

Thematic concerns in the Essays of Charles Lamb: A critical analysis

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Abstract: Francis Bacon and Charles Lamb are the two prominent names in the history of English essays. If Bacon is the father of English essays, Charles Lamb (1775-1833) may be called the prince of English essayists. In fact, Lamb is entitled to a place as an essayist beside Montaigne, Sir Thomas Browne, Steele and Addison. Lamb's essays can be categorized into essays proper which are characterized, among other things, by the presence of subjective elements, informal tone, certain degree of lightness and ease and a confidential relation between the author and the reader. The manner and tune of Lamb's essays is as changeful as their occasion and topic, for Lamb saw English prose as an instrument flexible enough to be used for various purposes. His essays cover a wide range so far as their themes are concerned. This paper is an attempt at making a critical analysis of the thematic concerns in the essays of Lamb.

Keywords: Essays, confidential, humour, subjective, themes

1. Introduction:

Charles Lamb's essays, though limited in number, exhibit infinite variety of subjects. The saying "Here's God's plenty" is applicable to Lamb's essays. As Edmund Blunden observes, they range from the vision of beautiful children that never were to the drollery consequent upon old George Dyer's stumbling into the new River's tenuous trickle, from nonsensical rebellion against Beethoven, Bach, Mozart to the contemplation of true and false painting. Their autobiographical animation is sustained from child Elia's small and magic world of the Temple sundials and fountains to the man's superannuation from his daily work of year on year, and his sense of a 'dark companionship' already beckoning him away from his dear earth.

2. Objectives:

The present paper has been prepared keeping the following objectives in view.

- i) To study, analyse and appreciate the personal essays of Charles Lamb.
- ii) To attempt a critical analysis of the essays of Lamb with special emphasis on their thematic aspects.

3. Materials and methods:

The present study is basically of descriptive and analytical type. For this purpose, a thorough critical study of the essays of Charles Lamb has been made. Materials that are considered to be relevant to the proposed study have been collected from different sources and analysed critically. Text books, reference books, research journals, e-journal etc. have been used for the present study.

4. Discussion:

4.1 Wide variety of themes:

Lamb's essays embody a wide variety of themes. His essays satisfy the appetite of every taste-from personal to professional, from imaginary to factual, from pathetic to humorous. However, the most striking feature about the contents of Lamb's essays is the self-revelation of their endearing and whimsical author. We read all about his stammer, his work at India House, the violence and intensity which threatened the good cheer of his life and almost everything about his life. To give a few examples, his essay, 'The Christ's Hospital' gives an account of his early education. In this essay, Lamb takes the readers into his confidence and talks to them of his boyhood days at school. In a reminiscent mood, he makes an intimate self-revelation – an account of his life at school, of his friends and companions and of his teachers. He says:

"I was a poor friendless boy. My parents and those who should care for me were far away. Those few acquaintances of theirs which they could reckon upon as being kind to me in the great city, after a little forced notice, which they had the grace to take of me on my first arrival in town soon grew tired of me of my holiday visits".

This essay contains a number of character sketches. The characters of Mathew Field and of James Boyer, the upper master have been skillfully drawn through a few deft touches. This essay has the charm of autobiography. It throws interesting light on Lamb's youth. His pensive mood, his nervousness, his fear of initiation, his dislike for school discipline, and his several other likings and dislikings are presented here. In this connection George Gordon remarks, "This passion for places and more especially for the places where he had dreamed as a boy continued with him through life, growing stronger, even as time lengthened his perspective and what had been the present entered, without quite passing, the hither and limits. He was fortunate in all his surroundings. The chance

which elected that he should be born in the Temple and spend his schooldays in Christ's Hospital passing as it were, from cloister to cloister, must rank with the imaginative solitudes of Blakesware among the ennobling provisions of life."

Here Lamb also recalls the unsatisfactory and inadequate meals that were served to the boarders at school. He recalls the feeling of misery which Coleridge experienced at school on account of his loneliness and home-sickness. He recalls the persecutions the smaller boys were subjected to by the older boys. His mind goes back to the case of the unfortunate fellow who used to feed his destitute parents with 'gags' collected from the dinner table. He does not forget to narrate the varying degrees of punishment awarded to boys guilty of various offences. All these memories are vividly projected in this essay.

