

William Hazlitt: Distinguished Practical Critic of William Shakespeare

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Abstract

This paper aims to analyze the real condition of William Shakespearean characters and their qualities which is seen by William Hazlitt. It is an attempt to analyze and interpret William Hazlitt's beauty theory and critical practice and see the impact of Romantic poets on him. Hazlitt's book was very influential in the life of the author, only to enter the mainstream of criticism of Shakespeare in the second half of the nineteenth century. The dramatic structure of the plays and poems and the comments of the skeleton and central plays and the general mood of each play gave the basis for detailed explanations after the critics. Often expressing the idea that the presentation of the stage could not be judged for Shakespeare's plays by Hazlitt. He shows many great examples of Shakespearean characters such as "design", "full poetic 'impression'" "she is only wicked to gain a great end", "inexorable self-will", "bad purpose" and "natural affections". He uses all great plays of Shakespeare due to which he is known as a critic of Shakespeare.

Introduction

Practical criticism is like the formal study of English literature itself, a relatively young discipline. It began in the 1920s with a series of experiments by the Cambridge critic I.A. Richards. He gave poems to students without any information about who wrote them or when they were written. In *Practical Criticism* of 1929 he reported on and analysed the results of his experiments. According to *A Handbook of Literary Terms* by M H Abrams / Geoffrey Galt Harpham "Practical Criticism or applied criticism concerns itself with particular works and writers ; in an applied critique, the theoretical principles controlling the analysis, interpretation, and evaluation are often left implicit, or brought in only as the occasion demands". There are many great examples of practical criticism such as Dr Johnson's *Lives of the Poets* (1779-81) Matthew Arnold's *Essay in Criticism* (1885s), T S Eliot's *Selected Essays* and Cleanth Brooks' *The Well Wrought Urn* (1947) Stanley Fish's *Surprised by Sin the Reader in Paradise Lost* (1998).

William Hazlitt is greater as a critic than as an essayist in the Romantic Age in which there were many great critics such as Lamb, Shelley, Keats etc but he was one of the greatest critics after Coleridge. The current study, William Hazlitt, has been called as the Reviewer of Literature, an attempt to analyze and interpret William Hazlitt's beauty theory and critical practice. Incidentally, in order to establish their position and importance in the history of English literary criticism, the investigation is limited only to discussing the works of William Hazlitt which are related to the problems of literary criticism or in the form of art and letters and their actions. On the individual men clearly present the attitude of William Hazlitt. At him, George Watson comments--“Hazlitt's criticism has enjoyed a sizeable reputation for more than a century, but it is doubtful if it will bear examination on either count. For sensitivity, he possesses only a familiar clutch of a priori notions of a romantic radical born a little too late; and since he never pursues analysis beyond a few phrases, we are not entitled to suppose that he was capable of it.” And according to R. L. Stevenson, “Though we are mighty fine fellows now-a-days we cannot write like Hazlitt,”.

The great influence of William Wordsworth and S T Coleridge on William Hazlitt is very important. That's why, he is known to write essays and criticism. In his autobiographical essay "My First Acquaintance with Poet", he wants to show his lust to hear the thoughts of S T Coleridge. He says in these lines....

“It was in January of 1798, that I rose one morning before day-light to walk ten miles in the mud, to hear this celebrated person preach. Never, the longest day I have to live, shall I have such another walk as this cold, raw, comfortless one, in the winter of the Year 1798. Il y a des impressions que ni le tems ni les circonstances peuvent effacer. Dussé-je vivre des siècles entiers, le doux tens de ma jeunesse ne peut renatre pour moir, ni s'effacer jamais dans ma memoire. When I got there, the organ was playing the 100th Psalm, and when it was done, Mr Coleridge rose and gave out his text, "And he went up into the mountain to pray, HIMSELF, ALONE." As he gave out this text, his voice "rose like a steam of rich distilled perfumes,”

He gained the way of writing from the company of William Wordsworth and Coleridge. In 1802, he went to Paris to study art and stayed till 1803. At where, he painted William Wordsworth and S T Coleridge. and met Charles Lamb.. After passing a long period, from 1817, he wrote many works on criticism. Such as *Characters of Shakespeare's Plays* in 1817. Like Dr. Samuel Johnson's *Preface To the Plays of William Shakespeare*, he studied all plays of Shakespeare. In 1818, he wrote *English Poets* and he told us about many poets. like Dr. Johnson wrote in *Lives of the Most Eminent English Poets*. There are many great example of his criticism *English Comic Writers (1819)*, *The Dramatic Literature of the Reign of Elizabeth (1820)* and his most valuable work *The Spirit of the Age (1825)*. Most over it, he wrote many great works like *Table Talk etc*

“*Character of Shakespeare's Plays*” is criticized by Shakespeare's plays, 1817, which was

written by William Hazit, a 19th-century English essayist and literary critic. Samuel Johnson wrote in response to the neoclassical approach to Shakespeare's plays, This was one of the first English language studies of Shakespeare's plays, to follow the way of German critic Wilhelm Schlegel, and, with the work of Samuel Taylor Collier, the way to appreciate the rise of Shakespeare's talent. The next criticism of the nineteenth century was the first book to cover all plays of Shakespeare, which was intended as a guide for the general reader. The dramatic structure of the plays and poems and the comments of the skeleton and central plays and the general mood of each play gave the basis for detailed explanations after the critics. Often expressing the idea that the presentation of the stage could not be judged for Shakespeare's plays, yet the constable played some plays in particular, and he has played many actors, especially Edmund Kean. In this, there are many plays, as "Hamlet", "Tempest", "Macbeth", "Cymbeline", "Coriolanus", "King Lear" etc. After reading the *Preference of Characters of Shakespeare's Plays*, it is clear that William Hazlitt's criticism was of Dr Samuel Johnson's "Preface To the Plays of William Shakespeare" instead of Shakespeare's plays. In it, he wants to respond of criticism of Shakespeare of Dr Johnson. As he says---

