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**14.1 OBJECTIVES**

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**In this unit**

- you shall learn to read, understand, analyse and appreciate a work of literature, a specific genre which is here the essay (Personal Essay).
- You will be able to appreciate the features of the personal essay, which gained popularity during the Romantic Age.
- On completing this unit, you should be able to
- \*Read literary essays, and distinguish the chief characteristics of each form

- \*Understand the use of allusions and references by a writer

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## 14.1 INTRODUCTION

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The Romantic Age witnessed the use of subjectivity in creative writing, which was in stark contrast to the Neo- Classical Age, an Age of objective writing. While poets like Wordsworth and Coleridge or Keats and Shelley wrote subjective poetry, essayists like Charles Lamb and William Hazlitt were exponents of the Personal Essay in the same Age. A personal essay has been defined as a short work of autobiographical nonfiction characterized by a sense of intimacy and a conversational manner.

William Hazlitt (1778—1830) has miscellaneous writings to his credit, including treatises on moral philosophy and politics, collection of his critical lectures etc. Influenced by the events of the French Revolution, his outlook is essentially critical. His mind is deeply impregnated with Romanticism and this is further intensified by a vivid faculty of imagination. His most important collections of essays are: The Round Table, Table Talk etc. No one is probably more alive than Hazlitt to the joys of independence and of art.

The essay On Reading Old Books was first published in the New Monthly magazine, and is also found in Lectures on the English Comic Writers as well as in The Plain Speaker. The essay is a confession of his reading habits and the essayist helps us wander with him through the various stages of his life. We peep into his likes and dislikes, almost as if he were talking to us. This is a characteristic feature of the Personal Essay as a literary form. As Lamb did in many of his essays, we find Hazlitt too revealing himself in the essay. The writer's own character is always there, flaunted before the reader, but it is carefully prepared and controlled before it is exhibited. Of Hazlitt's rambling style, a critic wrote 'The dew from a thousand pastures was gathered into its softness.'

### Check your Progress: I

1. Fill in the blanks with appropriate words or phrases:
  - a) \_\_\_\_\_ was an important characteristic of Romantic writing.
  - b) In addition to Hazlitt, \_\_\_\_\_ was an important essayist of this Age.
  - c) The personal essay has a very \_\_\_\_\_ tone, as if the essayist is speaking to the reader.
  - d) The events of the \_\_\_\_\_ made a great impact on Hazlitt.
  - e) One of Hazlitt's important works is \_\_\_\_\_.
2. State whether True or False:
  - a) Wordsworth and Coleridge were contemporaries.
  - b) There are no autobiographical elements in a personal essay.

- c) The theme of the present essay is the pleasures of travelling.
- d) Charles Lamb is well-known for his plays.
- e) The Table Talk is a collection of short stories.

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## 14.2 THEME OF THE ESSAY

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Hazlitt describes in detail his love for reading, specially old books. He reiterates the fact that no new book can ever take the place of his old favourites. He believes in reading only those books that were published some time back and does not believe in the importance of their 'newest gloss'. To him, books are also read for the memory associated with them, i.e. when he reads an old book he is transported to that period of life when he first read it. To him, they then become 'links in the chain of our conscious being'. The essayist provides a long list of writers and their works and delineates in detail their specific features which made them special when he first read them and continue to have a sway over him after many years. In contrast, he argues, the contemporary books are mere 'words' and fail to have any power over him. He fails to revive the kind of interest that he felt earlier. He looks back with 'gratitude and triumph' at all the books that he could read and concludes the essay with a list of works that he would love to read for various reasons. A critic and acquaintance of Wordsworth and Coleridge, Hazlitt was witnessing the poetic sea change of the Romantic period first-hand. He was immersed in a contemporary literature scene that must have been amongst the most thriving, exhilarating and inspiring in the history of English literature. And yet even Hazlitt found himself abandoning the literary rumpus of his day for the quiet meditation of an old book. Like Goldsmith, Lamb and Stevenson, Hazlitt loved to live on the memories of his youth, intensely and continuously. His pleasure in writing of favourite authors is in great part the pleasure of remembering what he was when he first read them. The happiness of his early life seems to be also the happiness of his later life.

