

The Essays of Elia

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Introduction

A Short Biographical Sketch of Lamb

Charles Lamb is one of the Best Beloved of English essayists whose memory, as Southey said, "will retain its fragrance as long as the best spice expended on the "Pharaohs". Lamb was born in London in February 1775. He was the son of a poor clerk. John Lamb was the youngest of seven children, only three of whom survived infancy. Of these three, John, the elder, took no part in the heroic struggle of his brother Charles and sister Mary. Charles Lamb was for sometime at a school in the neighbourhood and, later, was sent to the famous "Blue Coat" Charity School of Christ's Hospital where he remained from 1782 to 1789.

He was a nervous and timid child. While others were all fire and play, he stole along with all the self-consciousness of a monk. He inherited something of his literary inclination and his humour from his father. He spent his early years partly in London and partly with his mother's family in Hertfordshire. These years gave him many happy memories, which are beautifully related in his essays.

When the time came for leaving school, he had learned some Greek, much Latin, Mathematics and general knowledge. If not for his stammering, he would have entered the Church. Now, he could only get a job in a London merchant's office. In 1791, he was appointed as a clerk in the South-Sea House. In 1792, he became a clerk in the famous East India House, where he worked steadily for thirty-three years, with the exception of six weeks in the winter of 1795-1796, spent within the walls of an asylum. His friendship with Coleridge developed during this period and Lamb joined him in writing sonnets. It was during this time, that he was mentally unhinged for a while. It was probably due to an unsuccessful love-affair with Ann Simmons, the Hertfordshire maiden to whom his first sonnets were addressed, whom he must have seen often on his visits to Balckesware House, the country home of the Plumer family where his grandmother Mary Field lived.

There was a taint of insanity in the family. In 1796, his sister Mary, who had been showing symptoms of madness, picked up a knife one day and stabbed her mother in a fit maniacal frenzy. For a long time, after this appalling tragedy, she was in an asylum. But Lamb made himself responsible for her guardianship and brought, her back home in 1799, after the death of their father. For the remaining part of his life, he cared for her with a tenderness and devotion which furnishes one of the most moving pages in our literary

history. They lived together in a garret in Chapel Street, Pentonville. Mary's malady broke out at intervals. As it gave sure warning of its terrible approach, they used to go together to the asylum, tears streaming down their cheeks. The dread of the mad fit hung always over them.

Lamb started publishing sonnets and verses. In 1801, the Lambs moved back to their loved Temple, Mitre Court Building. In 1809 once again they moved to 4, Inner Temple Lane and then to 20, Russel street in 1817. In 1819, he proposed marriage to Fanny, an actress. She declined, giving her devotion to her mother as the reason. But her real reason was the streak of insanity in Lamb's family, Lamb bore the rebuff with his characteristic humour.

In 1823, the Lambs had left London and taken a cottage at Islington. There, Lamb adopted Emma Isola, a young orphan whose presence brightened their lives, until her marriage to Mexon, a publisher. When Lamb was fifty years of age, the East India Company led partly by his literary fame and partly by his thirty three years of faithful service, granted him a comfortable pension of 450 a year. The relief he felt at his retirement was much that he wrote to Wordsworth in April 1825. "I came home for every Tuesday; last week-it was like passing from life into eternity". Curiously enough he seemed to have lost power after his release from drudgery, for, his later works had lost the grace and charm of his earlier works.

In 1827, they shifted to Enfield and then in 1833 to Edmonton. Lamb's health was impaired and Mary's attacks were becoming more frequent and of long duration. The death of Coleridge in 1834 came as a great blow to him. During one of his walks, he fell slightly hurting his face. He died on twenty ninth December 1834. The others opine that the death of Coleridge perhaps expedited his own death. His sister Mary sank rapidly into the gulf from which his strength and gentleness had so long held her back. She died at St. John's wood in 1847.

Charles Lamb's Works

Lamb occupies a peculiar place in literature both as a writer and as a man. His humour and pathos, his blending of fancy and wisdom, tenderness and gusto have given irresistible and lasting charm to his works. As an essayist he is unsurpassed. As a dramatic critic, he is a pioneer. In poetry he can claim "The Old Familiar Faces" and "Hester" as classics.

