CHAPTER I

MAX BEERBOHM AND THE BIGGEST NESTLE

All the things truly wicked start from an innocence. So you live day by day and enjoy what you have and do not worry. You lie and hate it and it destroys you and every day is more dangerous, but you live day to day as in war.

Ernest Hemingway

This is never easy and to find...
Commenting on Francis Thompson, G.K. Chesterton wittily sums up his chapter on the eminent Victorian poets with the remark: "Perhaps the shortest definition of the Victorian Age is that he stands outside it."¹ It is obviously as much a comment on the age as on the poet. Having placed Thompson outside Chesterton has drawn a line between the Victorian era and the eighteen nineties. In fact, Francis Thompson belonged to the new generation of writers who were responsible in developing a new artistic sensibility in reaction against Victorianism in the last decade of the nineteenth century. Oscar Wilde and Aubrey Beardsley were in the vanguard of the new movement and Francis Thompson, Richard Le Gallienne, G.S. Street, Arthur Symons, Max Beerbohm and others were in the rear. These writers had rejected the traditional values and had established their own. They were the decadents who called themselves 'modern' and their movement the renaissance of art and ideas.

Their was not the only movement which challenged Victorianism in the nineties. In fact, the decade saw quite a heterogeneous literary assemblage. There were also other writers who were the least satisfied with the ethical code of Mrs. Grundy. They proposed their own solutions to the social enigma. There were the progressives - Shaw and Wells; the imperialists - Henley and Kipling; and the Catholics - Chesterton and Belloc. The new generation of writers was full of enthusiasm and hope for the redemption of their society from the crass Victorianism. The latter writers could not, however, come to limelighet before the

1. G.K. Chesterton: The Victorian Age in Literature (OUP, 1955) p. 124
decadents. Until the death of the 'yellow movement', their voices were inaudible in the clamour of the decadents which began with the publication of The Yellow Book in April 1894. In fact, the Yellow dominated the literary scene of the nineties to such an extent that to this day the decade lingers in the memory of the people as 'the yellow nineties', or 'the naughty nineties'.

In 1894 Max Beerbohm came fresh from Oxford. He was greatly influenced by Oscar Wilde and Aubrey Beardsley. They were his personal friends. He contributed 'A Defence of Cosmetics' to the opening number of The Yellow Book at the behest of Beardsley, its art-editor. The essay, along with Beardsley's drawings, created a great scare generating a litter of bitter comments from the angry press, denouncing the writer and the essay as lawd and filthy. The press could not be appeased until Max sent a letter of protest to the editor explaining why he wrote the essay. It was only then that it was understood that he did not stand so much for the Edwardian reaction against Victorianism as for the reaction within reaction.

In fact, Max belonged to the set of writers who wrote satires on the English Decadence during its heyday. Though R. Hichens, G.S. Street, and Max were directly associated with the decadents, they did not share their vagaries. R. Hichens satirized the 'yellow', Oscar Wilde and his group in Green Carnations; G.S. Street ridiculed the followers of the decadents in the Autobiography of A Boy; and Max parodied the 'precious school' of writers in 'A Defence of Cosmetics'. Max aimed at a pleasant criticism of the stylistic extravagance of his
contemporaries. To Oscar Wilde and others Max's essay was a pleasant surprise since it struck a different note. In fact, Max Beerbohm was very much the child of his own age. His literary and artistic tastes conformed to Wildean aestheticism. He was in full sympathy with the young and promising writers and artists. Though he appreciated them and their rebellious spirit, yet he was not blind to their shortcomings. He received and mentioned only their good qualities and rejected the bad ones. Needless to say, he adopted "an indifferent pose" from the very beginning.¹

In order to assess Max's performance as a writer it is necessary to understand the literary background of the aesthetic nineties. It was quite a lively period, a period of experimentation and innovation. Frank Harris expressed his sense of wonder at "The Nineties in London!" He found it's "promise ... more exciting than performance" since all these men were eager and enthusiastic; good work done and better projected, one could warm oneself with their hopes."² Max himself was so enthusiastic about it that he called it the "Beardsley Period."³

It is not possible to ignore Wilde's writings and Beardsley's drawings which quickened a new sense of life in the 'fin de siècle' decade. Beardsley, who, like Keats, had a very short career, not only revolutionised the concept of art but introduced the decadent tendencies to English literature by his prose-romance Under The Hill, first published in The Savoy. Its

forty odd pages, along with Wilde's novel, The Picture of Dorian Gray, sum up all the characteristics of the English Decadence - (1) Sadoism (2) Artificiality (3) Perversity and (4) Curiosity.

