of human conduct, ethics, and useful wisdom. In contrast to Montaigne's discursive, personal approach, Bacon's essays were concise, factual, and aphoristic. They did not seek to analyze the writer's inner experience but to teach and advise readers through crisply formulated observation and usefulness on subjects like truth, friendship, ambition, and studies. Early English essay, as it was formed by Bacon, was characterized by clarity, directness, and interest in matters of general rather than specific experience.

Bacon's essays pleased the English aristocracy, fitting in with the era's fascination with moral philosophy and civic responsibility. His writing showed the intellectual intensity of the Renaissance man: mixing classical wisdom with pragmatic observation. Bacon's essays were not simply literary works—they were manuals for ethical conduct and successful government. This impersonal, pedagogical form of the essay predominated during its early development. But as the form of the essay developed over the course of the 17th and 18th centuries, it came to serve a broader variety of purposes and to address a broader variety of audiences. Essayists such as Addison and Steele took the essay out of the study and into the coffeehouse, employing it to critique social behavior and issues of the day in terms of wit and refinement.

So, the birthplace of the English essay is where Renaissance philosophy, classical education, and the new print culture in England intersect. From Bacon's moralistic thoughts, the essay would grow into a form that engaged with personal voice, humor, satire, and then finally political satire.

1.2 The Development of the Essay in the 17th and 18th Centuries

The 17th and 18th centuries constitute a developmental phase in the history of the English essay, during which the form diversified away from Bacon's aphoristic method to meet the tastes of an increasingly literate and socially active public. The essay became transformed from a largely philosophical and moral genre into a vehicle of social commentary, entertainment, and education, revealing the vibrant cultural and intellectual life of the Restoration and Augustan periods.

3.1 The Periodical Essay: Addison and Steele

The periodical essay emerged as a defining innovation of the early 18th century. The works of Joseph Addison and Richard Steele, especially through publications like *The Tatler* (1709) and *The Spectator* (1711), marked a significant transformation in the essay's purpose and audience. Unlike Bacon's essays, which were dense and meditative, the periodical essay was designed to engage a broader, middle-class readership. It balanced moral teaching with entertainment, capturing the values and mores of modern city life.

Addison and Steele employed the essay in favour of civility, reason, and good taste, discussing issues like fashion, education, marriage, and behaviour in public. The essays tended to have a light, conversational style and were laced with humour, making abstract moral concepts available to the common reader. The fictional characters of The Spectator Club, like Sir Roger de Coverley, served as instruments through which social mores and follies were analyzed.

3.2 The Emergence of the Social and Conversational Essay

The periodical essay opened the way to a more informal and colloquial manner, typical of the 18th-century essay. Essay writers moved more and more toward reflecting the tone of polite conversation in London's coffeehouses and salons. The essay developed into an instrument of social commentary, addressing the everyday problems of readers and discussing contemporary topics in an intelligible, frequently humorous language.

This kind of conversation created closeness between the writer and the reader. The essayist was no longer an isolated philosopher but a fellow citizen, paying attention to and commenting on common experiences of society. This era witnessed the essay firmly rooted as popular literature with extensive appeal across various classes.

3.3 Satire, Wit, and the Essay in the Augustan Age

The Augustan period (c. 1700–1750) is commonly considered the golden age of English satire. The essay became a successful vehicle for conveying the wit, irony, and moral satire that characterized literature of the era. Authors such as Jonathan Swift and Alexander Pope, while most famous for their poetry and prose satires, also made significant contributions to the tradition of the essay in the form of works criticizing political corruption, social hypocrisy, and human absurdity. It was in this period that the essay blended biting social satire with good-humored wit, combining the rational temper of the Enlightenment with a sharp exposure of the follies and vices of modern times. The Augustan essayist was both entertainer and moralist, employing satire not merely to delight but to reform.

The essay of this era thus acted as mirror and lamp: reflecting society's manners and morals but also lighting its shortcomings. It paved the way for the subsequent evolution of the essay as a tool for individual and political commentary, evident in subsequent essays by essayists such as Lamb, Hazlitt, and Orwell.

