

Lamb as an essayist

Lamb occupies a unique position in the history of English essay. Though he began his literary career as a poet, he is remembered today for his invaluable essays – ‘The Essays of Elia’ and ‘The Last Essays of Elia’. He is an eminent essayist of the early nineteenth century and belongs to the group of romantic essayists. He has often been called the prince of all the essayist England has so far produced. Hugh walker calls him the essayist par excellence who should be taken as a model. We may not find in him the massive genius of Bacon, or the ethereal flights of Thomas Browne, the brilliant lucidity of Addison, or the vigorous energy of Dr. Johnson, but none excels him in the ability to charm the reader with the element of his self-reflection in his essays.

The Personal elements in Lamb’s essays

Lamb is unsurpassed as an essayist. His essays are intimate expression of his mind, his life and all that makes him an individual. He resembles Montaigne, the French essayist, in this respect. He reveals much of himself indirectly and incidentally in his essays and as a result his essays can be called 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 place names in his essays which are linked with his past and these places are like living characters in his mind. In his essays we get to see Lamb the man - his affection, loyalty, uncomplaining endurance, simplicity, likes and dislikes, sportive humour and serious moods. His essays are intensely personal and subjective. They cover a great variety of topics, but the approach is always personal. Without openly taking himself as a subject, he is forever speaking of himself. It is not that he is led by vanity, but simply that he relates what he knows best. As for instance, his kind heart and the spirit of goodness can be seen in his essay “The Praise of Chimney-Sweepers”, which indicates that he was a champion of the poor.

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 which he draws lavishly from an inexhaustible storehouse of his own. While his wit is based on the intellect, his humour is based on insight and sympathy. There is always some touch of humour, sly remark and irony to amuse his readers. In “The Praise of Chimney-Sweepers” we find several touches of humour in their description and the annual feast hosted by Jem White. His essay “A Dissertation Upon Roast Pig” is replete with wit, humour and fun. In “Dream Children: A Reverie” the reactions of the children provide a touch of humour.

Pathos in Lamb’s essays

Pathos is another striking feature of Lamb’s essays, which appeals to our feelings of compassion and evokes sympathy. It exists separately but often intermingles with humour. Lamb’s pathos springs from the tragic background of his life. Reminiscence has for him a great charm and in doing so a note of sadness enters many of his essays. His essay, “Dream children: A Reverie” is highly moving with its account of his dead brother, non-existent wife

and children. Even the reference to his grandmother's loneliness is tinged with melancholy. The essay "The Praise of Chimney-Sweepers" arouses our deepest sympathy for the young chimney sweepers who do the laborious work. Lamb gives the pathetic incident of a young chimney sweeper falling asleep in a state-bed at Arundel castle out of exhaustion. An atmosphere of pathos is predominant in the essay "Christ's Hospital Five and Thirty Years Ago". 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 are no doubt very touching.

The Fusion of Humour and Pathos

In many of Lamb's essays we find humour and pathos alternating each other and in some, the two elements exist simultaneously as two aspects of the same person. The curious intermingling of the two elements gives a peculiar flavour to his essays. A touch of morbidity in him makes him dwell upon the melancholic aspect of things. At the same time being endowed with a keen power of observation he could perceive the funny side of things. It is Lamb's perception that everything in life has at one and the same time its serious and trivial side that makes him fuse humour with pathos. He combines the two apparent opposites – the joyous and the pathetic by full sympathy with each and it is this unique blend that makes his style special and makes his essays memorable.

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. The description of the disappearance of a young chimney-sweeper entering a chimney and his reappearance, after doing his job, at the top amuses us. Again Lamb's account of how some of these chimney-sweepers might have been kidnapped in their infancy from the aristocratic homes where they were born appeals to our feelings of compassion and evokes our sympathy. The essay "Dream Children: A Reverie", though primarily an essay characterised by tragic quality, has several touches of humour in the description of the reaction of the imaginary children. "Christ's Hospital Five and Thirty Years Ago" also provides numerous instances of humour and pathos. A vein of humour runs throughout the essay, but there are many touching episodes in it. We feel sympathy for the boys who were supplied tasteless and inadequate food at the boarding school although Lamb describes it in an amusing manner.

Unique style used by Lamb in his essays

Lamb was very much fond of the earlier prose writers of the 17th century and as a result the influence of these writers shines out conspicuously in his style. He often used obsolete Latinised words, long heavy winding sentences, quotations from the old writers to express his feelings. Allusiveness and evocativeness are marked features of his style, which are characteristic qualities of romantic essayists. These features can be noticed in his essay "Dream Children: A Reverie". He also makes use of parentheses, which gives us an insight to the characters stream of consciousness. The parentheses in "Dream Children: A reverie" mostly show us the observations of the father, which tells us more about the children's

expressions for dramatic emphasis. Another aspect of Lamb's style is his dramatic characterization. His character sketches are brief but vivid. In "Dream Children: A Reverie" the characters of his grandmother Mrs. Field, his sweetheart Alice Winterton, his brother John Lamb are skilfully portrayed. The unforgettable portraits of James Boyer and Matthew Field in "Christ's Hospital Five and Thirty Years Ago" are admirably drawn. Lamb's essays are also rich in poetic cadence and beauty. They may be called lyrics in prose. In fact, it is in prose that Lamb the poet is to be found. As for instance, the essay "Dream Children: A Reverie" is steeped in rich poetry.

Thus Lamb's position in the realm of English essay is unquestioned. His essays are the greatest contribution to this genre of literature, the unique charm of which lies in the bewitching personality of their creator. He is rightly entitled to a place as an essayist beside Montaigne, Sir Thomas Browne, Steele and Addison.
