



NOTES:

UNIT: I (prose-i)

ON THE CONDUCT OF LIFE

- William Hazlitt

The lesson 'On the Conduct of Life' is a letter of William Hazlitt addressed to his son William. His son had just started to go to a new boarding school. His son was very much doubtful when he went to the school and made a series of complaints to his father. Hence, Hazlitt tried to answer all the questions of his son and to resolve his doubts. In his letter, Hazlitt tried to avoid his son's hostile attitude towards others in general and towards his school fellows in particular.

SUMMARY

William Hazlitt wrote his lively (intellectually perceptive) and thoughtful letter to his son in explaining that living in a boarding school was his first entrance into the world. Hazlitt also said that his health was not very well and he might not live with his son for a long time. So, he wished to leave his son some advice about human conduct in life for practical use to him, to remember him after his death and to warn against the errors in life.

Hazlitt's son used to say that the people (students) in the school would be a set of stupid and disagreeable people. It, according to Hazlitt, was wrong in imagining things to be bad without any verification (It is a form of prejudice). Everything should be believed to be all right until he found them the contrary. We should adjust with them even we find them bad instead of showing our negative attitude towards them. His son also had told him that he would not like the new school. It meant that he determined to do so and he did not like to leave home. It was a matter of prejudice. Thus, his son was asked never to anticipate evils (to expect wrong things beforehand) nor to describe a thing as bad through mere spite and willfulness.

Hazlitt's son seemed to be against the people at school as they were strangers to him. They kept aloof that they did not know him. So, he should not create any prejudice against new people and he should not think otherwise of them until they behaved ill. He should try to avoid the faults seen in them. It would bring strangers to be friends.

Hazlitt, next, came to his son's criticism of the dress of some of his school fellows. Hazlitt advised his son not to look down/ hate others for their poverty and helplessness. His son would dress well in order to escape criticism of others but he should not emphasize much on clothes. He should not despise anybody else particularly for their poor dress. His son should not feel contempt for others which meant pleasure when others failed or were unlucky.

Hazlitt's son had also made complaint on the laughing at him by the school fellows and he was careless at school as he was at home. Hazlitt, now, came to the main reason that it was why he was sent to the new school in order to prepare himself to face such uncertain things in life. His son would not be with him ever. He should not try to be a leader among his play-fellows. Instead, he should adjust with every situation among the school boys. He should not forget his place amongst many other boys in the school and the society. Many of the school boys were his equals or bigger or stronger than him. If he honoured others' feelings, they would not humour his feelings. He should respect the likes and dislikes of others as he felt on his feelings. True equality should always be a true wisdom and true morality. He was not a son of a king who was born to dictate or to destroy millions. So, he should share the fate of

others and reconcile with them.

Then, Hazlitt came to disrespectful speaking of his school fellows. Uncharitable towards others was a bad habit. Ill names begot ill blood. He wanted his son to be courteous, mild and forbearing. Due to our ill temper towards others, we see others at fault but we would not be able to mend their faults by exasperating (a feeling of intense irritation/ annoyance) ourselves against them. His son was also advised to treat his fellows like Hamlet had advised Polonius to treat the actors (in the Shakespearean play 'Hamlet') 'according to his own dignity, rather than their (others') deserts (what someone deserves)'. We should not act according to the caprice (unreasonable behaviour) of others. His son should be the master of his own behaviour.

Hazlitt also advised his son not to quarrel with the world too soon. The world might be as bad as anything but it is the only place for us to live in. If railing (finding faults and protesting) could have reformed the faults in others, the faults in others would have been reformed long ago. As it was impossible, we have to live in this world contentedly as far as possible. If the world is really incorrigible, it is a matter to be sad but not angry. His son should not be a misanthropist as a misanthropist disgusted not only with mankind but with his own self also. Here, Hazlitt warned his son not to misunderstand his advice that he did not mean to say that the ill of the world should not be seen as ill. He only meant that indiscriminate and unqualified satire (criticism) could do little good. Criticizing the world would not be the best example. Man's strong feeling against deformity and vice proves man's innate (inborn) love of beauty and goodness.