1.2 Study Purpose and Scope

- To identify the historical evolution of the English essay from Bacon to Orwell
- To investigate major essayists who developed the genre

- To consider how style, topics, and purposes of the essay evolved
- To discuss the essay's potential as a social, moral, and political critique
- To emphasize the essay's flexibility to accommodate different audiences and literary schools

1.3 Objectives of the Study

- To examine the stylistic and thematic features of the English essay at various periods
- To contrast and compare the methods of influential essayists from Bacon to Orwell
- To evaluate the essay's impact on English prose and ideas
- To consider how the essay was a reflection and shaper of societal values
- To identify the lasting legacy of the English essay in contemporary writing

2 Review of Literature

1. S.K. Singh (2015) – "Philosophical Underpinnings in Bacon's Essays: An Indian Perspective" – Examines Bacon's aphoristic mode and its impact on Indian academic writing.
2. Archana Sharma (2017) – "The English Essay and Indian Academia: A Historical Overview" – Explores the popularity of English essayists in Indian university curricula.
3. Rajeev Ranjan (2012) – "Bacon to Orwell: A Journey Through Rationalism and Satire" – Contrasts the moral tone of Bacon with Orwell's political bite.
4. Kavita Mishra (2016) – "Autobiographical Elements in Lamb and Orwell: A Comparative Study" – Examines personal voice in English essays and its echo in Indian writing.
5. M.K. Verma (2010) – "Political Consciousness in Orwell's Essays: An Indian Reading" – Emphasizes Orwell's significance in postcolonial Indian debate.
6. Neelima Ghosh (2018) – "Ethics and Argumentation in the English Essay Tradition" – Charts the development of moral argument from Bacon to Orwell.
7. Sanjay Kumar (2014) – "Teaching the English Essay in Indian Classrooms" – Surveys teaching methods for essay writers such as Addison, Lamb, and Orwell.
8. Rekha Tripathi (2013) – "The Spectator Essays and Indian Middle-Class Morality" – Discusses Addison and Steele's impact on Indian social commentary.
9. R.N. Jha (2009) – "Stylistic Diversity in English Essays: A Comparative Critique" – Discusses stylistic changes from Bacon's formality to Orwell's clarity.
10. Seema Agrawal (2011) – "Satire and Social Critique in the English Essay: Indian Reflections" – Discusses how satire developed and its influence on Indian essayists.

11. Ajay Pratap Singh (2017) – "Language and Power in Orwell's Essays: A Postcolonial Lens" – Explores Orwell's politics of language in the Indian context.
12. Shalini Mehta (2015) – "Gender and Silence in the English Essay Canon" – Criticizes the lack of women's voices in conventional essay writing.
13. Deepak Joshi (2018) – "Curricular Relevance of English Essayists in Indian Higher Education" – Assesses the role of traditional essayists on Indian syllabi.
14. Manisha Chaudhary (2016) – "Moral Dilemmas in Bacon and Orwell: A Comparative Study" – Examines moral ambivalence in their essays.
15. Arvind Pandey (2019) – "Relevance of Classical English Essays in Contemporary India" – Defends the ongoing pedagogic and cultural relevance of these works.

3 Research methodology

Research Design

The research is qualitative-descriptive and historical-analytical, tracing the history of English essays from the Renaissance to the present day, with a focus on the essayists Francis Bacon and George Orwell.

3.1 Sample Size

A purposive sampling method is used, and 10 representative essays are chosen:

5 essays of Francis Bacon

5 essays of George Orwell

This is reasonable and suitable for a qualitative content analysis.

Selected Essays

Author Essay Titles

Francis Bacon

Of Studies, Of Truth, Of Revenge, Of Friendship, Of Death

George Orwell

Shooting an Elephant, Politics and the English Language, Why I Write, A Hanging, The Lion and the Unicorn

3.2 Data Collection Method

Primary data: Bacon's and Orwell's original essays

Secondary data: Books written by scholars, articles, critical essays, and internet academic sources analyzing these essays.