Lamb had early learning's to literature. Inspired by Coleridge, he had started writing sonnets addressed to eminent persons at the end of 1794. He published his sonnets and other verses in association with Coleridge and Charles Lloyd. His first book was "The Tale of Rosamond Gray", one of the most pathetic stories in English literature. Shortly

afterwards, he began contributing to the daily papers. In 1801, he published a five-act tragedy "John Woodvil", which was a great failure as a drama. The remarkable feature in it was the way in which Lamb had caught the manner and spirit of the Elizabethan writers of whom he was a constant and enthusiastic student.

Brother and sister wrote together 'Tales from Shakespeare' (1807), 'Mrs. Leicester's School' (1808) and 'Poetry for Children' (1809). Of each of these books Mary wrote about two-thirds. To the same period belong other children's books, "The King and Queen of Hearts" (1806) and "The Adventures of Ulysses" (1808). In 1808, Lamb wrote "Specimens of English Dramatists" who lived about the Time of Shakespeare. This book gave an impetus to the study of the Elizabethan dramatists. But his best book which places him in the highest rank as a writer of prose is the "Essays of Elia", which originally appeared in the London Magazine. Later it was published in a collected form in 1823.

Between 1811 and 1820 he wrote almost nothing. These years represent his most social period during which he played much host and entertained his friends on Wednesday or Thursday nights. At this time, he gathered that reputation as a conversationalist or inspirer of conversation in others.

In 1830, Lamb published small volume of poems called Album Verses. In 1833, his "Last Essays of Elia" was published. Lamb was a curious reader, an amusing talker, a convivial soul. He became the centre of a group of wits including Coleridge and Hazlitt. Long before he had discovered his talent for writing essays, he had practised the art of dramatic and literary criticism. He played a considerable part in reviving the dramatic writers of the Shakespearean age. Here he displays exquisite powers of discrimination. As a poet he is not entitled to a high place. Yet, One cannot forget the tenderness, grace and the quaint humour in them. As a letter-writer he ranks very high and when he is in his frequent nonsensical mood, none can equal him. As an essayist he can properly be described as a romantic in the sense that his work is highly personal, tinged with various emotional tones, given to the exploitation of individual whims. In style, he deviates widely from the norm of cultivated style. In his essays, he shows his tendency to escape from the harsh and painful aspects of life into the realm of imagination.

A bundle of essays, a number of casual lyrics, one or two brief plays, a tale of striking pathos, a few narratives and adaptations of old authors for children and some critical notes on his favourite writers -these constitute the sum-total of his work.

The Important Topics

- Autobiographical elements in Lamb's essays.
- The wit and humour in Lamb's essays.
- Pathos in Lamb's essays.

- How does Lamb mix humour and pathos?
- Lamb as a visualiser of memories.
- Lamb's essays are a combination of fact and fiction-Discuss.
- The wisdom of Lamb.
- The style of Lamb.
- Lamb as an essayist.

The Personal Elements in Lamb's Essays

Lamb's essays are the intimate expression of the writer, his mind, his life and all that makes him an individual. In this respect, he resembles Montaigne. Lamb reveals much of himself indirectly and incidentally in his essays. There is a veiled portrait of Lamb in 'Christ's Hospital' and some history of the family of 'My Relations'. We read about his youthful experience in "Mackery End in Hertfordshire" and about his official work in 'South-Sea House'. His sentimental memories can be seen in 'Dream Children and his likes and dislikes are vividly expressed in "A Dissertation upon Roast Pig' and in 'A Chapter on Ears'.

Lamb's essays are his best biography. They show him as a typical Londoner who loves the town, especially all that is old and expressive of the human past. We see his love for relatives and friends and his devotion to his sister. He mentions many places like, The Temple, Christ's Hospital and Hertfordshire which are linked with his past. These places are like living characters in his mind.

We see Lamb the man in his essays. His affection, loyalty, uncomplaining endurance, simplicity, sportive humour and serious moods shine out in his essays. His essays are intensely personal and subjective. But they are not laboured. There is spontaneity. Even in his most reckless sallies of wit and fantasy, there are flashes of self-revelation. He appears to be a gentle, harmless egoist indulging in his fancies and recording his moods and wistful longings. There is no trace of vanity in him. He seems to be more at home in the past than in the present. It is actually his attempt at sublimation of his unhappy experiences.

It is not always good to take Lamb's statements as literal facts. He has a tendency to mystify. The fictitious figure of Elia is his own shadow, the cousin Bridget in his sister, Alice in Ann Simmons. But the disguise which he assumes is transparent. Round the figure of Elia, he weaves musings which are his own. It shows the supreme artistic detachment with which he treats things that personally affect him.