Advising on his studies at school, Hazlitt wished his son to learn Latin, French and dancing. His son was also asked to emphasize on dancing, as it was likely more to be neglected but it was of the greatest consequence to the success in one's life. After this, Hazlitt came to one's first impression. It was depended on two things – *dress* and *address* (manner and speech). They were the most important things in creating one's first impression. They are small coins and are often in need (demand) in the intercourse of life. The insults that a man faces for neglecting his dress and address are not atoned for (to make amends or reparation) by the esteem or admiration which one's integrity or talent brings. When we habitually disregard the above, it shows that we defy the opinion of others and we consider that we are above the opinion of others. It implies that we have a want (lack) of good nature though we have a good sense. We should always have a desire to please in every situation. If one has a tendency (type of behaviour) to vanity and affectation (pretentious) in dressing, there is a matter of pride and obstinacy on the opposite one. Slovenliness (untidiness or dirtiness) may be corrected at any time but a graceful manner needs an early habit. There comes the need for the dancing master. We should never confuse in manner and gesture. It seems to have done something wrong.

If we possess openness, freedom and self-possession, it makes good impression on others. It shows that we are in good terms with ourselves building a strong self-confidence. Grace in women shows an outward and visible sign of her inner harmony and it gains a secured affection sooner. On the other hand, the lack of grace in men is also the lack of harmony between mind and body and is the greatest obstruction on the road to the female heart and in the career of gallantry. Excessive book reading was also an important thing that Hazlitt wanted to warn against. As it was a bad habit with an ill consequence. Hazlitt advised his son to avoid anything that consumes his nerve and brain.

At the end, Hazlitt wrote that his son was too fond of reading and asked him to avoid excess in doing it. His son was also asked to open his mind not only to books but to all impressions. He also reminded his son about his excessive reading in his youth and the ill and irreparable consequences. Lastly, he advised his son that whatever may be the value of learning but he should prefer health and good spirit to it.

WORD NOTES

Para-1: *Lively* – something that is applicable in practical purposes (for Hazlitt's son). *The errors* – errors made by Hazlitt when he was a boy.

Para-2: *In imagining things* – to think of people and their acts. *Found them the contrary* – to find the acts of people opposite to what it should be. *Our negative attitude* – Showing of the disapproval towards others/showing anti-feeling. *Determined to do so* – to determine something to do

beforehand – It means Hazlitt's son determined that he would not like the new school. *Prejudice* – preconceived opinion that is not based on reason or actual experience. *Anticipate* – expecting things beforehand. *Spite* – hatred. *Wilfulness* – stubbornness.

Para-3: *Aloof* – not friendly/ cool and distant (People at the school did it to Hazlitt's son). *Faults* – faults done by people, particularly the acts of the people at the new school of Hazlitt's son.

Para-4: *Emphasize* – give special importance/ value to. *Despise* – feel contempt- Hazlitt's son had such a feeling towards others.

Para-5: *Humour* – the quality of being amusing. *Reconcile* – restore friendly relations between (Hazlitt's son and his school fellows).

Para-6: *Uncharitable* – unkind. *Begot* – brought into existence (specially by the process of reproduction).

Forbearing – patient and restrained. *Exasperating* – a feeling of intense irritation/ annoyance. *Deserts* – What a person deserves with regard to reward or punishment. *Caprice* – unreasonable behaviour.

Para-7: *Railing* – finding faults and protesting. *Misanthropist* – a person who dislikes humankind and avoids human society (Hazlitt warned his son not to be such a kind of person). *Satire* – criticism. *Deformity* – a malformation. *Innate* – inborn/ natural.

Para-8: *Latin* – the language of ancient Rome, widely used historically as a language of scholarship and administration. *Greatest Consequence* – most important effect/ result/ outcome. *Address* – one's manner and speech. *Atoned for* – to make amends or reparation. *Integrity* – the quality of being honest and having strong moral principle. *Vanity* – Excessive pride in or admiration of one's own appearance. *Affectation* – a pretentious behaviour designed to impress others. *Obstinacy* – stubbornness. *Slovenliness* – untidiness or dirty, particularly in one's dress.

Para-9: *Self-possession* – the state or feeling of being calm, confident and control of one's feelings. *Obstruction* – the action that prevents passage or progress. *Gallantry* – polite attention or respect given by men to women.

Para-10: *All Impressions* – all ideas or feelings that formed without conscious thought. *Irreparably* – Something which is beyond repair.



മിണിപുരം സർക്കാർ വിദ്യാഭ്യാസ വകുപ്പ് (എം.എ.)

DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION (S)

Government of Manipur