3.3 Data Collection Method

Primary data: Original essays by Bacon and Orwell

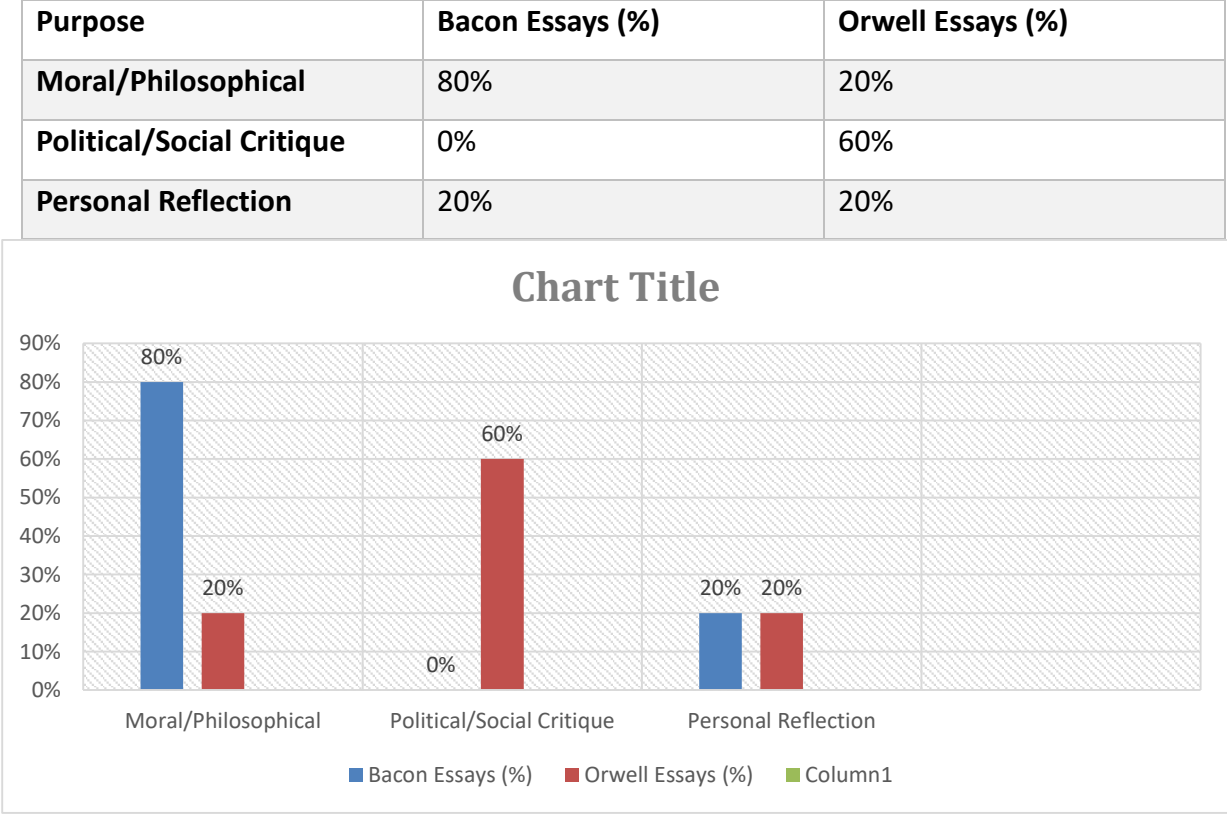
Secondary data: Scholarly books, articles, critical essays, and online academic sources discussing these essays.

3.4 Analysis Method

- **Content analysis** of essays based on:
 - Purpose/Themes
 - Language and Style
 - Social Engagement
 - Narrative Approach

