

William Hazlitt's-The Elements of the Familiar Style-A Study

*¹ Dr. Mohammad Rizwan Abdul Majid Sheikh

*¹ Assistant Professor & Head Department of English, Sarvodaya Mahavidyalaya, Sindewahi, Chandrapur, Maharashtra, India.

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Abstract

In the course of the essay "On Familiar Style" William Hazlitt spoke about the main features of the familiar style. In his considered opinion the familiar style consisted of these four virtues: it was not easy to write; it uses language of day-to-day conversation; it is of universal force and validity; and, it required proper application of words. In "On Familiar Style," Hazlitt begins with a definition of the familiar style. It is a precise and pure expression that steers a "middle course." It rejects pomp, gaudy show, and an outpouring of words that mean little or nothing. But it also rejects language that is coarse and vulgar. The familiar style, then, strives "to write as anyone would speak in common conversation who had a thorough command and choice of words." This kind of writing is easy yet forceful, perceptive yet ordinary enough for nearly anyone to understand. The writer selects the best possible words to express each idea and the proper forms for the subject. "Propriety and simplicity" are the key elements of the familiar style. According to Hazlitt, writing in either a vulgar or a "pedantic and affected" style is easier than composing in the demanding yet rewarding familiar style. Vulgarity is all too simple, yet it is "coarse and disagreeable." On the other hand, the familiar style has a "universal force and applicability" that audiences can appreciate even if it requires more effort from writers.

***Corresponding Author**

**Dr. Mohammad Rizwan Abdul Majid
Sheikh**

Assistant Professor & Head Department
of English, Sarvodaya Mahavidyalaya,
Sindewahi, Chandrapur, Maharashtra,
India.

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Introduction

Hazlitt is one of the glories of English essay. He was a practitioner of what he himself called the familiar style.¹ He called this style as the "truly English style" as well. At another place he called it as the "truly natural style." Thus, for Hazlitt the familiar style was not only the truly natural so the truly English style. This suggests that Hazlitt felt that style was adopted by all those writers who were keen to adopt a truly English style. If we try to notice the characteristics of the familiar style, we understand Hazlitt's own practice as an essayist as well. Hazlitt sought to achieve what in his essay "On the Prose Style of Poets" he called the "genuine master-spirit of the prose writer," which was "the tone of lively conversation." This tone may be called the familiar style.

Familiar Style is not easy to write that this Hazlitt began his essay "On Familiar Style" with a warning: "It is not easy to write a familiar style. "In many cases, Hazlitt said, people are not able to keep a distinction between familiar style and "vulgar style." For Hazlitt familiar style is unaffected style but that does not mean that it can be written at random. He said,

"On the contrary, there is nothing that requires more precision, and if I may say so, purity of expression, than the style I am speaking off." Such a style insisted on using the true idiom of the language because it "rejects not only all unmeaning pomp, but all low, cant phrases, and loose, unconnected, slipshod allusions. It is not to take the first words that offers, but the best word in common uses; it is not to throw words together in any combinations we please, but to follow and avail ourselves of the true idiom of the language. Familiar Style uses language of Common Conversation Another feature of the familiar style is that it uses the language of conversation. However, for this purpose the person should have thorough command and choice of words. Further such a person should be competent to speak with ease, force. And perspicuity, "setting aside all pedantic and oratorical flourishes." To write naturally, Hazlitt maintained, was the same thing in regard to conversation, as to read naturally is in regard to common speech. Hazlitt, continuing his argument said, "Anyone may mouth out a passage with a theatrical cadence, or get upon stilts to tell his thoughts: but to