His essays cover a great variety of topics, but the approach is always personal. The intimacy with which he communicates constitutes the principal charm of his love of books and his tastes. Without openly taking himself as a subject, he is for ever speaking of

himself. It is not a case of vanity, but simply that he relates what he knows best. His life itself offers him a fund of inexhaustible matter which he freely exploits.

His kind heart and the spirit of goodness can be seen in "The Praise of Chimney-Sweepers". He seems to be the champion of the poor. Though as a writer he is given to self-expression, he is rather self-effecting. In his essays, we get a picture of a spare, slender person of extremely excitable nervous temperament and of shy melancholic air. In different essays he describes his want of skill in figuring, his dread of novelty, his dislike of death, his incapacity for music, his short stature and unmilitary appearance, his ignorance of things generally known, his love of good cheer, his weakness for wine and tobacco. There is only one subject on which he is silent, and that is insanity.

The romantic writer is confidential. It is a necessity of his nature to express himself. The intimate confidential note is peculiar to all romantic writers. From his essays, we can easily construe the inner and outer life of Lamb. For all their candour they make us feel the continual presence of a fine reticence. Lamb omits no essentials. He does not sentimentalise and he does not brutalise his memories. He poetises them.

The autobiographical detail is not the purpose of his work. It is merely incident to it. Hence the author keeps to strict truth at times and draws upon his imagination some times.

Wit and Humour in Lamb's Essays

Wit and humour are all-pervasive in Lamb's essays. It is a rare and rich blend of elements. While fun is based on the vigour and freshness of the body and mind, his wit is based on the intellect, and humour on insight and sympathy. There is always some touch of humour, sly remark and irony to amuse his readers.

Thomas Tame's royal stoop, John Tipp's singing prowess revealed in his screaming and Hepworth's gravity helping Newton to formulate laws are quite witty. In Christ's Hospital there is the funny story of the lodger who kept a young ass. In the same essay, we have the amusing description of James Boyer and his wigs. There is plenty of humour in "A Chapter on Ears" especially when he uses witty metaphors for ears. His exaggeration of his ignorance of music is in itself a humorous feature of this essay. In "The praise of Chimney-Sweepers" too we have several touches of humour in their description and the annual feast hosted by Jem White. "A dissertation upon roast pig" is replete with wit, humour and fun. Starting from the origin of roasting, to the best method of killing the pig it is full of fun. He describes his poor relations in witty metaphors. Even in "The Dream Children" the reactions of the children provide a touch of humour.

Lamb at times introduces absurd details to heighten the sense of the ludicrous or to indulge in the habit of punning. He indulges in irony too. An unpleasing phrase, word or sentence is suddenly made more pleasing. Sarcasm and sadder vein of irony are fused in "My

Relations". His love of paradox appears in "Superannuated Man". He indulges in farcical humour also, when he describes his personal idiosyncrasies. The element of grotesque is found in the description of Boyer's Wig.

Though his humour takes a freakish and dismal turn, now and then, it is his saving grace. It detaches him from the painful realities and enables him to survey the ills of mankind with dispassionate view. His fine perception and sensibility are expressed on delicate humour and rendered in subtle and perfect language. His rollicking mirth relieves him of the tedium of life. The tender wistfulness with which his humour invests everything is a quality which is unique in Lamb. Humour is ubiquitous in Lamb's essays. We have gentle and kindly humour, ironical and satirical humour, biting and pungent humour and hoisterous fun and so on. There is no malicious or spiteful humour and we seldom see cynical humour.

There is nothing forced. His humour is natural and spontaneous. It is part of his mental equipment. His humour, in all its shifting colours, touches everything he writes. It lends enchantment to all his reveries, fantasies and speculations. Humour is a very important element in his character as well as in his writings.

Pathos in Lamb's Essays

Pathos has a place which is next only to that of humour. Pathos is something recurrent in Lamb's essays. It is an essential ingredient in most of his essays. It exists separately intermingles with humour. His pathos springs from the tragic background of his life. Reminiscence has for him a great charm. The prevailing note of such passages is their pathos.

