Max Beerbohm's essays form the major part of his literary writings. They include his pure essays, critical essays, caricatures in prose and spoken essays. Beside the essay, Max Beerbohm has also handled the other forms of prose writing, such as parody, fantasy, tale etc. But he considered the writing of the essay as his principal occupation. The importance Beerbohm gave his essays, may be gauged from the fact that while arranging his works according to their quality, he assigned them to the first four volumes of the Uniform Edition of his works (published by William Heinemann Ltd., London, 1922); the subsequent volumes contained his other writings. It is somewhat surprising that most of the critical estimates of Beerbohm's mind and art have ignored his genuine work in the field of essay. In various sporadic articles the critics - L. Krenenberger, Edmund Wilson, A.K. Tuell, I. Cross, and others, have mainly concentrated on the lighter side of his work, which he took as his secondary interest. In fact, Beerbohm enjoys an all time reputation as the wit, the parodist, the caricaturist, and the satirist, rather than the essayist. In spite of the fact that they, in brief comments, admit the quality of Beerbohm's essays, none has so far taken up these essays for a systematic study.
This trend is to be noticed in a few regular critical works, too. Bohun Lynch's *Max Beerbohm in Perspective* (1922) estimates Beerbohm's talent mainly as the caricaturist and the parodist of modern prose styles. David Cecil's illuminating work - *Max: A Biography* (1964) traces Beerbohm's development as the supreme parodist, the caricaturist, and the satirist, that England ever produced. In his critical writings Cecil has established that, beside these aspects of his talent, Beerbohm is an exceptional humorist. He also bases his account chiefly on the lighter writings, not the essays. E.G. Riewald's *Sir Max Beerbohm: Man and Writer* (1953) is the only exhaustive critical work that analyses Beerbohm's mind and art conspicuously. He takes into account Beerbohm's statement that the caricaturing was his pastime, and the writing his serious occupation; he maintains that the two arts were the expression of his single creative impulse - tending to the aesthetic end. Riewald's scholarly survey of Beerbohm's work reconstructs a conspicuous picture of Beerbohm, the man and writer, dwelling mainly on the general aspects of his art. He too does not consider him primarily as an essayist. This may be one of the possible reasons why Beerbohm did not show much enthusiasm for such a scholarly work.

The most valuable opinion on Max Beerbohm's essays was expressed by Virginia Woolf in *Modern Essay* (Colophon Reader). She unreservedly praised Beerbohm for his creditable service to the personal essay in the early decades of this century. Having
considered his contribution to the 'genre', she comments that Matthew Arnold was never to his readers...att, nor Walter Pater affectionately abbreviated in a thousand homes to balt. They gave us much, but they did not give us themselves. Thus, sometimes, in the nineties it must have surprised readers...to find themselves familiarly addressed by a voice which seemed to belong to a man no longer other than themselves." It was the voice of 'sex' - the abbreviation, the signatory of all writings and caricatures; and later, the magical voice on the BBC. (with due apologies, this work also adheres, hereafter, to this endeared form of address to Sir Max Beerbohm, the English national celebrity).

Max's achievement, according to Virginia Woolf, is the conscious and the wilful introduction of "the essayist's most proper but most dangerous and delicate tool.....personality" to literature by means of an exact and beautiful style, after Charles Lamb. This is how Max has nurtured the personal essay, and has given it a respectable place with the other literary forms in the early decades of the twentieth century.

It need not be stressed that Max's love of 'style' inclined him to the essay. He was "quite happy to sacrifice a story for style." The style for him means "the direct expression of self", "the natural outcome of personality"; and the essay is the only literary form that provided him the full scope for his quest. The study of Max's essays, thus, is the right approach towards the assessment of his literary gift.
Lax's preference for the style, however, amplifies the view that his prose works are the offspring of his singular literary activity as an 'essayist'; and that the prose-writings, other than the essays, betray simply "extensions of his genius as an essayist"—the view expressed by Bolbrook Jackson in The Eighteen Nineties (Penguin, 1950; p. 122).

It is significant that lax was directly associated with the artistic movement, that arose in the nineties under the impact of Walter Pater and Oscar Wilde. Lax also believed in the aesthetic end of art, he also held that it had nothing to do with preaching morals. His essays, therefore, may be classed as belles-lettres; they betray an effort exclusively made for entertaining the reader.

Consequently, lax, the aesthete, has given new dimensions to the concept of humour in his essays. He distinctly stands out from his writings as "the laughing philosopher", who is a humanist as well as an ironical spirit in expatiating on the manners and morals, art and artists of his period. This study, therefore, assesses lax's essays with particular reference to his humour.

The work has been divided into eight chapters. The First Chapter describes the literary background of the eighteen nineties and includes a brief history of lax's life and work; and lastly, it points out lax's affiliation and disaffiliation with the decadent movement of the nineties.
The next three chapters are devoted to a critical appreciation of the 'subject-matter' in the essays. The Second Chapter, forms, in the first part, a study of the personal essay as a literary 'genre' which Max served; in the second part, the thematic study of his Pure Essays is taken up with a view to reconstructing his outlook on life and things. The Third Chapter examines Max's aesthetic views from the Critical Essay. It further attempts at examining whether these essays, too, possessed the characteristics of the essays, in essence. The Fourth Chapter considers Max's other prose writings, such as tales, fantasies, caricatures in prose etc. The thematic study of these writings is undertaken in order to see whether they too evince an essayist's approach.

The Fifth and the Sixth Chapters appraise Max's art of humour. In the first part, Max's satire and wit are considered under the heading the 'Mixed Humour', in which reflection and laughter are intermingled. The Sixth Chapter evaluates the processes of Max's 'Pure Humour': it tries to establish his claim to the ranks of the genuine humorists.

The Seventh Chapter critically examines Max's Technique in the essays. The earlier part of the chapter looks into the 'form' of the essays, and the latter into the 'style'. Being the most vital part of the essayist's art, the Technique entails a detailed and minute scrutiny of Max's classics: in the matter of form, and the admirable use of the linguistic resources, that were mobilised.
by him to accomplish his task so skillfully that he, along with Winston Churchill, is credited as one of the makers of the modern English prose.

The Eighth Chapter is the Conclusion of the thesis, driven to that end. It also considers the plexus of opinions that supports Shaw's famous epithet - 'the Incomparable Max', in describing him; and lastly, it determines Max's place among the English essayists.

[Signature]