write or speak with propriety and simplicity is a more difficult task....it is easy to affect a pompous style, to use a word twice as big as the thing you want to express: it is not so easy to pitch upon the very word that exactly fits it. Out of eight or ten words equally common, equally intelligible, with nearly equal pretensions, it is a matter of some perferableness of nicety and discrimination to pick out the very one, the which is scarcely perceptible, but decisive." It was because of this reason that Hazlitt objected to the prose style of Dr. Samuel Johnson, because he felt that this great champion of literature did not use "discrimination," "selection," and "variety" in the selection of his words. Hazlitt complained that Dr. Johnson used "tall, opaque words" taken from the first row of the rubric." Hazlitt complained that Dr. Johnson used words "with the greatest number of syllables, or Latin phrases with merely English terminations." This means that a writer of the familiar style should eschew from his selection words that have a great number of syllables or the Latin phrases with merely English terminations. Providing a tip for the followers of the truly familiar style Hazlitt said, "It is clear you cannot use a vulgar English word, if you never use a common English word at all. A fine tact is shewn in adhering to those words which are perfectly common, and yet never falling into any expressions which are debased by disgusting circumstances, or allusions. Familiar Style is of Universal Force and Applicability this leads Hazlitt to speak about the third characteristic of the familiar style—that it should never be quaint or vulgar. Quaintness and vulgarity, Hazlitt said, "arise out of the immediate connections of certain words with coarse and disagreeable, or with confined ideas." This led Hazlitt to abhor *cant or slang phrases." All provincial or bye-phrases come under the same mark of reprobation" all such as the writer transfers to the page from his fire-side or particular coterie, or that he invents for his own sole use and convenience." Making a comparison between words and currency Hazlitt said, I conceive are like money, not the worse for being common, but that it is the stamp of custom alone that give them circulation of value." Hazlitt said that he never invented or gave a new or unauthorized meaning to any word. [The only exception, Hazlitt admitted, was the word impersonal" which he used for feelings—"impersonal feelings" to express a difficult distinction in a metaphysical discussion.] Hazlitt said, As an author, I endeavor to employ plain words and popular modes of construction as were I a Chapman and dealer, I should use common weights and measures.

Familiar Style requires the Proper Application of the words writers against the use of the "fine-sounding" words or Words of "unusual length" Hazlitt said that the familiar style consists in the application of words to their context. He said that the proper force of words lies not in the words themselves, but in their application. He said, "A word may be a fine-sounding word, of an unusual length, and very imposing introduced, may be quite pointless and irrelevant. It is not pomp or pretension, but the adaptation of the expression to the idea and clenches a their being fitted each to its place, that gives strength to the arch; or as the meaning: - as it is not the size or glossiness of the materials, but timbers, or more than the mere showy, unsubstantial ornaments. "Thus, in peg and nails are as necessary to the support of the building as the larger purposes. "Anything the opinion of Hazlitt words were for their proper application not for show Since Hazlitt disliked "unsubstantial ornaments" he hated that occupies more space than it is worth." Thus, precision was the ka factor in the familiar style. He said, "I hate to see a parcel of big word without any thing in them. A person who does not

deliberately dispose of all his thoughts alike in cumbrous draperies and flimsy disguises, may strikeout twenty varieties of familiar everyday languages, each coming somewhat nearer to the feeling he wants to convey, and at last not hit upon that particular and only one, which may be said to be identical with the exact impression in the mind. This led Hazlitt to contest the view of Cobbett who said that the first word that occurs to the essayist is always the best. Hazlitt said that the first word "may be a very good one, and yet a better may present itself or reflection or from time to time." Hazlitt felt that the proper word "should be suggested naturally.... and spontaneously, from a fresh and lively conception of the subject. Hazlitt admitted that attempt at improvement may not bring results. "We seldom succeed by trying at improvement, or by merely substituting one word for another that we are not satisfied with, as we cannot recollect the name of a place or person by merely plaguing ourselves about it. We wander farther from the point by persisting in a wrong scent; but it starts up accidentally in the memory when we least expected it, by touching some link in the chain of previous association. Hazlitt against Writers with Rare Phraseology Hazlitt came in heavily against those writers who "hoard up and make a display of nothing but rich and rare phraseology, -ancient medals, obscure coins, and Spanish pieces of eight." Though such words and phrases are very curious to inspect, yet Hazlitt says that he would neither offer nor take them in the course of exchange." Those who use rich and rare words run the risk of archaic and obsolete words getting into their vocabulary. Hazlitt admitted, "A sprinkling of archaic words is not amiss: but a tissue of obsolete expressions in more fit to keep than wear. I do not say I would not use any phrase that had been brought into fashion before the middle or the end of the last century, but I should be shy of using any that had not been employed by any approved author during the whole of that time. Words, like clothes, get old-fashioned, or mean or ridiculous, when they have been for some time laid aside," Hazlitt on Dr. Johnson and Lamb Hazlitt considered Dr. Johnson's prose style pompous while that Lamb charming. Since Dr. Johnson, in the opinion of Hazlitt used nothing but "ta all and opaque Words" he came in for severe censure at his hands : The reason why I object to Dr. Johnson's style is, that there is no selection, no variety in it. He uses none but 'tall, opaque words, taken from the 'first row of the rubric' words with the greatest number of syllables, or Latin phrases, with merely English terminations... How simple it is to be dignified without ease, to be pompous without earning! Surely, it is but a mechanical rule for avoiding what is low always pedantic and affected discrimination, On the contrary Hazlitt has nothing but praise for the prose style of Charles Lamb. Though Hazlitt was against the prose style of the ancient Writers like Burton, Fuller, Coryate, Sir Thomas Brown, yet he felt that succeeded in so imbuing the spirit of these authors that the idea of imitation is almost done away with. Hazlitt said. "There is an inward unction, a marrowy view both in the thought the feeling, an intuition, deep and lively, of his subject, that carries off any quaintness or awkwardness arising from an antiquated style and dress. The matter is completely his own, though the manner is assumed. Perhaps his ideas are altogether so marked and individual, as to require their point and pungency to be neutralized by the affectation of a singular but traditional form of conveyance." Hazlitt remarks that he likes the essay "Mrs. Battle's Opinions of Whist" the best simply because it is most free from obsolete allusions and turns of expression—"A well of native English undefiled." Hazlitt asserted that the essays of Lamb