The atmosphere of pathos is predominant in "Christ's Hospital". Here we see the poor, lonely boy and his home sickness. The pathetic account of the punishments for the boys and the heart-rending story of the destitute who tries to feed his parents make this essay memorable. In "Poor Relations", he touches upon the story of Favell who had to quit his studies because of the proximity of his house-painter father. The episode concerning Mr. Billet, the poor man who has to bear the insults of his aunt, is quite touching. "The Praise of Chimney-Sweepers" arouses our deepest sympathy for the young boys who do the laborious work. Lamb even gives the pathetic incident of a young chimney-sweeper falling asleep in a state bed at Arundel's aisle out of exhaustion. "Dream Children" is highly moving with its account of his dead brother, non-existent wife and children. In this, he tries to give a concrete shape to his unfulfilled parental longings. Even the reference to his grandmother's loneliness is tinged with melancholy.

Lamb's compassionate nature finds expressions in scores of moving incidents and episodes. Lamb is to be classed with the masters of the sentiment of pity in literature as he feels pity for himself as well as for others.

The Fusion of Humour and Pathos

In many of his essays there are alternations of humour and pathos and in some, the two elements exist simultaneously. This curious mingling of the two ingredients gives a peculiar flavour to his essays. Lamb has a touch of morbidity which makes him dwell upon the melancholic aspect of things. He is also endowed with a keen observation that perceives the funny side of things. His appreciation of life is founded upon its apparent contradictions. Lamb is a humorist in the fullest sense of the word. His keen sense of the ludicrous is complemented and checked by his consciousness of the pathetic element in life. It is the perception that everything in life has at one and the same time its serious and trivial side that makes him fuse humour with pathos. Lamb reconciles the two apparent opposites by full sympathy with each.

In "Poor Relations" the amusing description of the poor relative is immediately followed by the painful cases of Favell and Mr. Billet. In "The Praise of Chimney Sweepers" he arouses our sympathy for the poor and unfortunate young fellows and at the same time amuses us by his description of the chimney-sweepers and their teeth. "Dream Children", though primarily an essay characterised by tragic quality, has several touches of humour in the description of the reaction of the imaginary children. The mixture of humour and pathos occurs in the portrayal of Thomas Tame in "The South-Sea House". Humour and pathos alternate in "Christ's Hospital".

Lamb's duality of mind is remarkably expressed in his manner of working out and setting off comic elements with solemn seriousness. His written humour, in fact looks a serio-comic direction, playing with grim subjects and identifying itself with imaginary topics. This blending of tears and laughter has given a peculiar charm to his style. In conclusion - pun repartee, grave exaggeration, grotesque narrative, whimsical turns of thought, reminiscent anecdotes, kindly ridicule, delicate irony - he runs through the whole gamut of humour with the finest taste and is sure in his pathos.

Lamb as an Essayist

Lamb is the most beloved bachelor of letters literature has produced. His writings are the product of his life. He never objects to his lot. He faces life squarely, gaily without whining and with inexhaustible courage. He has resilience unknown to noisier men and toughness unsuspected. Although he knows great sorrow, he is not discontent. He does not like change and will not reverse the untoward accidents and events of his life. He means what he says when he confesses "I am in love with this green earth; the face of town and country; the unspeakable rural solitude and the sweet security of streets". He prefers cobble stones to grass any day. He is a city man if ever there is one; a cockney in every inch of his small person. The nightingale never released a song so sweet to his ears as the sound

of Bow Bells. The pleasure, Wordsworth finds in daffodil Lamb derives from a chimney-sweeper. He does not object to nature for others. But human nature and the hum of city streets are his delight. Nature to him is dead: London living. He cherishes every aspect of the metropolis. He is never tired of its lighted shops, play-houses, crowds, its pungent smells and its very dirt and mud. The city for him is at once a stimulant and an escape. Urbanwise, he lives on it no less than in it. He always measures his fortune, good or ill by his distance from the Strand. But, the City's government is an irrelevance and its politics non-existent. History has bypassed Lamb or he, history. The French Revolution has left no visible mark upon him. Society for him is always a circle of friends and never the collective well-being of a community. "Public affairs-except as they touch upon me and so turn into private", Lamb wrote to Thomas Manning, "I cannot whip up my mind to feel any interest in".

He is as insulated against political events as he is susceptible to human, literary and gastronomic values. A benevolent eccentric himself, he delights in the eccentricities of others. The heads he prizes are not those highly placed but those "with some diverting twist in them", heads lightened by "out-of-the-way humours and opinions". His absorptions are personal, not public, they are small scaled rather than outsized. Londoner utter and complete though he is, he never feels, thinks or writes as a citizen but always as an individual.

