

William Hazlitt

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William Hazlitt was born in Maidstone in 1778, the youngest of the three children of the Revd. William Hazlitt, a Unitarian minister who had studied at the University of Glasgow, where he was taught by Adam Smith.

The family moved to Ireland and then to the United States, but returned to Wem in Shropshire in 1787. In 1793, Hazlitt was sent to a Unitarian college in Hackney, London, where, for 2 years, he received a broad education. One of his teachers was Joseph Priestley, an impassioned commentator on current political issues. While there, he read very widely and formed a strong belief in liberty, the rights of man, and the importance of the ability of individuals to effect beneficial change by adhering to strong beliefs. As he wrote later "I have a hatred of tyranny, and a contempt for its tools ... I cannot sit quietly down under the claims of barefaced power, and I have tried to expose the little arts of sophistry by which they are defended."

Hazlitt's life can be divided into discreet sections; the first of these was his interest in poetry and in philosophy. In 1798, he met Coleridge, and later was invited to stay and met Wordsworth. They were all fired with ideas of liberty and the rights of man, and Hazlitt benefitted greatly from these friendships.

However, he had to start earning a living. He went to stay with his brother John, who had by now become a successful painter of miniature portraits. So he decided to become a painter, and, within 3 years, had a painting accepted for the summer exhibition at the Royal Academy. He made a living for several years as a painter. He painted portraits of his friends Coleridge and Wordsworth, though neither of the sitters liked the portraits; Hazlitt as more concerned with producing an accurate portrait than with producing a portrait which would be liked by the sitters.

Women were a serious complication in Hazlitt's life; like many men of his time, he liked to go with prostitutes, but unusually he also liked to talk about this in public, which many of his friends found distasteful. He married twice, neither lasted.

In 1803, William Godwin held a dinner party at which Hazlitt met Charles Lamb and his sister Mary; they remained firm friends. In 1808, Hazlitt married Sarah Stoddart, a friend of Mary's. Sarah's brother Richard established a trust which provided £100 a year to help their finances; Hazlitt detested being supported by his brother-in-law, whose political convictions he despised. The couple had three sons, only one of whom survived infancy.



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In 1812, Hazlitt started another phase of his life, and became a journalist, essayist and lecturer. He was hired by the Morning Chronicle as a parliamentary reporter, and was later expanded to work as drama critic, literary critic, and political essayist. He also contributed essays to *The Examiner*, edited by John and Leigh Hunt. With a more established income, he moved his family into a house in Westminster which had at one time been occupied by John Milton, who was very highly regarded by Hazlitt. His landlord was Jeremy Bentham, the philosopher and social reformer.

His circle of friends expanded, though few were real friends like the Lambs.

Hazlitt idolised Napoleon as the hope of the common man against the oppression of "legitimate" monarchy. He took the defeat at Waterloo as a personal affront, became profoundly depressed, started drinking heavily, and walked around unshaven and unwashed for some weeks.

The last fifteen years of Hazlitt's life began quite well. He was earning enough money, he was producing good work of his own, and was employed by a number of quality newspapers as a contributor, or as a literary or dramatic critic. He was an innovator; his "Characters of Shakespeare's

Plays" was comprehensive, and written for a general reader, to read and re-read with pleasure. His lecturing attracted a small group of admirers, including John Keats.

But his marriage was failing; his relations with Wordsworth and Coleridge were deteriorating. He was evicted from his lodgings, and his wife finally broke with him. He retired for long periods to Winterslow, near Salisbury, where his wife had a property, and rented a room in Southampton Buildings off Chancery Lane. While there, he pursued for two years an unreciprocated obsession with the 19 year old daughter of his landlord. He then wrote "Liber Amoris", a fictional account of this episode, which had the effect of scandalising many of his friends, and providing plentiful ammunition for his growing number of detractors. However, when at Winterslow, he was still able to concentrate on writing essays of remarkable variety and literary merit. Many of these were published in "Table Talk" and are considered among the best essays ever written in English.

Relief from loneliness and financial troubles came from his second marriage to a Scottish widow, Isabella Bridgwater, who had an income of £300 a year. The pair went first on a tour of Scotland, and then in 1824 on a tour of Europe returning in 1825. In August 1826 he returned to Paris so that he could research his projected life of Napoleon. It did not work out as well as expected, and when he returned to London in August 1827, he learned that his wife was leaving him. His last years were plagued with financial insecurity, bouts of illness and depression. He moved for a time to rooms in Bouverie Street which he shared with his son. There is a plaque to him on the site. He then moved to Frith Street in Soho, where he died in September 1830.



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Additional notes

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Additional notes

A short example of Hazlitt's trenchant writing style is from "The Pleasure of Hating":

The pleasure of hating, like a poisonous mineral, eats into the heart of religion, and turns it to rankling spleen and bigotry; it makes patriotism an excuse for carrying fire, pestilence, and famine into other lands: it leaves to virtue nothing but the spirit of censoriousness, and a narrow, jealous, inquisitorial watchfulness over the actions and motives of others.

Further reading: Hazlitt's "Table Talk" collection of essays is available at [://archive.org/details/tabletalkessays0000will/page/1/](http://archive.org/details/tabletalkessays0000will/page/1/)