**On Nicknames**

By William Hazlitt

Study Material for 4th semester Alternative English

Prepared by

Dr. S.Nath, Dept. of English

William Hazlitt (1778-1830) is considered to be one of the greatest essayists in the history of the English language. Like Lamb, he was a personal essayist but he wrote on a wide range of subjects which revealed his knowledge and insight. Hazlitt’s “On Nicknames” (published in 1828) is a fine extended essay on a seemingly trivial theme which ends up by becoming eminently serious and even thought provoking. Hazlitt writes in an easy conversational style infused with epigrams and allusions.

Hazlitt begins his essay “On Nicknames” with a line from Horace’s *Ars Poetica* which conveys the idea that some trifles may lead to serious things. Nicknames, for instance, appear to be trifles, meaningless terms but they govern the world and have often led to serious consequences. The history of every field such as politics, morals and religion is the history of nicknames. Many massacres, tortures, imprisonment and wars have taken place due to nicknames because they have the power to arouse human passions of hatred and contempt. Hazlitt mentions two famous writers whose books explain that nicknames are more powerful than anything else in the world. The martyrdom mentioned in Fox’s “Book of Martyrs” and Daniel Neale’s “History of the Puritans” was due to the two nicknames ( Protestants and Catholics} which destroyed the peace of England.

**Party Nicknames**

Hazlitt mentions that nicknames are used in a variety of situations. They are used as labels to compartmentalize different sections of society to foster enmity. Such usage is termed as party-nicknames and Hazlitt explains how the Frenchmen hates the Englishman because he is an Englishmen and the Englishmen hates the Frenchmen for the same reason. Even Shakespeare is not spared. He is treated with contempt by the French just as the renowned French dramatist Racine is met with the same by the English. The Tories and the Whigs, the Catholics and the Protestants, the Christians and the Muslims, the Jacobins and the anti-Jacobins are other examples of party-nicknames which foster mutual hatred and contempt. The animosity between them is often the result of their names rather than in anything else.

**A Powerful weapon**

Nicknames, comments Hazlitt, are the portable tools of mischief. It is a shortened form of expressing one’s hatred and contempt and it is more effective than cutting with a sword. It can arouse powerful racial and national prejudice as can be seen in the case of the French and the English. A nickname works by giving full scope to imagination as it is not based on facts. Its aim is to create trouble because negative passions are aroused and the exercise of reason is suspended. Nicknames are used by both savages and civilized as a powerful weapon to victimize their opponents. Hazlitt quotes Shakespeare who had said “brevity is the soul of wit” (*Hamlet*) to point out that a nickname is the shortest and the most powerful argument one can use against his enemy. It is a mortal blow given to a person by his enemy

**The malignance in nicknames**

Hazlitt, speaking of the venomous effect of nicknames on an individual, says that a man who is without character himself can spoil the reputation of another with a nickname and the victim cannot retaliate, because the bystanders are so amused that they do not listen to the complaint of the victim. Hazlitt compares the use of nickname to the act of giving a bad name to a dog and hanging it. Hazlitt then mentions a famous proverb “A nickname is the heaviest stone that the devil can throw at a man”. Such is the malignance involved in a nickname that a person’s good name is destroyed forever. If a nickname is applied to our dearest friend, it can destroy our friendship forever for it arouses passion without proof.

**Proper use of names**

One also has to be careful regarding the use of a person’s name and the circumstances. There have been circumstances when a person becomes frightened at the sound of his own name. Hazlitt then mentions a humourous anecdote. Once, a young Cambridge student went to a playhouse in London. While he was seated in the pit, he saw one of his tutors seated in one of the front boxes near him. The student felt an immediate and strong desire to claim acquaintance with the tutor. He called in a very low and respectful manner “Dr. Topping!”. As there was no response, the student repeated in a louder tone. When there was still no response, the whole pit started chorusing the name. Feeling frightened and uneasy at the sound of his own name, the doctor was forced to leave the place.

**Conclusion**

In the concluding part, Hazlitt mentions that the calling of persons by their Christian or surname is both an indication of affection as well as hatred. Diminutives are titles of endearment. Goldsmith was called “Goldy” by Dr. Johnson which indicated his affection. However, calling so by a stranger would be an insult to Goldsmith. Titles of honour are the reverse of nicknames because they convey the idea of respect instead of contempt, but they equally mean nothing. But names standing by themselves can also carry a lot of weight. A striking example of this is Michael Angelo. The Englishmen know nothing of him but his name itself suggest fame and greatness.