



The Contribution of Charles Lamb as an Essayist to the English Literature

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Abstract: *This article describes how the great writer of English Charles Lamb as an essayist and why he is considered as the prince among the English essayists. The history of English essay writing has been admiring the position of Charles Lamb as the unique one among all essay writers of his time. His essays include the immense variety having autobiographical nature, humanitarian outlook, touching pathos, poetic quality and mystification. Moreover, the revelation of the creator's self can be seen in his essays. They are the intimate expression of the writer's mind, life and temperament. Lamb himself was described by him in his essays. The author of this article has attempted to show the greatness and popularity of Charles Lamb in the field of essay writing in English.*

Keywords: autobiographical, familiarity, variety of theme, poetic style, humour

Introduction

"The essay is a little criticism of life at some one point clearly enough defining."
- A.C. Benson

The essay writing was begun as early as the 15th century. Essay means a short composition which is something incomplete and unsystematic. According to Johnson, an essay is *"a loose sally of the mind, an irregular, indigested piece, not a regular and orderly performance."* The word 'sally' refers to the aimless movements of the mind here and there within the limits of the subject matter and the mind does not search for the depth of the knowledge of the subject. Alexander Smith describes an essay as – *"a literary form, (that) resembles the lyric, in so far as it is moulded by some central mood – whimsical, serious or satirical. Given the mood, and the essay, from the first sentence to the last, grows around it as the cocoon grows around the silkworm."* The essay differs from other literary forms in terms of its content and formation. It is short, precise, thoughtful and essentially it is an expression of the writer's feelings and ideas.

Charles Lamb's essays are considered as the best examples of essay in English. Lamb followed the rhythmic style in writing essays. His essays reveal the eloquent style of Montaigne and Cowly. He was called *'the Prince of English Essayists'*. His essays describe human nature, sweetness of heart, humour, touching pathos and over all the whole life-experiences of man. Hugh Walker admired Lamb's greatness in essay writing as – *"There are essayists like Bacon, of more massive greatness, and others like Sir Thomas Browne, who can attain loftier heights of eloquence, but there is no other who has in an equal degree the power to charm. If an attempt to be made to discover the secret of this power, it will be found that first and chief among the factors contributory to it is the incomparable sweetness of disposition which Lamb not only possessed but had a unique gift of communicating to his writing."* Such a tribute from critics proves the greatness of the genius of Charles Lamb.

Charles Lamb's first appearance was come as a poet with contributions to the collections by Coleridge and by Charles Lloyd. His poetic contributions include *A Tale of Rosamund Gray* (a prose romance-1798), *John Woodvil* (a poetic tragedy-1802) and *The Old Familiar Faces*(1789) – his best known poem. Further, his best poetic achievement was come in 1828 with a title *On an Infant Dying as Soon as It was Born*. He also published a retelling of the plays with the title *Tales from Shakespeare* in 1807 along with his sister. Later he and his sister published *Mrs. Leicester's School*, a collection of stories in 1809 and *The Adventures of Ulysses* – a children version of the *Odyssey* came in 1808. His literary writing also included critical papers on Shakespeare and on William Hogarth to Hunt's *Reflector*. His criticism comprises of brief comments, reactions, responses and delicate phrases. Above all these, Lamb's the most remarkable achievement in literature was his letters and essays written by him under the pseudonym Elia for London Magazine.

He had many distinct features or characteristics in his essay writing in English.

Familiarity in Lamb's Essays

Lamb's essays look more familiar than the essays of other writers in English. His essays changed the general tone from formality to familiarity on the part of the readers. The readers of his essay look more confident and familiar with the writer. Other essayists of his time made certain kind of distance between them and the readers. Lamb abolished this distance altogether and disarmed the readers with his buttonholding familiarity. He many times addressed his readers as – dear reader – as if he were addressing an intimate friend. This note of familiarity and intimacy made him different from other essay writers who were writing in formal way rather than familiar way.

Personal and Autobiographical

Lamb's essays were deeply personal and autobiographical in nature. He always reflected his nobility, his simplicity, his good nature and his humanity. As Thomson remarked, "*Lamb wrote in his essay, a record of episodes which can be connected with the addition of a few links and the elimination of a considerable amount of delightful fiction into a substantial account of a large part of his life.*" Lamb talked about the different stages of his life – his childhood, his boyhood and his manhood. His personal life was always visible very uniquely throughout his essays. His personality, his likings, his disliking, his nature, his character, his relatives, his work places, etc are conveyed in his essays. Anyone can learn something about his life while reading his essays. He revealed the past memories and people of his past life many times in his essays. In fact, Lamb's own life is narrated in his essays by him. Truly, his essays can provide anyone to write a large portion of his biography.