Remarkably enough, the importance of their step lies in their extreme individuality. They were 'rebels' very much like their predecessors in the early decades of the century. It was in a way the resurgence of the same romantic spirit which revolted against the pseudo-classicism of the eighteenth century. Though Shelley, Keats, and Byron had to face great hostility and unfavourable circumstances, yet they succeeded in expressing "the revolutionary idea ... very wildly indeed in words."¹ by 'incantation of [their] verse, they induced a sense of liberty, an imaginative sensibility, and an appreciation of the true and the beautiful. The last Romantics - Wilde, Beardsley, and others, also made forceful efforts to reinstate the value of an individual as an individual vision. They could not accept the social, religious and literary conditions of the later-Victorian era. As a consequence, they had to state their personal and new values.

And though, like the Early Romantics - Shelley and Byron, the later ones cannot be defended for their immoral behaviour, yet criticism could perhaps be mitigated by viewing their aberrations as an expression of an uncontrolled mental activity and of a restless desire to turn personal vision into reality.

As this 'rebellion' came from the fashionable segment of the upper class, it happened to be the movement of the few. It was simply the revival of the romantic ideal which, according to Yeats, lay "hidden away throughout the early a d

¹ G.K. Chesterton: op. cit., 112.
mid-Victorian years in tightly close circles," and which emerged at last from long concealment to become the most conspicuous inheritance of Arnold's "Barbarians" from whom Oscar Wilde and his aesthetic friends drew an idiom, a gesture, a pose. If this romantic spirit did not get a wider reception in the Victorian era, it showed itself in a marked insistence on individuality, as stated by David Cecil:

...the English, the wilful, eccentric, self-confident English, are the most individualistic of mankind, and the nineteenth century is the most individualistic of the periods. Laissez-faire rules the roost as triumphantly in the realm of art as those in Economics.

In fact, what constitutes Victorianism was an outcome of the strong individualistic contribution to the thoughts and ideas by men like Bentham, Mill, Macaulay, and Huxley. And the greatmen, like Carlyle, Ruskin, Newman, Dickens, and Arnold, were also the most individualistic as they challenged and criticised the dogmatic nature of the Benthamite philosophy and the Evangelical religion. They proposed their individual solutions to put brakes on the growing rationalism, material advancement, industrial growth, and a strictly puritanical code, all of which darkened life in the Victorian era. These 'reformers' succeeded to a great extent in creating a genial atmosphere, since their protest was sincere and just. However, their efforts turned literature, more or less, to a didactic end. Morality was a strait jacket even in philosophy and politics. "All social action," Newman states, "all national cohesion, all reverence for law, all sanctity in rules is based upon man's moral conscience."

However, their attempts were significant as their primary motive was to contemplate human good, refinement and culture. It seems as if they chanted the hymns of high spiritual value to the debased Philistine ears. A cursory glance at Victorian literature is enough to reveal that it was written to cater to the particular taste of the rising middle class - the 'nouveau riche' of the period, who had inherited no traditions of culture and ethics. Arnold's 'culture' is such an alternative to the moral provisions made by Carlyle and Ruskin. And Peter's philosophy is also an aesthetic solution of the growing materialism of the period. Its essential tone was moral, though its application to life in the nineties had very unsettling repercussions. It will not be irrelevant here to recall David Cecil's apt description of the Victorians who, in spite of their greatness and achievements, had their limitations as

...their outlook was often parochial. They were not men of the world; they did not value the things of the mind themselves; they were the great English Philistines. Nor were they broadened by the fact that the predominant religious temper of their day was set by the narrow creed and the relentless morality of the Evangelicals. 1

Thus the severe moral climate of the latter Victorian era left no room for a detailed and minute treatment of various themes - especially of 'sex'. It is somewhat strange that in the nineteenth century as "in no other period," according to Mario Praz, "...has sex been so obviously the mainspring of works of imagination," yet its treatment was quite subdued. The spirit of the age did not permit going deep into "the impulses of man - animal." 2

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1. David Cecil : op. cit., p. 50
Though it would have been highly immoral and objectionable to air an opinion about the animal side of sex, yet it cannot be said that they were not sexually obsessed. David Cecil wittily remarks:

The male novelists...shrink from passion even in its respectable manifestations. It was often the major motive in their plots...but they pat the beast gingerly with fingers protected by a thick glove of sentimental reverence, and they hastily pass on.  

It has certainly led to the modern charge of narrowness, hypocrisy, and false pretences against the Victorian elite.  

J.B. Priestley has voiced it thus:

The Victorian novelists pretended to blush and tremble at the very notion of prostitution, and then went cheerfully out on the spree with women of the town.