The South-Sea House records the author's experiences of past associations. In fact, this essay shows the author as a 'visualiser of memories'. This is a reminiscent essay in which the author recalls the days that he spent as a clerk in the South-Sea House and the persons in the midst of whom he worked. He takes the readers into confidence and tells them that the House was situated between the Bank of England and the Inn called the Flower Port. It is now desolate and ruined. To quote Lamb,

"Such is the South-Sea House. At least such it was forty years ago, when I knew it – a magnificent relic!"

The chief interest of this essay lies in the brief character sketches which it contains. These character sketches not only show Lamb's genius for vivid portrayal but also his gift for humorous delineation. The description of his colleagues is enlivened throughout with flashes of delightful wit and humour. Thus he says of Hepworth. "from his gravity Newton might have deduced the laws of gravitation." They all are odd eccentrics, and humorous exaggeration characterises Lamb's account of them. Continuing his description of the persons of the South-Sea House, Lamb says that they were mostly bachelors. Generally they were persons of a curious and speculative bent of mind. They were old 'fashioned'; they were 'humorists'; they formed 'a sort of Noah's Ark'; they were 'odd fishes'.

My Relations is another essay which is wholly reminiscent in nature. It contains Lamb's recollections of some of his relations. Here he gives character sketch of two 'familiar faces' of his family, his aunt Hetty and his brother John. The essay opens with a reference to the dead parents, but we know about them nothing more than that both of them are dead. After mentioning them Lamb passes on to describe his aunt and brother. Lamb writes;

"Male aunts, as somebody calls them, I had none to remember. by the uncle's side, I may be said to have been born an orphan. Brother or sister I never had any-to know them. a sister, I think, that should have been Elizabeth, died in both our infancies. What a comfort, or what a care may I not have missed in her! But I have cousins, sprinkled about in Hertfordshire."

Lamb's aunt was a spinster who loved Lamb above all others in the world. Describing, Lamb says that she was very of reading books. She was also a lady of religious temperament. The only secular employment Lamb had seen her performing was the splitting of French beans, and dropping them into a China basin of fair water. While giving a portrait of his elder brother John who has been named as James Elia, Lamb says that James was an inexplicable cousin whom nature had made so obscure that even an acute critic would not be able to understand him. He loved works of art. But his theories and principles were contrary to his practice. His proud and independent spirit asserted itself in all circumstances. James Elia, remembers Lamb, was also a stoic who lived in a world of his own. He was, however, a tender-hearted person.

Oxford in the Vacation is another remarkable reminiscent essay which describes Lamb's experiences in Oxford during vacations. In this essay, after having disclosed the identity of Elia, Lamb informs the readers that his real vocation is not auditing or accounting which he does in his office but the writing of poems and epigrams and essays which he undertakes after office hours. He follows up this piece of information by an expression of regret at the abolition of a large number of holidays connected with the memory of various Christian saints. This is followed by Lamb's fanciful account of his unfulfilled wishes.

Lamb imagines that if he had been able to join a university, he might have been a Sizer or a Servitor or a Gentleman Commoner; or even a Master of Arts. He writes:

"Their vacation too, at this time of the year, falls in so pat with ours. Here I can take my walk unmolested, and myself of what degree or standing I please. I seem admitted *ad eundem*. I fetch up old opportunities. I can rise at the chapel bell, and dream that it rings for me. In moods of humility, I can be a Cizer, or a Servitor."

Lamb's description of himself in the midst of books and manuscripts in the Bodleian Library is a genuine expression of his feelings it seems to him that the souls of all the writers are reposing on the shelves.

This essay also reveals Lamb's love of antiquity. He is impressed deeply by the antiquity of Oxford environs. He analyses his own feelings about it. Oxford as an old seat of learning fills Lamb with reverence. A library also breathes the very air of antiquity. He says,

"Antiquity! Thou wondrous charm, what are thou? That being nothing, art everything. When thou wert, thou wert not antiquity-then thou wert everything."

4.2. Observation of Man and Manners:

The essays of Lamb are a record of his keen observation of man and manners. Many of his essays bear testimony to this fact. As a matter of fact the various characters-sketches found in his essays not only make interesting reading but also establish Lamb as a minute observer of man and manners.

The essay, “The South Sea House” may be referred to as an illustration of Lamb’s acute power of observation. As already mentioned earlier, in this essay, there is a hint of the glorious past of the South Sea House as well as its inglorious ending. It has now been reduced into a magnificent relic. But Lamb gifted with rich sensibilities, naturally feels for it, and his memory which is a storehouse of images and impressions of the past, calls up the human figures, with which he had been associated. Lamb’s keen power of observation is displayed in its fullest in this essay as he conjures up some of his close associates in the South Sea House. He goes into the fine, subtle traits of each character. They might be no more than mere shadows, but his wit and humanity, committed to a gracious presentation of their foibles, and weaknesses, make them pleasant portraits of men who had once stirred the South Sea House into life and activity.