His attachment to the past is so great that he exclaims, "Hang the age. I'll write for antiquity". London's past is superimposed upon its present. The city has provided him with a release from his "cold bed of celibacy" and his long years of confinement at the East India House. Retrospection has become his refuge. He is fond of reviewing his memories of twenty or thirty years ago. He is unable to make present times, present to him; it has never prevented him from making times past-present to us. He clings to his past with tenacious affection. His consolation is to dream of the moments that had been.

His jests are infinite, instantaneous, impudent and deflating. He enlivens the passing moments with his humour. His fondness for pun is notorious. The nature of his laughter, the keen and enjoying manner in which he detects frailty, the amused details which underwrite his fantasy are the basis of his reveries. He wit is the expression of his love, not his contempt for men. People, who would have irritated others, amuse him. He is tolerant of human frailties. His is the laughter of acceptance, not protest, of recognition, instead of revulsion. His gaiety is as divorced from scorn or cynicism as it is wedded to melancholy. It smiles without being insulting. Unchilled by the arrogance which is the course of professional wits, it is as warm and human as the little man from whom it emanates. It springs from a superior mind, unconscious of its superiority, a mind which is more endearing because its modesty remains unlost in the midst of its most dazzling exhibitions of prowess.

Lamb's mind is the antithesis of the neat and office-like, as it is full of clutter. It is proudly unmethodized, desultory and tangential. It feeds upon the tantalizing obliquities of life. Its knowledge is a matter of informed tastes rather than of pursued facts. Though Lamb is autobiographical, he is not self-centered. Although with him the first person singular is a favourite pronoun, as he uses it, it somehow manages to seem printed with a small "i". Lamb is too unpretentious to pretend to be omniscient. His own voice contains the echoes of other voices. He chooses to write, intertwining with his identity, grief and affection which are not his own "making himself many or reducing many unto himself.

His familiar essays are the shadows of facts. They are verisimilitudes and not varieties. Yet, Lamb is presenting quintessential if not factually in every phrase and sentence. They are the spontaneous distillations of a writer. The essays give as Lamb unadorned, at his slipped ease-relaxed, using short sentences hitting directly, employing vivid and abrupt colloquialisms, and thus avoiding the calculated beautiful cadences. His very casualness is studied. In Lamb, we find a lot of echoes from his favourite prose writers such as Thomas Brone, Burton, Marvell and Fuller. Their outmoded language is an expression of what is backward-glancing in his spirit. It - pleases him by being out of date. It orchestrates his melancholy. It is very gravity that serves as a foil to his humour. He loves the stately rhythms and the obsolete words of these older writers. He imitates in order to create what is inimitable "Better it is", says he "that a writer should be a self-pleasing quaintness than to effect a naturalness that should be strange to him".

His essays are dateless. Stylistically there are intentional anachronisms. Their antique flavour remains a source of their charm. The long leisurely and intricate constructions of Y-arnbmay appear for bidding. But they are gloriously warm and intimate essays. His subtle and sustained sentences seem difficult. But these difficulties soofaturninto delights. However truffed, archaic or self-conscious his formal style is, it is rich in its rewards. Costume prose it may be, but costume jewellery it never is, because its gems are genuine. Although he complains about his deafness to music, he is able, with words, to release an incomparable music of his own. He is the opposite of those writers he dismissed as being "economists only in delight". His prodigality with the pleasures he provides is limitless. The joy he creates from small things is large. The conceits in his phrasing are redeemed by the sincerity of his feeling. The commonest reaction becomes uncommon in his statement of it. His vocabulary is as much as his own as his mind and both are unpredictable. His ruminative mood and associational mind bring in a lot of allusions and anecdotes. His finest phrases spill from his pen without warning. In his phrases he gives the pleasures other authors give in their paragraphs.

Lamb, the natural-born essayist and the matchless critic of books and men, caught life hot and frankly transferred it with effortless ease by a pen scratching swiftly against stolen time at the office.

Dream Children: A Reverie

"Dream Children" is a reverie of a man who was intensely human and whose life was a tragedy. Lamb had manfully borne the misfortunes that befell him. He sacrificed his own comforts and happiness and took the responsibility of his sister. As he had to remain a bachelor throughout his life, he indulged in such day-dreaming. He gives here a concrete shape to his unfulfilled paternal longings.