Consequently, the eighties set in with a note of dissent from the concept of morality. The decade began to create an atmosphere which led to "an extension of the sense of style and sex" in the nineties. It was the battle ground for ideas. Ruskin stated the Aesthetic Movement by propounding the cult of 'Beauty', in agreement with the Pre-Raphaelite ideal. Since Ruskin's cult had a moral tone, its appeal was momentary. Whistler, who introduced French Impressionism to English art, ridiculed Ruskin's concept of art preaching morality. He, in a controversy with Ruskin, cleared the way for the principle of 'art for art's sake.' As a matter of fact Whistler's was a flamboyant personality which influenced largely the last two decades of

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1. David Cecil: *op.cit.*, p. 44
2. J.H. Buckley: 'Victorianism' - see *Victorian Literature, op.cit.*, p. 4
3. J.B. Priestley: *op. cit.*
the nineteenth century. But it was Oscar Wilde who stole the show from him. Max himself admits Wilde's role thus:

Beauty existed long before 1880. It was Oscar Wilde who managed her debut. To study the period is to admit that to him was due no small part of the social vogue that beauty began to enjoy. 1

It is remarkable that it was from the haut monde - the fashionable segment of society, that the movement began, "A newly elegant and irresponsible aristocracy began once again to concern itself seriously with fashion."2 Whistler and Wilde were its representatives in the eighties - especially the latter began to propogate the new aesthetic theory. Wilde's sources were native as well as foreign. He presented the borrowed ideas in a lucid prose style; the result was that the theory of 'art for art's sake' seemed purely his. Primarily, he dissociated himself from Ruskin's influence, secondly, he made a cocktail of "Gautier's idea of art for art's sake and Whistler's idea of art as Nature's exemplar."3 Wilde's achievement lies in driving these theories to a logical conclusion.

Throughout the eighties, Wilde was engaged in professing the aesthetic theory. He stated that Art dominated Life and Nature: "Life imitates Art far more than Art imitates Life"; and "Art is our spirited protest, our gallant attempt to teach Nature her proper place."4 With the publication of The Intentions, The Picture of Dorian Gray, and A Woman of No Importance, Oscar Wilde leapt to the forefront of the artistic movement as the

1. The Works of Max Beerbohm, p. 39
3. R. Jackson: The Eighteen Nineties (Pelican, 1950) p. 84
nineties were ushered in. He observed that the new movement was
"the 'fin de siecle' flowering ... a renaissance which pointed two
ways: backward to Romanticism and forward to a new contemporary
modernism." 1

When Max began his literary career in the nineties, he
was fully conscious of Wilde's contribution to the literary art
and ideas. "The Later Romanticism or Decadence" held its sway on
the artistic sensibility. Its chief organs were The Yellow Book, and
The Savoy. According to B. Croce, though it was the same romantic
spirit which disturbed the "equilibrium" in the first three decades
of the nineteenth century, yet the whole movement was a pose, an
attitude which resulted in "the crystallization of the whole
Romantic movement into set fashions and lifeless decoration." 2

The early as well as the later Romantics possessed the same
'erotic sensibility' but their concepts of form differed. The
decadents wholly concentrated on the classical forms like those
of the eighteenth century.

What necessitated this change can be ascribed to the
problem of these artists as "one of the self-definition in a
society whose values they could not accept." 3 It compelled them
to seek new ways of living which could satisfy their physical as
well as mental needs. B. Charlesworth describes it as an act of
creating a new "self" - an alternative to Philistinism. 4 G.H.

Meads explains the "self" thus:

1. cf. P. Stanford's Writings of the Nineties (E.L. No. 773) p. 1
2. B. Croce: Storia d'Europa (Garr, Laterga, 1932) pp. 133-4
3. B. Charlesworth: Dark Passages (The University of Wisconsin
Press, Madison and Milwaukee, 1965) p. xiv
4. G.H. Meads: Movement of Thought in the Nineteenth Century
(Chicago, 1936) p. 375
The human self arises through its ability to take the attitude of the group to which he belongs and lays upon himself the responsibilities that belong to the community, because he cannot recognise his own duties as over others - that is what constitutes self as such. 1

Therefore, these artists developed a philosophy of their own whose sources were native as well as exotic. The English sources were Walter Pater and Swinburne; the exotic ones were the French decadents, such as Baudelaire and Huysmans - along with the Italian D'Annunzio.