Lamb shows his acute power of observation in the vivid description of his fellow workers. Lamb describes that they were mostly bachelors and were ‘persons of a curious and speculative turn of mind, old-fashioned.’ They had their own peculiar habits and oddities. One of them was the cashier Evans, a Cambro-Briton, who is described by Lamb as a ‘worthy sensible man at bottom’. Lamb also describes John Trip, the accountant who ‘neither pretended to high blood, nor in good truth cared one fig about the matter’. Lamb says that John Trip ‘thought an accountant the greatest character in the world, and himself the greatest accountant of it.’ Besides these, there were Henry Man, ‘the wit, the polished man of letters, the author of the South sea House’, Plumer the ‘rattle-headed’ person who traced his descent from the Plumers of Hertfordshire; pure and simple Maynard who sang divine melodies on the flute.

“*The Old and the New Schoolmaster*” is another essay which throws light on Lamb as a keen observer of men and their manners. In his characteristic manner, without any sentimental halo, Lamb brings out the pitiable situation of the schoolmaster. Underneath the glowing surface of modern learning, Lamb discovers the real priggishness of the whole educational system. He rightly observes that there is a lot of self-conceit behind the whole race of modern teachers. Lamb describes the awkward behavior of the schoolmaster in the company of his equals. Lamb says that the schoolmaster has been living in the company of his pupils who are intellectually inferior to him. Therefore, he suffers from a sense of self-superiority. Lamb makes an interesting observation on this situation of the schoolmaster:

“He is awkward, and out of place in the society of his equals. He comes like Gulliver from among his little and he cannot fit the stature of his understanding to yours. He cannot meet you on the square.”

The essay, “A Bachelor’s Complaint of the Behaviour of Married People” is interesting so far as Lamb’s observation of men and manners is concerned. Here Lamb describes various oddities of the married couples who very often make a show of their love in the presence of guests, who feel themselves as intruding upon their privacy. Their behavior to each other indicates that “they prefer one another to all the world.”

Then Lamb proceeds to speak how the wives of married people are prone to showing off their knowledge. They consider the unmarried people ignorant. Moreover, the mothers, Lamb says, are more proud and insolent because of their children. In an ironical tone Lamb the ‘double-headed arrows’.

Lamb makes another interesting observation on human behavior in this essay when he says that friendship rarely continues after the marriage of one of the friends. He says that wives envy the friends of their husbands, and they do not hesitate to use a number of cunning ways to undermine their husbands’ confidence in their friends. Thus Lamb’s power of minute observation of men and manners is seen throughout this essay.

Mention may also be made about the essay “Grace Before Meat” to illustrate Lamb’s observation of men and manners. In this essay, Bacon while expressing his views on the age-old Christian custom of offering prayers to God for providing us with daily food makes certain interesting observations which reflect his acute power of observation of man and manners. Lamb feels irritated at the peculiar manner of saying grace before taking meals. He fails to understand why grace should be said only before taking food, and not before other pleasurable activities like reading books. Lamb, however, discovers the beauty in grace when it is being said by the poor before his dinner or by the children at their simple repast.

According to Lamb, grace before the plainest diet is quite pleasant. But in the case of the rich, it is mere formality. He says:

“Again the plainest diet seems the fittest to be preceded by the grace. That which is least stimulative to appetite leaves the mind most free for foreign considerations. A man may feel thankful, heartily over a dish of plain mutton with turnips, and have leisure to reflect upon the ordinance and institution of eating; when he shall confess a perturbation of mind inconsistent with the purposes of the grace, at the presence of venison of turtle.”

Lamb feels that religious sentiment is eclipsed by a sort of pagan feeling of hunger, and naturally this contradiction in one’s mind makes one rather awkward. Lamb says that at the table where rich dishes are set, graces lose their sweetness. People are too engrossed with the food to bother anything about the music of graces.