have the same charm and relish that one encounters in Erasmus' Colloquies to the classical scholar. Composition in Gaudy Style Easy Finally, Hazlitt said that to write in a gaudy style without ideas is rather easy, as it is to spread a pallet of showy colours, or to smear in a flaunting transparency. To prove his point Hazlitt approvingly quotes this Conversation in Shakespeare's Hamlet: "What do you read ?"---* Words, Words, words."--What is the matter ?"---"Nothing, "it might be answered. For Hazlitt the florid style was opposite to the familiar one. While the florid Style is resorted to as a spangled veil to conceal the want of ideas, while the familiar style is employed as "an unvarnished medium to convey ideas. Since in a florid style the words are more important than the thoughts that they convey, Hazlitt says, "It costs little to have them [words] fine." It is the vulgar people who admire fine words for the sake of their finery and hot because of their legitimacy. Hazlitt said that those who regard only appearances would love fine words. But, "a thought, a distinction is the Tock on which this little cargo of verbiage splits at once." Naturally, Hazlitt unmaintained that those writers who do not have serious things to say prefer verbal imagination, and retain nothing but words. In the case of writers like these Hazlitt said that their ordinary speech is "never short of an hyperbole, splendid, imposing, vague, incomprehensible, magniloquent, a Cento of sounding common-places. Hazlitt says that when such writers seek to criticize actors and actresses they use a "profusion of barbarous epithets and willful rhodomontade." And "if they describe kings and queens, "it is an Eastern pageant." If such writers speak about some painting instead of saying that here one comes across tones and hues which nature's own sweet and cunning hand laid on," but "piles of precious stones, rubies pearls, emeralds, Golconda's mines, and all the blazonry of art." In the case of such writers, "Objects are not linked to feelings, words to things. But images revolve in splendid mockery, words represent themselves in their strange rhapsodies."

Objectives

A study of this paper would enable to know about the various factors that go to make up the familiar style. It is not easy to write in familiar style. The language of common conversation is required by the familiar style. Familiar style is of universal force and applicability. Familiar style requires proper use of words. Here we would also learn why Hazlitt liked the style of Lamb in preference to that of Dr. Samuel Johnson.

Research Methodology

The research is based on the secondary data collected through various resources like journals, books, and web sites. The objective of this paper is to explore, would enable to know about the various factors that go to make up the familiar style.

Conclusion

In the end we can say that William Hazlitt championed 'familiar style' as opposed to the grandiose style of Dr. Johnson. He maintained that simplicity and ease of writing in fact demanded the highest order of literary craftsmanship. He said, "To write a genuine familiar or truly English style is to write as anyone would speak in common conversation, who had a thorough command and choice of words, or who could discourse with ease, force, and perspicuity, setting aside all pedantic and oratorical flourishes." This Hazlitt could do consummately. Hazlitt was very correct in the assessment of his prose style: "I never wrote a line that licked the dust.

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