

# **MODERN ESSAYS FOR SCHOOLS**

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Modern Essays for Schools by Christopher Morley

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**CHRISTOPHER MORLEY**

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SELECTED BY  
CHRISTOPHER MORLEY



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TO THE  
SCHOOL

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## PREFACE

It had been my habit, I am now aware, to speak somewhat lightly of the labors of anthologists: to insinuate that they led lives of bland sedentary ease. I shall not do so again. When the publisher suggested a collection of representative contemporary essays, I thought it would be the most lenient of tasks. But experience is a fine aperitive to the mind.

Indeed the pangs of the anthologist, if he has conscience, are burdensome. There are so many considerations to be tenderly weighed; personal taste must sometimes be set aside in view of the general plan; for every item chosen half a dozen will have been affectionately conned and sifted; and perhaps some favorite pieces will be denied because the authors have reasons for withholding permission. It would be enjoyable (for me, at any rate) to write an essay on the things I have lingered over with intent to include them in this little book, but have finally sacrificed for one reason or another. How many times—twenty at least—I have taken down from my shelf Mr. Chesterton's *The Victorian Age in Literature* to reconsider whether

his ten pages on Dickens, or his glorious summing-up of Decadents and Æsthetes, were not absolutely essential. How many times I have palpitated upon certain passages in *The Education of Henry Adams* and in Mr. Wells's *Outline of History*, which, I assured myself, would legitimately stand as essays if shrewdly excerpted.

But I usually concluded that would not be quite fair. I have not been overscrupulous in this matter, for the essay is a mood rather than a form; the frontier between the essay and the short story is as imperceptible as is at present the once famous Mason and Dixon line. Indeed, in that pleasant lowland country between the two empires lie (to my way of thinking) some of the most fertile fields of prose—fiction that expresses feeling and character and setting rather than action and plot; fiction beautifully ripened by the lingering mild sunshine of the essayist's mood. This is fiction, I might add, extremely unlikely to get into the movies. I think of short stories such as George Gissing's, in that too little known volume *The House of Cobwebs*, which I read again and again at midnight with unflinching delight; fall asleep over; forget; and again re-read with undiminished satisfaction. They have no brilliance of phrase, no smart surprises, no worked-up 'situations' which have to be taken at high speed to pass without breakdown over their brittle



bridgework of credibility. They have only the modest and faintly melancholy savor of life itself.

~~Yet~~ it is a mere quibble to pretend that the essay does not have easily recognizable manners. It may be severely planned, or it may ramble in ungirdled mood, but it has its own point of view that marks it from the short story proper, or the merely personal memoir. That distinction, easily felt by the sensitive reader, is not readily expressible. Perhaps the true meaning of the word *essay*—an attempt—gives a clue. No matter how personal or trifling the topic may be, there is always a tendency to generalize, to walk round the subject or the experience, and view it from several vantages; instead of (as in the short story) cutting a carefully landscaped path through a chosen tract of human complication. So an essay can never be more than an attempt, for it is an excursion into the endless. [Any student of fiction will admit that in the composition of a short story many entertaining and valuable elaborations may rise in the mind of the author which must be strictly rejected because they do not forward the essential motive. But in the essay (of an informal sort) we ask not relevance to plot, but relevance to mood. That is why there are so many essays that are mere marking time. The familiar essay is easier to write than the short story, but it imposes equal restraints on a scrupulous author. For in

fiction, the writer is controlled and limited and swept along by his material; but in the essay, the writer rides his pen. A good story, once clearly conceived, almost writes itself; but essays are written.

There also we find a pitfall of the personal essay—the temptation to become too ostentatiously quaint, too deliberately ‘whimsical’ (the word which, by loathsome repetition, has become emetic). The fine flavor and genius of the essay—as in Bacon and Montaigne, Lamb, Hazlitt, Thackeray, Thoreau; perhaps even in Stevenson—is the rich bouquet of personality. But soliloquy must not fall into monologue. One might put it thus: that the perfection of the familiar essay is a conscious revelation of self done inadvertently.

The art of the anthologist is the art of the host: his tact is exerted in choosing a congenial group; making them feel comfortable and at ease; keeping the wine and tobacco in circulation; while his eye is tenderly alert down the bright vista of tablecloth, for any lapse in the general cheer. It is well, also, for him to hold himself discreetly in the background, giving his guests the pleasure of clinching the jape, and seeking only, by innocent wiles, to draw each one into some characteristic and felicitous vein. I think I can offer you, in this parliament of philomaths, entertainment of the

most genuine sort; and having said so much, I might well retire and be heard no more.

But I think it is well to state, as even the most bashful host may do, just why this particular company has been called together. My intention is not merely to please the amiable dilettante, though I hope to do that too. I made my choices, first and foremost, with a view to stimulating those who are themselves interested in the arts of writing. I have, to be frank, a secret ambition that a book of this sort may even be used as a small but useful weapon in the classroom. I wanted to bring it home to the student that as brilliant and sincere work is being done to-day in the essay as in any period of our literature. Accordingly the pieces reprinted here are very diverse. There is the grand manner; there is foolery; there is straightforward literary criticism; there is pathos, politics, and the picturesque. But every selection is, in its own way, a work of art. And I would call the reader's attention to this: that the greater number of these essays were written not by retired æsthetes, but by practising journalists in the harness of the daily or weekly press. The names of some of the most widely bruited essayists of our day are absent from this roster, not by malice, but because I desired to include material less generally known.