It contains a fanciful or imaginary account of the children he never had. Alice and John are the imaginary offspring of his imaginary marriage with Ann Simmons whom he had loved in his youth but who had not responded to his love.

Children love to hear about their elders. So, one evening they crept close to the father to know something about their great grandmother, Field, who lived in a great house in Norfolk. Though she was not the owner of the house, she looked after it with loving care. The most interesting thing about that house was the story of the children carved in wood upon the chimneypiece of the great hall. But this was replaced by a marble chimneypiece by a rich person afterwards. In fact after Mrs. Field's death, the house came to decay and all its ornaments were removed to the owner's other house where they looked out of place. Here John responded with a smile as much as to say that the ornaments must have looked very awkward in any other place. Then Lamb told them how pious, good and popular Mrs. Field had been. As she was respected by everybody, her funeral was attended by both the poor and the gentry of the neighbourhood. When he mentioned that the gentle hearted pious woman knew the Psalter by heart, the children were awe-struck.

Then, Lamb began to tell them about Mrs. Field's youth and her renown as the best dancer in the country. Here Alice's little right foot played an involuntary movement till, on Lamb's looking serious, it stopped.

Then he told the children about the apparition of two infants which used to haunt the place at midnight. At that John expanded his eye brows and tried to look courageous. The grandmother was very kind to her grandchildren. Lamb used to visit her very often and roam round the large silent rooms of that huge house and hang about the garden gazing at the trees and flowers. Though he indulged in many busy idle diversions, he was never tempted to pluck the fruits from the trees. Here, John slyly deposited back upon the plate a bunch of grapes which he had stealthily picked up a little earlier with the intention of sharing it with Alice.

Next, Lamb told the children about their uncle John Lamb, who was the favourite of Mrs. Field. He was a handsome and spirited youth and was very fond of riding and hunting. He was in fact a brave man and he won the admiration of every one. When Lamb was a lame-footed boy. John used to carry him on his back. Later on, John became lame-footed. Lamb feels that he had not been considerate enough .to bear the impatient pains of John or to remember how John helped him.

When John died, Lamb missed him very much and remembered his kindneatt. The pathetic story of John touched the hearts of the innocent children. They cried and requested him not to tell them anything more about uncle John but to tell them something about their mother. Then Lamb began telling them how for seven long years he had courted the fair Alice, sometimes in hope and sometimes in despair. Suddenly, he felt that the eyes of that old Alice were gazing from the face of the littleAlice sitting before him. As he looked, the children seemed to recede till he would see nothing but two sad features which appeared to be saying that they were not children at all. So they were merely dreams. At this point Lamb woke up to find himself in thebachelor chair where he had fallen asleep and had been day-dreaming with thefaithful Bridget by his side.

Critical Comments

This essay is noted for the autobiographical description. His remarkable storytelling power has fully revealed itself here. Pathos is the keynote of this essay. There is an air of dreamy reminiscence and reflection which intensifies the pathos. The reference to the some linens of his aged grandmother Field is tinged with soft melancholy. The account of his brother's death is tragic. The close of the essay is marked by deep poignancy and heart-breaking pathos. We are deeply touched by the utter frustration of Lamb's hopes of a conjugal life and the joys of having a family. As professor Mark Hunter says, "It is the wail of a deeply sympathetic keenly loving soul, for whom fate has apportioned solitariness".

The element of humour which is a characteristic of most of the essays of Lamb can be seen in the children's reactions to their father's story. In this essay humour and pathos are inextricably mingled. Lamb had a genius for reminiscence. He liked to chew the cud of memory. The retrospective character of this essay is clearly seen, when he recalls the lonely life of his grandmother, his childhood and his dashing brother's life. It is for this reason that he has been called "a visulaliser of memories".

Lamb can suit his style to the subject he has chosen. It is written in a brooding and meditative style as it is a reverie. The language is simple and lucid. There are no obsolete words. Latin expressions, coinages, learned allusions and quotations. The essay is completely free from verbal embellishments and adornments. His tone of sincerity is

unmistakable. His feeling of despondency and frustration is effectively conveyed. This essay is poetic as the subject is fanciful. It is indeed "a lyric in prose".

Dissertation upon a Roast Pig

Lamb gives amusing stories connected with the origin of roast pigs and reveals his taste regarding other eatables too. Man ate raw meat for seventy thousand years and discovered the art of roasting only by accident. To give credibility to this point, Lamb brings in an old Chinese manuscript which narrates the story of swine-herd, Hoti.