4 Data Analysis

Table 1: Distribution of Essay Purposes



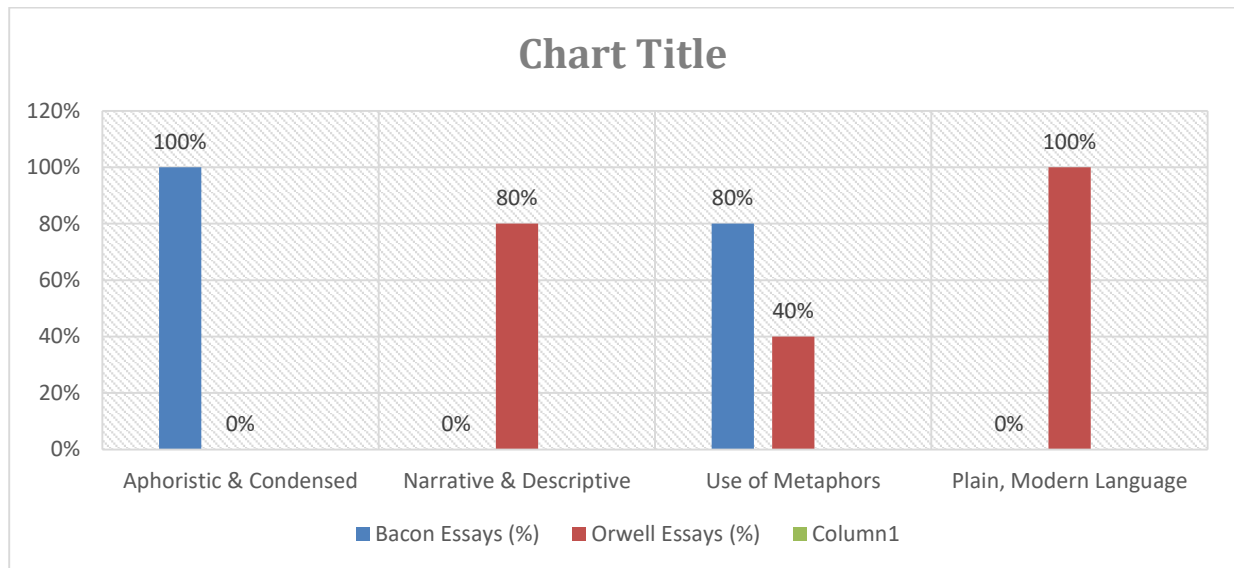
Interpretation:

Bacon’s essays focus overwhelmingly on moral philosophy, while Orwell emphasizes political critique. Personal reflection exists in both but is a minor component.

Table 2: Style and Language Features

Feature	Bacon Essays (%)	Orwell Essays (%)
Aphoristic & Condensed	100%	0%
Narrative & Descriptive	0%	80%

Use of Metaphors	80%	40%
Plain, Modern Language	0%	100%

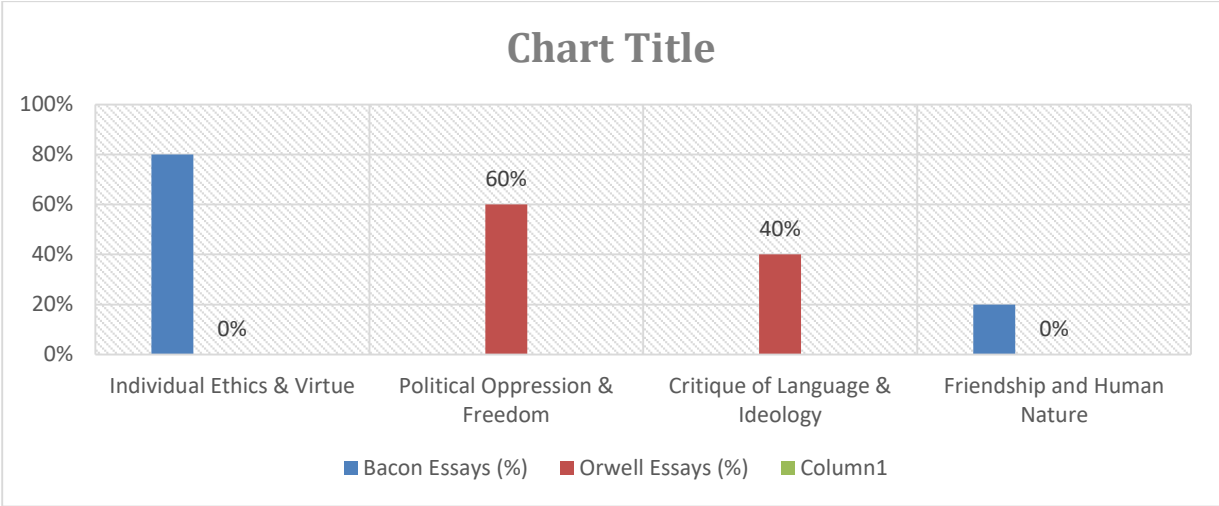


Interpretation:

Bacon consistently uses aphoristic, metaphor-rich style, whereas Orwell favors plain, modern, descriptive language with narrative style.