Written in 1873, Pater's 'Conclusion' to The Renaissance became their gospel. Its premise was the value of the things of the mind. It stressed on the value of the 'moment' and 'experience', with a suggestion "to burn always with the hard gem-like flame, to maintain this ecstasy, is success in life. 2" This philosophy of 'sensations', when read with his idea of 'New Cyrenicism' in Marcus The Epicurean, served as "a spark", writes H. Jackson, "to the tinder of new acceptance of life" in the nineties. 3

Pater's stress on the 'sensuous' became the sensual and the perverse. The artists interpreted this advice for the sensory experience as a positive hint. Accordingly they tried to seek 'beauty' in unusual things, and in the most unusual manner. Sex - the perverse sex - became the theme in their writings, quite contrary to the Victorian reserve. As a consequence of Pater's philosophy, they took unbounded liberty, rejected all moral considerations, and only valued their personal experience. H. Jackson aptly describes their dilemma:

3. H. Jackson: op. cit., p. 58
Coming late, in a century of pressure and scientific advancement, they embodied a tired mood rejected here, beyond the moment...took a subtle joy in playing with fire and calling it sin. 1

In short, though Peter's intentions in the 'Conclusion' were moral, yet he became "the subfusc of decadence." 2

Oscar Wilde expressed Peter's theory of 'sensations' in the yearnings of 'Dorian Gray': "Live! Live the wonderful life that is in you. Let nothing be lost upon you. Be always searching for new sensations." 3 As early as 1882 he prepared a delicious cocktail of Baudelaire's Philosophy of dandyism with the doctrine of 'Beauty' of Rossetti and Peter:

For him [the poet] there is one time, the artistic moment; but one law, the law of form; but one land, the land of beauty - a land indeed removed from the real world yet more sensuous because ensuing, yet within that calm which comes not from rejection but the absorption of passion. 4

It is plainly the principle of 'art for art's sake'. It lays stress on 'form' as the first necessity in literature. As such, it is a valuable advice to the artist nursing his art painstakingly. In true sense, it can be interpreted as 'art for artist's sake'. Like Turgenev, they thought: "with art, what is good seems better, and what is bad can't do any harm." 5 But the decadents' utmost care for form resulted in a "preciosity of manner", a peculiarity of the nineties. 6 As a result, in place of Fleurs du Mal (The Flowers of Evil), the 'fin de siecle' decade produced Fleurs du Feche (The Flowers of Sin). 7 This kind

1. ibid., p. 59
2. J.J.G. Stewart: op.cit., p. 6
3. Oscar Wilde: op.cit., p. 32
4. Quoted in B. Charlesworth's Dark Passages, op.cit., p. 63
6. Max Beerbohm: Mainly On The Air (Heinemann, 1957) p. 188
7. See S. King's A Beardsley Miscellany (London, 1949) p. 26
of individualistic spirit led in theory to the renewed but adverse interest in the principle of 'beauty' - a gift of Swinburne, exploring the macabre and the pathological in sex, and artificiality in life.

More than Swinburne's influence, the perversity was a gift of French Decadence which these artists, in their zeal for new life, smuggled from Paris into the life and literature of the decade. 'Fin de siècle' and the 'new' became the catchwords. Wilde, Arthur Symons, and Havelock Ellis had personally met J.K. Huysmans and Gourmont in Paris - "the fin de siècle capital of sex." On return to London, Arthur Symons set himself to the task of spreading the decadent ideal which urged the artists "to find the last line shade, the quintessence of things, to fix it fleetingly, to be a disembodied voice, and yet the voice of a human soul."²

J.K. Huysmans' novel, A Rebours, probed the chief French source of inspiration for the decadents. It contains two principal characteristics of French Decadence - "Sadism and Catholicism."³ Les Érasantes, the hero of the novel, embodies them. Wilde's 'Dorian Gray' is the English version of Les Érasantes. Mario Praz treats A Rebours as the ripest flower of "the erotic sensibility" to which he attributes the origin of the whole romantic literature right to the end of the nineteenth century. It is as a matter of fact "the pivot upon which the whole psychology of the Decadent Movement turns."⁴

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1. P. Stanford: op. cit. p 64
3. Mario Praz: op. cit. p. 307
4. ibid., p. vii
Thus, 1891 onwards, the young artists of fashion in England thought and worked in terms of their personal experience. "Sin" became a fashionable subject, a 'cliche' for them. They, in poems, prose-writings, and drawings, began to explore minutely the perverse sex - homosexuality and other sexual instincts, such as demi-vierge, and even the hermaphrodite.¹ D. Stanford comments that "in the imagination of the 'nineties, the darkling Venus is complemented by another image - that of Ganymede."² As a consequence, homosexuality is the theme of The Picture of Dorian Gray. As a proof of their modernness, the decadents set about to bridge up gap between "theory and practice" which had hypocritically widened in the late-Victorian era.³ Accordingly, good and bad were not different for them. The aesthetics of the non-moralists was enshrined in Wilde's words: "there is no such thing as a moral or an immoral book. Books are well-written or badly written. That is all."⁴ In the same way Beardsley's "harlot" balanced both, diabolically, since one of her breasts was engraved with John Lane, and the other with Elkin Matthews.⁵ The results were devastating.