One day, when Hoti left for the woods, his son Bobo looked after the cottage. As he was playful, he played with fire. At that time some sparks of fire got into the straw. Soon the whole cottage was engulfed in fire. The cottage and a fine litter of nine pigs were burnt completely. As pigs were considered to be a luxury in China those days, the boy was worried. As he was crying, the smell that emanated from the pigs appealed to him. Unable to explain this feeling, he bent down to feel the pig and burnt his fingers. As a natural reaction he tried to cool them by applying them to his mouth. The scorched skin of the pig was really tasty. He repeated the experience and realized that the appetizing aroma came from the pig. Then he started eating the roast pig.

His father who came back was horrified at that sight. He abused him and severely punished him. But it never had any effect on the boy. He turned his attention to his father only after he finished eating. Bobo was trying in vain to explain to his father his delicious experience with the roast pig. Unable to convince him he brought the burnt pig and made his father touch it. When Hoti's fingers were burnt, he too put them into his mouth and found to his great joy he could relish it. Then father and son sat down to have a sumptuous meal of the burnt pigs.

As they were afraid of the neighbour's reaction, they kept the secret to themselves. Whenever they felt like eating the roast pig they used to burn their cottage. Strange rumours were spread and their secret was uncovered. They were taken to Peking for trial. Before the judgement was given, the jury wanted a specimen to be produced at the court. All the members of the jury sucked their fingers. Having found the delicious taste they declared that Hoti and Bobo were not guilty.

Soon, the judge's house was on fire. This practice spread throughout the district. Fuel and pigs became very costly and insurance offices were closed. Later, the art of roasting developed. Lamb feels that most useful arts make their way among mankind very slowly.

Lamb feels that the roasted flesh of the pig is the most delicate of all delicacies. It must be a young pig, which is less than a month old. This crackling lies in the plate on the

dinner table beautifully. Lamb humorously describes the plate as its second cradle. Lamb likes the pig to be roasted, not seethed or boiled.

The flavour of the crisp, properly roasted crackling is beyond comparison. He is in fact glad that the young pig is not allowed to grow fat. Lamb has often watched with fascination, the eyes of the pig melting in the fire and dropping out like bright jellies or like shooting stars. Lamb delights in the beauty of the roasted pig served in a dish. He is glad that the young pig was not allowed to grow dirty, obstinate, disagreeable, glutinous and gross. Lamb does not care for bacon or sausages as they are the meat from mature pigs.

Lamb enjoys eating pineapple also. But it does not satisfy hunger. Even a mutton chop would be better in that respect. But roast pig is the finest dish. It satisfies both the critical judgement and the pangs of hunger. Every man is benefitted by it. The strong man becomes stronger by eating it and the weak finds the mild juices nourishing.

A young pig is uniformly good. As no part of it is better or worse than the other, nobody blames that the neighbour has taken a better portion. In fact, the roast pig promotes friendship. Lamb normally loves to share good things with his friends. If he receives hares, partridges, chickens, capons, plovers and oysters, he shares them with his friends. Like King Lear he will not give away everything. He draws a line where a pig is concerned. He feels that it is ungrateful on his part to give away the gift (the roast pig) God has given him. He recalls to his mind, how he gave away to a beggar a plum cake given to him by his old aunt. Later, he bitterly repented. In the old days pigs were killed by whipping. Though it appeared to be a cruel practice, they did it, in order to improve the flavour and taste. The young students at St. Omer had a discussion on the pigs being whipped to death.

Critical Comments

The fanciful description of the origin of the art of roasting a pig is highly amusing. It becomes hilarious when the judge starts setting fire to his house in order to taste the pig. The humour becomes boisterous when the insurance offices closed shutters and the science of architecture was almost lost to the world. Though the story is absurd, it is full of fun. Lamb uses a lot of anecdotes in this essay. He waxes eloquently about the roast pig and shows himself a true lover of it. His delight in roast pig borders on ecstasy. Lamb's apparent callousness towards the pig is the only jarring aspect in this essay. The merciful and kind-hearted Lamb seems to show the other side of his character cruelty and complete indifference.

The essay is couched mostly in simple words, though the high-sounding phrases and bombastic sentences are not entirely absent. Some sentences have an almost aphoristic quality. On the whole this essay is the classic example of Lamb's fine humour and wit.