### Check your progress II

1. Match the words/phrases in Column A with appropriate words/phrases in Column B

A	B
i) newest gloss books	a) contemporary
ii) links in chain of conscious being	b) new books
iii) mere words	c) old books

2. Write a short note on the main theme of the essay.

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## 14.3 READING OLD AND NEW

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In the course of the essay, Hazlitt contrasts old and new books. In the process he lists the features that make reading old books such an enjoyable experience. The essay proves the wide reading of the essayist

as he rambles through books and writers with consummate ease. To him, a book being old is not a flaw as many modern readers would like to opine. Old books bind the ‘different scattered divisions’ of one’s personality. He has more confidence in the ‘dead’ than in the ‘living’. The contrasts are clearly drawn up:

Old	New
1) pure, silent air of immortality	dust, smoke and noise
2) form lasting friendships	passing acquaintance
3) Time-tested dish made-dish	nauseating, new-fangled
4) wardrobe of a moral imagination	hashes and rifaccimenti

Hazlitt is convinced that when he reads an old book, he looks at the face of an old friend and he seems to know what to expect. He considers them landmarks and guides in the journey of life. Even on looking at an old book, he gets the delightful feeling of twenty years being struck of his life and he is a child once again. The familiarity of old books extends to another level, namely the history shared by the book and the reader. In contrasting the old and new books, he says “The sharp luscious flavour, the fine aroma is fled, and nothing but the stalk, the barn, the husk of literature is left”. With old books, you get the additional advantage that, like an old and trusted friend, you can always learn something new. And you can take your time, too, without having to worry about rushing to the end; you can linger, or skip and skim, for you’ve been there already.

### Check your progress III

1. Fill in the blanks with appropriate words/phrases:
  - a) \_\_\_\_\_ books are better than \_\_\_\_\_ books.
  - b) Old books provide a link to the \_\_\_\_\_.
  - c) In old books he feels in the presence of \_\_\_ friends.
  - d) \_\_\_\_\_ books are ephemeral.
2. Give reasons:
  - a) Old books are like a time-tested dish.
  - b) In new books, only the husk of literature is left.

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## 14.4 GENRE OF LITERATURE: PERSONAL ESSAY

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This essay is a perfect example of the genre known as the Personal Essay. The personal essay examines a subject outside of the self, but through the lens of self. Hazlitt meanders through his readings of both past and present and thus allows the reader to have a peek into his likes and dislikes. We can also see here the personal element (self-revelation, individual tastes and experiences, confidential manner), humor, graceful style, rambling structure, unconventionality or novelty of theme. There is also a loose structure which helps in the rambling style. As a personal essay is a conversation with the readers, the essayist speaks to us almost directly. Nowhere does he write to impress or write from a pedestal. He admits to his weakness in no uncertain terms when he writes, “I am

deficient in the faculty of imagination”, though his writing does not stand testimony to this. The personal essay is an informal mixture of storytelling, facts, wisdom, and personality. As we read this essay, we are struck by this ability of the essayist to combine easily obvious facts with a bit of storytelling. A personal essay is a glimpse of the writer’s life. The writer describes the personal experience using the scene-building technique, weaves a theme throughout the narrative, and makes an important point. There must be a lesson or meaning, which here is the importance of reading old books. As was said of Lamb, so can we say of Hazlitt: "The writer's own character is always there, flaunted before the reader, but it is carefully prepared and controlled before it is exhibited." A personal essay can wander through its subject, circle around it, get the long view and the short, always providing experience, knowledge, book learning, and personal history. This essay provides the reader with the wide range of books that one can read and also the features of each kind as well as how the essayist benefitted from it. The personal essay strives to say what is evident, and to come to a conclusion that the reader may agree or disagree. Many readers of future generations may totally disagree with Hazlitt’s choice of books but that does not deter the essayist from expressing his point of view.

#### **Check your progress IV**

1. Give Reasons:
  - a)The essayist speaks to us directly.
  - b)Facts and story-telling blend easily in a personal essay.
2. State True or False:
  - a) The reader must agree with the opinion of the essayist.
  - b) The Personal Essay is always objective.
  - c)The present essay meanders through many years.