They loved the cleanliness in unclean things, sweetness in seedy alliances; they actually could not kiss Cynara, they kissed her by proxy of some 'red mouth'. It was as though they were tired of being good, in old accepted way, they wanted to experience the piquancy of being good after a debauch."⁶

It is significant that such a perversity is not unprecedented in English literature. Restoration drama recorded the lowest

1. D. Stanford: op.cit. p. 60
2. ibid., p. 58
3. J. Priestley: quoted earlier, p. 52
4. Oscar Wilde: 'Preface' to The Picture of Dorian Gray. op.cit. p. 321
6. H. Jackson: op.cit. p. 58
ebb of the English morality of the period. The works of Wycherley and Congreve have produced the immoral and profane atmosphere of their period. It was, of course, "a perversion of national taste clearly recognizable from Elizabethan times—delight in all sorts of unnatural relations."

Finally, the Decadence can be summed up as an 'attitude', or a 'condition' which occupied the main interest in the life and art of the 'fin de siècle' decade. The whole movement, if seen in the true perspective, is the reinstatement of individuality in the realm of art and literature of the nineties. D. Stanford establishes harmony between the increased stress on 'style and sex' in the decade thus:

Both of them represent a quickening of the new personality; a deeper, fuller, alerted awareness; a keener expressiveness of the whole being. Carefully to cultivate these two senses was surely, in Peter's language, "to burn always with a hard gem-like flame."

What kind of anarchy of ideas and spirit prevailed on account of this 'alerted awareness' may be noticed in the selection of themes by these writers. They hunted for the extinct, the bizarre, the grotesque, and the exotic. Whistler and Deardley did worthwhile experiments in the sphere of art. Oscar Wilde and the decadents poets sang of sin, sodomy, the satanic hero, the fatal woman, and depicted the very atmosphere of corruption—traceable to Swinburne's influence. Geridek, the love of the "Byzantine decoro" and the love for the cities, like London and Paris, also were the fashionable subjects. Though the subjects were new, they were expressed in the classical forms.

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They showed a weakness for the strange names, purple patches, concrete and colourful words, and debased Latin. They discovered even the archaic and queer words, and employed a language quite capable of communicating their sensory experience.

Quite an important contribution of the decade was its trend towards Catholicism. If Francis Thompson sang of Catholic mysticism in his poems, there were others who converted to Catholicism. Beardsley, Wilde, Arthur Symons and others became Catholics in their last days. It seems to be rather a comic end that their journey, which began with the annul of sin, ended at Rome.

Having understood the nature of English Decadence, it is not difficult to determine Max's position in the eighteen nineties. His essays, caricatures, and other writings reveal that though he came to the literary scene in London in the heyday of the Decadent Movement, and that he began his writing career by contributing to The Yellow Book, yet he was not a decadent in the real sense. He has nowhere tried his hand at the analysis of 'sex' as his friends did. He was neither a non-moralist, nor a homosexual. His affiliations with the decadents were in the matter of aestheticism. He was an aesthete. Like Wilde, he, too, stressed on the element of personality in literature. At a very late stage he gave his own explanation of Peter's Philosophy thus:

("Peter's") one lapse from constancy was when he urged them "to burn always with a hard, gem-like flame." To burn like that one must shut all draughts, as he did ... as I do, I suppose, nowadays.

1. Mainly On The Air, p. 117
The observation forms the gist of Max's attitude to things in general — particularly to the decadent ideal. The words — 'to burn like that one must shut all draughts', convey, in a subtle manner, that Peter's philosophy insists on the purity of soul which equips a man for self-analysis. Max possessed it in the utmost degree. Perhaps, this is the reason why he emerges from his essays as an individual who stood for himself only. And this is the reason why he cannot be identified with the decadents or any other group of the writers of the nineties.

Max's keenly developed raciststive faculty checked him from joining hands with Henley or Kipling who sang the songs of Imperialism and Britain's military power. He could see very well through the dangerous game they were playing. Neither he was impressed with Shaw's socialistic propaganda, nor with Wells' scientific planning for the creation of a better world. He was the aesthete who could not approve the literature which had the 'palpable designs' on us. His definition of the genuine literature implies that it should be written for the "personal enjoyment" and, thereby, to entertain the reader. It is the possible reason that Chesterton and Wells did not appeal to him much on account of their Catholic preaching.