"Dr. Johnson is of opinion that Shakespear was generally inattentive to the winding up of his plots. We think the contrary is true; and we might cite in proof of this remark not only the present play, but the conclusion of Lear, of Romeo and Juliet, of Macbeth, of Othello, even of Hamlet, and of other plays of less moment, in which the last act is crowded with decisive events brought about by natural and striking means"

In "Cymbeline", he tells us about the presentation of Shakespeare that includes personal impressions of individual characters - like the title of the book will lead us to the hope. Most over it, he wants to show the real picture of his techniques. Such as William Hazlitt says---

"No one ever hit the true perfection of the female character, the sense of weakness leaning on the strength of its affections for support, so well as Shakespear"
He wants to show the reality of Shakespeare's writing through Cloten

"Macbeth" this tragedy is one of his four greatest tragedies. According to William Hazlitt, there are many salient features in it. He talks a lot of characters as Duncan, Banquo, Macduf, Macbeth and Lady Macbeth but due to characters witches. Hazlitt is especially interested in the "design", "full poetic 'impression'" and talks about the evil of Lady Macbeth "she is only wicked to gain a great end", "inexorable self-will", "bad purpose", "natural affections". Hazlitt notes that Lady Macbeth displays human emotions and says "swelling exultation and keen spirit of triumph, [...] uncontrollable eagerness of anticipation [...] solid, substantial flesh and blood display of passion"; while the witches from the same play are only "hags of mischief", "unreal, abortive, half-existences".

On this chapter, Kinnaird points out "Hazlitt in part sees *Macbeth* as a tragedy of imagination itself" In "Timon of Athens", William Hazlitt has shown the real means of

writing and he says—"He does not relax in his efforts, nor lose sight of the unity of his design. It is the only play of our author in which spleen is the predominant feeling of the mind." In "Coriolanus" Hazlitt also comments on the characters of the mother and wife of Coriolanus, and they pointed to the adequate allegiance of their drama in the translation of Thomas North's Plutarch *"Noble Greeks and Romans,"* to extract a substantial part from the life of Coriolanus, In *"Troilus and Cressida"*, Hazlitt tells that *"Troilus and Cressida"* is a comparison of the characterisation in this play and that in Chaucer's poem Troilus and Criseyde Hazlitt is not only tell us about Shakespeare's Cressida but also Chaucer's Cressida and says---

"Both characters are originals, and quite different from what they are in Chaucer. In Chaucer, Cressida is represented as a grave, sober, considerate personage (a widow—he cannot tell her age, nor whether she has children or no) who has an alternate eye to her character, her interest, and her pleasure: Shakespeare's Cressida is a giddy girl, an unpractised jilt, who falls in love with Troilus, as she afterwards deserts him, from mere levity and thoughtlessness of temper."

In *"Antony and Cleopatra"* Hazlitt declared and admire about the characters which is living and breathe. he says--- "The characters breathe, move, and live. Shakespeare does not stand reasoning on what his characters would do or say, but at once *becomes* them, and speaks and acts for them." In *"Hamlet"* Hazlitt has shown the fact of Shakespeare's writing. Most over it, he tells the importance of his characters and says---"*The character of Hamlet [...] is not a character marked by strength of will or even of passion, but by refinement of thought and sentiment*" and he sides with Schlegel and Coleridge in thinking and says--- "Hamlet seems incapable of deliberate action" and says again *"His ruling passion is to think, not to act"*

In *"Tempest"*, William Hazlitt compares this play to *"A Midsummer Night's Dream"*. and says--- *"most original and perfect plays"* and *"all the resources of passion, of wit, of thought, of observation."* There are many salient feature of his characters, due to whom, Hazlitt tells us about the quality of them. *"savage", "half brute, half demon", "the essence of grossness", "in conducting [them] to Prospero's cell"* etc. There are many example in his critical works which is shown the real condition of Willlliam Shakespeare. Hazlitt's ideas about many plays are now considered thought provoking options for those contemporary correspondents, and the characters of Shakespeare's play are now considered to be a major study of Shakespeare's plays, with Shazell and Coleridge Hazilitt's three most notable Shakespeare critics of a romantic period. All this, as no one else was before, made Shakespeare's play characters for all the studies and accolades of Shakespeare's plays.

Conclusion

To sum up above points, it can not be wrong to say that William Hazlitt is one of the most influential critics in English literature and *Characters of Shakespeare's Plays* was

Hazlitt's most successful book. Hazlitt's book was very influential in the life of the author, only to enter the mainstream of criticism of Shakespeare in the second half of the nineteenth century. He tells us about the real condition of Shakesperean characters and their quality which are important parts of Hazlitt's concept on Shakespeare. Hazlitt continued to receive some acceptance after Shakespeare's criticism, yet a stigma still hung about his character, and his criticism was often more emotional and "impressionist". With complete restoration as the reviewer of Hazlitt's chief Shakespeare in 2006, philosopher Colin McGinn wrote a complete book about Shakespeare's plays on Shakespeare's ideas that Shakespeare was a "philosopher". The salient features of William Shakespeare see in the works of William Hazlitt. In Shakespeare's criticism, his predecessors synthesize a lot of books with their ideas of Hazlitt. The greatest of these critics were contemporary German literary scholars and critics August Wilhelm Schlegel, who influenced highly Coleridge [264] and which Hazlitt considered better than Shakespeare's any English critic.

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