“Modern Gallantry” is one of the interesting essays in which Lamb records his observations on womanhood but at the same time, makes comment on the failures of the young men of his age to live up to the true ideals of gallantry which has ever been held in high esteem. Lamb observes with regret that there is no true gallantry to be found among the people of his generation. Men treat women unfairly. They are whipped in public, or occasionally hanged, and actresses are jeered at the stage and made to go off it. Men feel shy, says lamb, in helping a fishwife to cross a canal or assisting an apple-woman to collect her scattered fruit. A woman looking sick or tired and standing in the pit will not be able to attract a man to offer his seat to her. Lamb writes that when a man shows courtesy to a woman, it is not out of respect for the fair sex, but because of her beauty, youth, rank or fortune. This is proved by the fact that an old unmarried woman is often looked upon with disgrace.

The essay “Old Benchers of the Inner Temple” also deserves mention so far as Lamb’s observation of man and manners is concerned. In this essay, the author recalls nostalgically the place where he was born and brought up, with its church, halls, gardens, fountains and also its people whom he loved from the depth of his heart. In the vivid character sketches given by Lamb in this essay we come across the author’s minute observation of his fellow human beings and also his unique capability to invest his people with dramatic quality. The most notable characters described by Lamb in this essay are Thomas Coventry, Samuel Salt and Lovell. Similarly, Samuel Salt is described as a man of pensive gentility. He had the reputation of being a very clever man and of very excellent discernment in the chamber practice of the law. In contrast with Coventry, Salt was a much milder man. He is described as shy, slow and lazy, though he was greatly liked by ladies. Then Lamb describes Lovell who was a person of ‘incorrigible and losing honesty’. Moreover, he was “liveliest little fellow breathing, had a face as gay as Garrick’s whom he was said greatly to resemble-possessed a fine turn for humorous poetry”.

4.3.Lamb’s psychological insight:

Lamb in some of his essays reveals his deep insight into human psychology. The psychological observations made by him have universal validity. In this connection reference may be made to the essay “The Old and the New Schoolmaster.” In this essay, the author makes observations on the emotional situation of the schoolmaster. He vividly expresses the loss and lack that the schoolmaster’s emotional life faces in the imaginary letter purportedly to be written by a schoolmaster. How pathetically true is the fact that a schoolmaster craves but does not get the love from the children he teaches. They respect him but do not love him, says Lamb. In course of time, the schoolmaster even loses the love of his wife, who also starts respecting him as the boys’ master rather than loving him.

Lamb says that when the old boys come with a gift and other people think that it is out of love for him, the schoolmaster feels otherwise. He sadly realizes that it is not love for him which draws them towards him. We are touched by the pathos of this man being emotionally starved- even though he desires to show and get the affections of his pupils, his position involves a relationship of respect rather than one of love and affection with his pupils.

Lamb also displays his psychological insight when he explains in this essay why one feels uneasy in the presence of one’s superiors. The superior fellow, says Lamb, can never fit the stature of his understanding to that of others. The effect of such a constant companionship is harmful too. The inaccessible ideas of the superior person stunt the growth of one’s faculties. In the words of Lamb;

“I would not be domesticated all my days with a person of very superior capacity to my own- not, if I know myself at all, from any consideration of jealousy or self comparison for the occasional communion with minds has constituted the fortune and felicity of my life- but the habit of too constant intercourse with spirits above you, instead of rising you keeps you down.” Lamb further says;

Lamb’s deep psychological insight is also revealed in the essay “The Old Benchers of the Inner Temple”. In this essay he makes some valid observations on the working of the minds of the children. Here he disapproves of the demolition of the harmless pleasures for the children such as the marble fountain and the sundials. Why, he asks, should the children not have their innocent means of pleasure? Why cannot the older people cater to their imaginative powers? Then he makes an important observation whose truth was not realized in his age but which is an almost established fact now:

“Let the dreams of classic idolatry perish,- extinct be the fairies and the fairy trumpery of legendary fabling, -in the heart of childhood, there will, forever, spring up a well of innocent or wholesome superstition- the seeds of exaggeration will be busy there, and vital- from every form educating the unknown and the uncommon.”

The essay “the Superannuated Man” gives insight into the mind of a clerk who has finally liberated himself from the life-long drudgery. Lamb who had undergone the terrible experiences of clerkship recalls his days in such heart-touching words:

“It is now six and thirty since I took my seat at the desk in Mincing Lane. Melancholy was the transition at fourteen from the abundant playtime and the frequently intervening vacations of school days, to the eight, nine, and sometimes ten hours’ a day attendance at the counting house. But time partially reconciles us to anything. I gradually became content – doggedly content, as wild animals in cages.