It is remarkable that with the passage of the decadent movement, he stood firm on his ground obeying the artistic urge. He abstained from the social and the political life of the day. He was least impressed with the upbeat social and political trends. He was a 'detached observer' who skimmed the cream of everything. His writings disclose his 'alerted awareness' of all

that was happening during his life time. He had his own kind of
regard for the veterans like Thomas Hardy, George Meredith, and
A.C. Swinburne. He read with interest the 'avant garde' writers:
Henry James, Maeterlinck, Ibsen, Wilde and others. All the while
he approached them with an observant eye, and criticized them
whenever called for.

It is also noteworthy that the important and the shocking
events at the turn of the century, such as Boer war, Queen's
death, rise of Labour, death of many eminent personalities, and
the World War, did not ruffle him. He concentrated only on
writing and caricaturing - his two principal interests. In them
he has expressed his true artistic bent of mind. They occupied
him to the end of his life, and he had an exclusive and
unflagging devotion to them. "Only Art with a capital A," he
remarked, "gives any consolation to her henchmen." ¹

The charge, that Max was a decadent, has been looked into
by the critics. David Cecil is the foremost amongst them. He has
given ample reasons, in Max's biography and a television talk on
him, why the charge is baseless. He has quoted instances from
Max's writings in support of his argument. ² Max's case may be
summed up in the words of : "... "... thus :

It is Max's less stereotyped personality which makes
him of the 'Beardsley Generation', the most convincing
in tone and opinion. Wilde was weighed down by his
Chrysobryus, Lionel Johnson by his a tique erudition,
Symons by his excitement over 'sin'. All of these
authors found it difficult to extricate themselves
from their original premises, from the hardened
shell of their own ritual. Max, alone of these, had
the temerity of each new impression. ³

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1. The Works of Max Beerbohm (1922), p. 138
2. David Cecil: 'More Best Sellers: The Yellow Book'
   (TV: Roadcast, 15 January, 1968)
Max holds a significant place in the history of the literature of the nineties. His work embodies whatever was of the genuine value in his period, in his own character and of his contemporaries. He was "a dilettante, a petit maître" in literature. He was an aesthete without a vice of the aesthetes. He was the direct descendent of Oscar Wilde in aestheticism, but his own tended mainly towards Henry James's the finer and the subtler one. He stuck to James's motto: "be generous and delicate and pursue the prize." It need not be stressed that having obeyed the spirit of the motto Max has emerged as an outstanding personal essayist and as an exceptional humorist of our times after Charles Lamb. He has safely walked out of the pages of The Yellow Book into the bounds of modern literature without a sympathetic word for the modernity.

One cannot, however, ignore the circumstances of Max's life which played a decisive role in forming his rare individuality. His serenity and equipoise, wisdom and sense, great intellect and keen critical faculty were the gifts of his decent upbringing in the calm and quiet Victorian surroundings. Sir Max Beerbohm, the English national celebrity, was born on 24 August 1872, only two days after Aubrey Beardsley, at 57 Palace Gardens Terrace in Kensington. The youngest child of Edward Julius Beerbohm and Eliza (nee) Draper, he was christened Henry Maximilian. They affectionately called him 'Max' which, in the first half of this century, was the household name in England for his writings, caricatures, and broadcasts on the BBC. His was a middle class family of 'elegance and wit.'

2. David Cecil: *op.cit.* p. 6
of the continental origin, and was a naturalized citizen of England. He was known as a dandy - "monsieur superbe-Homme"¹, and a person of scholarly interests. He was a thriving London corn merchant. Max's mother was a woman of sweet disposition. Though she had no scholarly interests, she possessed a streak of "genuine humour."² In fact, Max inherited a tradition of culture from his parents. When Max was born his father was at sixty two, and his half-brothers Sir Herbert Beerbohm Tree, the great actor-manager, and Julius, the traveller and the utopian, were quite grown-up. The child Max spent a very happy childhood in the calm and quiet atmosphere of an illustrious Victorian household. The males of the Beerbohm family were almost out for the day on business, these were the ladies who set home for the child. Of his brothers and sisters, Max was particularly attached to Dora Beerbohm, four years his senior. She became a nun at a very young age. Max was very fond of his sister who exercised a great influence on his character. Though their fields were different, yet they maintained a common bond of love and understanding and uniformity of outlook.³

Max was educated at Charterhouse and Oxford. From 1885 to 1890, he remained at school. It was quite a valuable period since he acquired "a knack of understanding [his] fellow-creatures."⁴ He took no interest in games. He was a recluse who loved to read Latin prose and verse, and drawing caricatures of his schoolmasters.