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### **14.5 BOOKS AND WRITERS IN THE ESSAY**

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As the essayist writes of his love for old books, the essay is filled with names of authors and their books. It would be impossible to make an exhaustive list of them, yet a quick glance at some of them would contribute greatly to our appreciation of Hazlitt, who probably neither during his lifetime or even later received the acclaim he deserved. The essayist moves easily from the well-known (for a 21<sup>st</sup> century reader) authors, books and characters to the almost-unheard of. Poets like Wordsworth and Coleridge and Keats and his ‘Eve of St. Agnes’, as well as the 18<sup>th</sup> century novelists Richardson and Fielding and Smollet with Pamela and Tom Jones and Peregrine Pickle leave the reader with a sense of déjà vu. That Hazlitt read almost all genres of literature becomes obvious as we read the essay. To him, these old books are indeed ‘the wardrobe of a moral imagination’. The characters and their characteristics of the three novels mentioned above are described vividly. As he writes, “Open them anywhere... and there I find the same delightful, busy

bustling scene as ever, and feel myself the same as when I was first introduced into the midst of it". A passing reference to Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, as well as Radcliffe's *Romance of the Forest* or *Don Quixote* and Sancho, and many other characters make this essay a veritable treasure house of the kind of literature that was popularly read in the Romantic Age.

It is important to note that the French Revolution did have a great impact on the writers of the Romantic Age and Hazlitt was no exception to this. Hobbes and Locke and Rousseau were among his favourite authors and so was De Quincey. Burke finds more description: "but Burke's style was forked and playful as the lightning, crested like the serpent. He delivered plain things on plain ground; but when he rose, there was no end of his flights...". Hazlitt ends the essay listing writers that he has not read but has always wanted to read.

To a student of literature, this essay can well serve as a catalogue for each to decide on their reading list.

### **Check your progress V**

#### **1. State whether True or False:**

- a) No writer of the Romantic Age was affected by the French Revolution.
- b) Burke was a poet.
- c) Bunyan wrote *Pilgrim's Progress*.
- d) Hazlitt mention only authors well known to readers of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.
- e) This essay proves the essayist's love for old books.

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## **14.6 FIGURES OF SPEECH**

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Hazlitt was a painter too and his feel for the texture of painting can be perceived in his essays too. This is seen also in the metaphors and similes with which the essay is luxuriously sprinkled. To him, the old writers had 'the pure, silent air of immortality, while the new ones are merely 'the dust and smoke and noise'. His love for books is an 'appetite'. Continuing the metaphor, he writes of his 'palate being nauseated with the most insipid or vilest trash' as 'new-fangled books' are mere 'made-dishes'. Old books have a number of attributes—metaphors—appended to them: 'landmarks and guides in our journey through life', 'wardrobe of a moral imagination', 'pegs and loops on which we can hang up', 'relics of our best affections', 'tokens and records of our happiest hours'. The list above shows that the essayist combines adjectives and metaphors with a natural ease as was the case with most Romantic writers. To look through the pages of his favourite books was like gazing at wild beasts in a menagerie! And in recalling the pleasure that he felt in the past on reading those books of yore, he writes that they are like "heavenly tints of Fancy reflected in the bubbles that float upon the spring-tide of human

life”. Reading a poem by Keats that he had read in his childhood, Hazlitt quotes at length from the poem. A reader would remember the rich tapestry of Keats’ The Eve of St. Agnes. The essayist says ‘he dipped’ into these books and we can see how well his quill is equipped to describe all of them.

### **Check your progress VI**

1. Give reasons:
  - a) Hazlitt’s love for books is an appetite.
  - b) To him, old books have a number of attributes.

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## **14.7 LET’S SUM UP**

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In this unit, you have learned;

\* the features of a personal essay

\*to appreciate and analyse the essay as a genre

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## **14.8 KEY WORDS**

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imagination, old books, reading, genres, point of view, personal essay, metaphor

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## **14.9 BOOK SUGGESTED**

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1. History of Literature by Albert
2. Forms of literature by B. Prasad
3. Literary Terms by Brahms

❖ **Answers**

**Check your progress I**

1. a) Subjectivity b) Charles Lamb c) conversational d) French Revolution  
e) Table Talk
2. a) True b) True c) False d) False e) False

**Check your progress II**

1. i—b, ii—c, iii—a
2. Reading--- love for old books—features of old and new books

**Check your progress III**

- 1) a) new, old b) past c) old, trusted d) new
- 2) a) links him to the past--- knocks off years---creates the same interest  
b) sober truth of old literature missing—beautiful images are absent

**Check your progress IV**

1. a) As the tone is conversational, as it is autobiographical  
b) Experiences form the backbone but fiction is added to make it interesting
2. a) False b) False c) True

**Check your progress V**

1. a) False b) False c) True d) False e) True