Lamb was a man of carefree nature and was at the same time conscientious about his work. But when he did not take interest in his work, he used to have nightmares of having committed some sort of mistake, perhaps because of the lack of interest and concentration. Lamb describes this psychological state thus:

“Independently of the rigours of attendance, I have ever been haunted with a sense of (perhaps a mere caprice) of incapacity for business. This, during my letter years, had increased to such a degree that it was visible in all the lines of my countenance. My health and good spirits flagged. I had perpetually a dread of some crisis, to which I should be found unequal.”

Witches and other Night Fears reveals the working of the child mind. Lamb tells us accurately how a child mind works in the face of superstitions and fears related to them. Lamb explains this position of the sick man in these terms:

“He has put on his strong armour of sickness, he is wrapped in the callous hide of suffering, he keeps his sympathy, like some curious vintage, under trusty lock and key, for his own use only. He lies pitying himself, homing and moaning to himself; he yearneth over himself; his bowels are even melted within him, to think what he suffers; he is not ashamed to weep over himself.”

The state of convalescence, says Lamb, is a fall from dignity. This state sinks a man back to his original state. The sick room is reduced to a common bed room. Hushed are those mysterious sighs- those groans- so much more awful, while we knew not from what caverns of vast hidden sufferings they preceded. The Learnean pangs are quenched. The riddle of sickness is solved, and Philoctetes is become an ordinary personage." Finally, Lamb reaches his original self and feels relieved of the quibble of sickness. He describes this psychological transition in these terms:

"The summons, unseasonable as it appeared, seemed to link me on again to the petty business of life, which I had lost sight of; a gentle to activity, however trivial; a wholesome wearing from the preposterous dream of self-absorption- the puffy state of sickness- in which I confess to have lain so long, insensible to the magazines and monarchies of the world alike to its laws and to its literature." Similarly, Lamb in the essay "The Old Benchers of the Inner Temple", among other things, makes a comparison between the mind of the child and that of the grown-up man. Lamb says that imagination plays an important role in the working of the mind of the child. It is illumined with unquestionable faith and untainted superstition which remains unaffected by the darkness around. In the words of Lamb,

"Fantastic forms, whither are ye fled? Or if the like of you exist why exist they no more for me? Ye inexplicable, half-understood appearances, why comes in reason to tear away the preternatural mist, bright or gloomy, that enshrouded you? Why make ye so sorry a figure, in my relation, who made up to me- to my childish eyes- the mythology of the Temple? In those days I saw Gods as 'old men covered with a mantle, 'walking upon the earth."

4.4. Love of antiquity:

Love of antiquity is a dominant theme of Lamb's essays. As a matter of fact; one of the chief characteristics of the Romantics was that they expressed their dissatisfaction with the present. The Romantics 'looked before and after'. The Romantic writer either looked at the past with interest or idealized it, or he looked to the distant future with a wistful longing. Lamb is a Romantic in this sense. He has fascination for antiquity, though he does not dislike his present, too, like other Romantics. The glorification of the past gives us a clear peep into the peculiar nature of the writer.

In the essay, Oxford in the Vacation, Lamb's love of antiquity is apparent. Lamb says that antiquity appeals Lamb greatly. He is impressed deeply by the Oxford environs. He analyses his own feelings about it. Oxford as an old seat of learning fills the author with reverence. The venerable antiquity of learning takes possession of Lamb's fancy. When he is in the library, he senses the presence of all the souls that labored in the past in enriching knowledge. He feels disinclined to disturb them in their repose on the shelves. The very atmosphere over there breathes learning.

Lamb's deep love for antiquity **is also seen when he says:**

"Antiquity! Thou wondrous charm, what are thou? That being nothing, art everything. When thou wert, thou wert not antiquity- then thou wert everything."

Then Lamb speaks of George Dyer who seems to have grown into a book by pouring over it. Dyer has been engaged in studying the controversial question about the respective antiquity of the two universities- Oxford and Cambridge.

5. Conclusion:

To sum up, it may be said that Lamb shows a rich variety in his choice of theme for his essays. It is the diversity of his thematic concerns that lends his essays a charming appeal. His essays have something to provide to every type of readers. Children, youth and the old can equally enjoy Lamb's essays which are characterised by rich subjective elements, sense of humour, minute observation of man and manners and also deep insight into the working of human mind. It is by virtue of the universal appeal of his essays that Lamb still continues to enjoy readership throughout the world.

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