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1. E. Wilson: 'An Analysis of Max Beerbohm' (The New York, 1 May, 1943) p. 80
2. David Cecil: op.cit., p. 6
3. Max Beerbohm: 'Obituary' Of Dora Beerbohm... see Letters to Reggie Turner, pp. 305
4. Mainly On The Air, p. 137
He was duly encouraged by his teachers, his caricatures were published in the school magazine. At the age of fourteen, he wrote an elegiac poem, "Catala," in parody of the dull manner of his music teacher. It was at Charterhouse that Max read "Satire, The Epicurean" secretly.

In 1890, he joined Merton College, Oxford. Here, Max got freedom denied to him at school. Oxford provided him full opportunity to enrich his mind with the study of the classics. He particularly loved to read Thackeray and Edward Lear's "Complete Nonsense." Though he read all the contemporary writers, none was a greater influence on him than Thackeray. More than the regular course of studies for Honours degree, he read things of his own interest.

At Oxford, Max drew caricatures of the dons and the undergraduates, and was soon known as a wit and a dandy. His first caricatures appeared in "The Strand" (1892). He showed promise in the field of writing also. He wrote the essay "The Incomparable Beauty of Modern Dress" for "The Spirit of the Age" (1893). In fact, 1893 proved a turning-point in Max's career. This very year he made friends with William Rothenstein, a painter from Paris and with Reginald Turner at Oxford. They were his best friends. In 1893, he earned from Wilde compliments for his review of Wilde's writings in the "Anglo-American Times." And it was at Oxford Max wrote "A Defence of Cosmetics" in 1894.

In 1894, Max came to London. Will Rothenstein introduced him to the young and fashionable artists of the day. He became quite intimate with Aubrey Beardsley, the art-editor, and Henry Harland, the literary editor of "The Yellow Book." He came to know
John Lane, the proprietor of the Bodley Head and *The Yellow Book*. John Lane was the patron of the decadents. He was the daring publisher of their works. He published *The Works of Max Beerbohm* (1896) - the first collection of Max’s essays.

Max drew attention by his charming looks. He was slim and middle-statured. He had a round big head with sleek hair parted in the middle. His eyes were sharp, blue, having always an inquisitive look. He was perfect in dress at all occasions. Perfect in manners, an entertaining talker, and a patient listener, he was a pleasant company at dinner tables. He served as ‘model’ for the heroes of Chesterton’s novel *The Napoleon of Notting Hill*, and Reggie Turner’s 'Sans' in *Doway's Affairs* who stood for intimacy, dignity and affection.¹

Max continued writing the essays for *The Yellow Book* and other periodicals. In 1895, he went on a tour of America with Sir Herbert, his brother, as secretary. He wrote 'Be it Cosiness' in Chicago for *The Pageant* 1895, which appears as 'Diminuendo' in *The Works*. Along with the publication of *The Works* in 1896, there also appeared a collection of his caricatures, *The Caricatures of Twenty Five Gentlemen*. In 1897, he wrote his famous tale - *The Happy Hypocrite*. It disclosed Max’s moralism. In 1898, Shaw recommended Max to succeed him as the dramatic critic on *The Saturday Review*. Shaw wrote: "The younger generation is knocking at the door, and as I open it sprightly steps in the Incomparable Max."² Though Max took up the job with misgivings, yet he wrote successfully on *The Saturday Review* for twelve years, until in 1910 he resigned and married Florence Kahn, the

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1. *Letters To Reggie Turner*, p. 160
2. cf. S.N. Behrman : *op. cit.* , p. 18
beautiful American Broadway star and distinguished Ibsen heroine.

They first met in 1904 and remained friends for six years. Florence's graceful looks and modest, reserve nature appealed to Max greatly. He saw in her a suitable life-partner. They married quietly on 24 May 1910, at Paddington Registry Office, in the presence of his mother and Reggie Turner. It was the very year that Max bade adieu to London, and to his flourishing career of a young and promising journalist.

1910 afterwards, Max made his home in Italy. He bought a small villa—Villino Chiaro in Rapallo, a pleasant small town on Italy's Mediterranean coast. Barring brief intervals of stay in England, during world wars, Villino Chiaro was Max's permanent home, until death in 1956. Though Max lived forty years of his life in Italy, he never learnt Italian. His thoughts were occupied with his own people and country. During the war-time his 'Englishness' urged him to remain "where English language is spoken, and English thoughts and feelings are expressed."