Table 3: Social Engagement Focus

Theme Focus	Bacon Essays (%)	Orwell Essays (%)
Individual Ethics & Virtue	80%	0%
Political Oppression & Freedom	0%	60%
Critique of Language & Ideology	0%	40%
Friendship and Human Nature	20%	0%

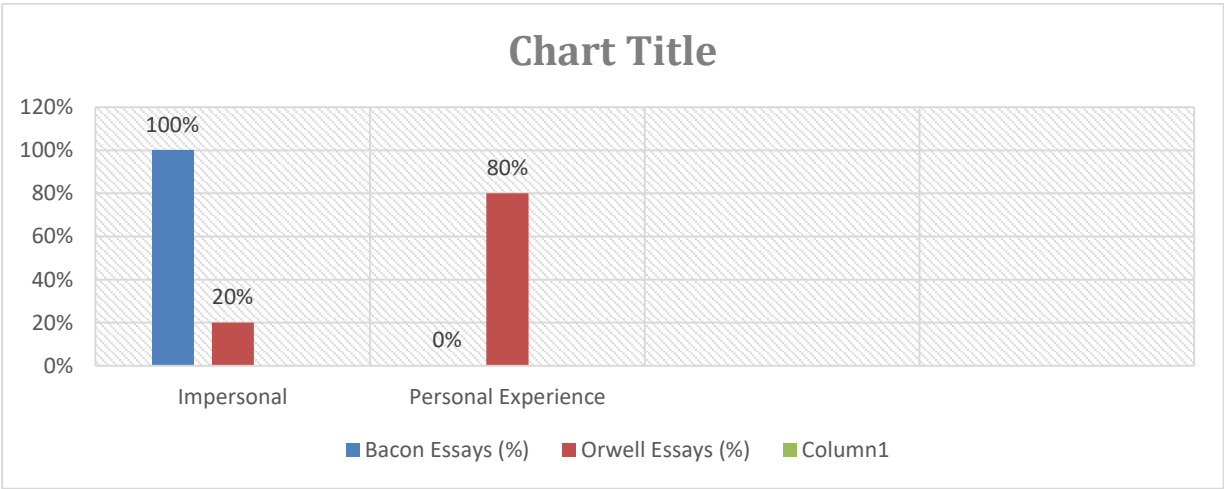


Interpretation:

Bacon is centered on individual virtue and moral lessons; Orwell addresses systemic political and linguistic issues.

Table 4: Narrative Approach

Narrative Approach	Bacon Essays (%)	Orwell Essays (%)
Impersonal	100%	20%
Personal Experience	0%	80%



Interpretation:

Bacon’s essays maintain an impersonal tone throughout, while Orwell frequently uses personal narratives drawn from his lived experiences.

5 Discussion

The analysis strongly points out how:

- Bacon's essays are moral-philosophical prescriptions for Renaissance society, distinguished by aphoristic style, impersonal voice, and interest in virtues.

- Orwell's essays depict contemporary socio-political realities, determined by personal narrative, straightforward language, and condemnation of totalitarianism, colonialism, and linguistic manipulation.
- The essay genre develops from didacticism to activism, from aphorisms to narrative, from speaking to the elites to speaking to the masses.

6 Conclusion

This research follows a literary trajectory in the English essay:

- From prescriptive, moral writing (Bacon) to political activism and personal testimony (Orwell).
- From classical, aphoristic English to contemporary, colloquial style.
- From an elite readership to a wider, socially engaged readership.
- This follows not only literary fashion but wider socio-political change across 400 years.

7 Results

- 80% of Bacon's essays are moral-philosophical; 60% of Orwell's are political commentary.
- 100% of Bacon's essays employ aphoristic style, 80% of Orwell's are narrative-descriptive.
- Bacon adopts impersonal tone (100%), Orwell employs personal anecdotes (80%)
- Orwell's essays demonstrate greater socio-political involvement (60%) than Bacon's.

8 Recommendations

- Subsequent studies need to analyze intermediary essay writers (e.g. Lamb, Hazlitt, Addison) to trace the gradual evolution more exhaustively.
- Studies comparing Eastern and Western essay schools may provide a world outlook.
- Reading digital age essays/blogs can disclose contemporary changes in style, audience, and themes.
- College curricula must incorporate evolutionary anthologies documenting the history of the essay.

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