Immense Variety of Theme

Essay had been used as a medium of expressing writer's inner thoughts on any general subject since Bacon. Lamb brought immense variety in essay writing in his time. He gave expression to his experiences and what he saw throughout his life span. He didn't like to present thoughts in any systematic way rather he liked to describe sudden thoughts of imagination. His essays are his own revelations in a true sense. He persistently revealed everything about his life to the reader in his essays. One can find his opinions, feelings, emotions, prejudices, likes and dislikes while reading his essays. A variety of taste is the main aspect of his essay writing. Edmund Blunden rightly said, "*In treatment of almost every essay moves through a series of moods, wild and sweet, grave and subdued, clear and practical, sumptuous and sonorous,*

Elia is all there. They are promiscuous, meagre and fragmentary, the essays are differenced many blossomed and handsome."

Touching Pathos and Humour

Lamb's essays reveal touching pathos and humour which differentiates him from the essay writers of his time and after his time. He is considered the most original humorist of all. It is the humor of life which is presented in his essays with a variety of style. The humor and pathos expressed in his essays are in a way enabling him to detach himself from the painful realities of his life. He never cherished any bitter feeling in his heart rather he saw his life in a view of comedy, in steady way and as a whole. He drew out comedy of the meanest stuff of human nature. He believed in the art which plays with the lements of life which creates a fantastic world of its own. His essays are full of absurd details, funny situations, puns and boisterous laughter. In the introduction to their edition of the Essays of Elia, Hallward and Hill pointed out – *"The terms Wit, Humour and Fun are often confused but they are really different in meaning. The first is based on intellect, the second on insight and sympathy, the third on vigour and freshness of mind and body."* There was a good balance between the humour he presented in his essays and pathos which is a significant aspect of humour. He was conscious of his pathos of his life which was reflected in the form of humour in his essays. His *The Dream Children* is a notable in matter of humour and pathos. He had a gift of humour that enabled him to dissociate himself from the realities, and construct a new world of humanity in which one can find a faint reflection of reality.

Lamb's Style and Poetic Quality

Lamb's style as expressed in his essays is charming, inimitable and the expression of his personality. In the words of Saintsbury, *"The style of Lamb is as indefinable as it is inimitable and his manner and method defy selection and specification as much as the fluttering of a butterfly."* We can notice emotional fervor, conversational ease, moving pathos, epigrammatic depth, reminiscent allusiveness, shy satire and other stylistic characteristics in all his essays, especially in *Essays of Elia*. He had the most natural and original style; however it is quite difficult to analyze his style. About the distinct quality of Lamb's style, Hugh Walker observes, *"Neither the brilliancy of Hazlitt, nor the harmony of De Quincey, nor the vigour of Macaulay, nor the eloquence of Ruskin, nor the purity of Goldsmith could for a moment be thought capable of expressing the meaning of Lamb."* Lamb's style was influenced by Brown, Burton and Fuller of the 17th century. Many times, his feelings were expressed through the quotes of the old writers. *"His style is highly personal and mannered, its function being to "create" and delineate the persona of Elia, and the writing, though sometimes simple, is never plain. The essays conjure up, with humour and sometimes with pathos, old acquaintances; they also recall scenes from childhood and from later life, and they indulge the author's sense of playfulness and fancy. Beneath their whimsical surface, Lamb's essays are as much an expression of the Romantic movement as the verse of Coleridge and William Wordsworth."* Thus, his style had the charm of poetry, emotional fervor and a marked feature of allusiveness with the frequent use of irony and pun.

Lamb's essays are somewhat poetic. The poetic beauty and charm are the major characteristics visible in his essays. Sampson remarked, *"Lamb's finest essays are nearest of all to poetry."* His *Dream Children*, *A Quaker's Meeting* and *Essays of Elia* are rich in poetry along with spontaneous ease and graceful charm.

Conclusion

Thus, Charles Lamb was an essayist having great poetic style, autobiographical outlook, a variety of theme and humourous and pathetic touch rarely found in other essay writers of English literature. Deighton points out, “*no amount of study will stale their infinite variety and that if they have been read a hundred times, they will be all the better loved the hundred and first time.*” Lamb is given a place as an essayist beside Montaigne, Sir Thomas Browne, Steele and Addison. He had all the important elements of essay writing with the highest artistic intelligence and brilliancy. His nobility of life and gentleness of heart made his one of the greatest essayists of English literature.

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