The warmth of Italian sun, the calm and quiet of the Villino, and, above all, the loving care of Florence seemed to fulfil the creative urge in him. It blossomed forth in writings and caricatures of lasting value. In 1911, he issued A Christmas Garland—the collection of parodies of the modern prose styles; in 1912, Dulieka Dobson—a burlesque novel on Oxford. His fame as writer and caricaturist grew steadily. The volumes after volumes of his brilliant prose came out. He tried his hand, with grace and perfection, at essay, tale, fantasy, novel, parody.

1. *Mainly On The Air*, p. 43
and caricatures in prose. In 1922, the Uniform Edition of his works was published by William Heinemann Ltd., London. The ten volumes contain the cream of Max's writings. They disclose Max's utmost care in the selection of the writings on qualitative basis.

The year of the publication of Yet Again (1909) landmarks the period of Max's maturity. He wrote his best works: Seven Men and And Even Now, between 1915 and 1921, in England. He gave his best work in caricaturing to Rossetti and His Circle in 1923. After that, Max did nothing new or fresh. Very discreetly he terminated his literary career at the peak of his powers.

It was in the thirties that Max came by an opportunity to conclude the Cities Revisited series of the BBC. Max gave a thirty-five minutes talk on 'London Revisited'. He made his debut in the field of broadcasting. The master of the written form of the essay proved himself a master of the spoken form, too. In his wonderfully resonant and friendly voice he talked, throughout the thirties and the forties, of the Music Halls of the nineties, of his contemporaries, and of his own boyhood days. He gave some talks on such horrid aspects of the twentieth century as Speed, Advertisement, and Bloomsbury etc., and expressed his frank disapproval. Max's broadcasts made him so popular that he became the representative of 'the legendary nineties'. His broadcasts are collected in Mainly On The Air (1946).

Max was knighted in 1939. He described this honour as a tribute "paid to the lucid ideal of art." One after another honours were heaped on Max. He was awarded the honorary doctorates by the Universities of Edinburgh and Oxford. In order to
commemorate his seventy seventh birthday his friends formed a
'Maximillian Society' with seventy seven members under the
chairmanship of Sir Desmond McCarthy. It was in 1943 that Max
gave the Rede Lecture on 'Lytton Strachey' in Cambridge University.
It may be considered Max's last verdict on his own aesthetic
principles.

Max went back to Villino Chiaro in 1947, never to return
to England. He was now recognised as a writer of Universal fame
and a British national celebrity. Villino Chiaro became a kind
of 'pilgrimage' for the holidaying Englishmen on the continent.
He was very friendly to the visitors who were rather wonderstruck
at his simplicity of living, of his aversion to camera, TV,
Great Editions, and all the means of popularity. They were quite
impressed with his saintly demeanour. He lived happily in the
private world of his own, until Florence died in 1951. Max was
fortunate enough to find in Elizabeth Jungmann, a befitting
housekeeper, companion, and later, wife.

Max lived up to a great age of eighty four. To the last
years of his life he was mentally alert, excepting a few physical
disorders due to the old age. He passed away peacefully on 20 May
1956 in the hospital at Rapallo. His last words to his doctor and
Lady Beerbohm were GRAZI PEC TVTTI (the Italian version for
'Thanks for everything').¹ Before death he murmured Swinburne's
following lines from The Garden of Prosopira:

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1. 'Obituary' in (Times Literary Supplement, 21 May, 1956) P. 10
From too much love of living,
From hopes and fears set free,
We thank with brief thanks giving
Whatever gods may be

"That no life lives for ever,
That dead men rise up never
That even the weariest river
Minds somewhere safe to sea."

When asked affectionately by his niece Mrs. Iris Tree:

“You are very much loved, uncle Max. Everyone loves you,” he modestly replied, with an effort, from his sick-bed, “Well, my dear, I was — or — a — well-wisher.”

These words signify Max’s intentions in literature as well as life. Though he was a great satirist and caricaturist, and was feared by the great men, such as Shaw and Kipling, he was not in any form ill-intentioned. What led to his disagreement with others was the incompatibility of things with his own point of view. It is remarkable that though he was quite cynical about the preachers in literature, yet he, himself, taught, inadvertently, a lesson of self-discipline and self-definition in his writings. It came in the form of comedy, mild irony, and witty observations — often causing embarrassment to the elite. The critical study of Max’s essays in the following pages, therefore, aims at unfolding the various subtle shades of his mind and art.

1. David Cecil: Max : A Biography, p. 497