

Lamb as a Romantic Essayist

Lamb is pre-eminently romantic in his outlook and attitude. In the *Essays of Elia* he has done for London what Wordsworth has done for the Lake Districts. He has studied and enjoyed its people, its beggars, its chimney sweepers, just as Wordsworth studied and enjoyed the shepherds of Westmoreland. The varied mass of humanity in London inspired most of Lamb's essays in which drollery is mingled with affection. Though Lamb did not write in verse, his exquisite prose- delicate and suggestive -touches the readers as much as the best lyrics.

Subjectivity is the key note of Romantic writing. This is also an essential feature of *Essays of Elia*. Indeed in his essays, Lamb always speaks of himself and hence we get to know a lot about his personality, nature, character, relatives, work places and people around him. However Lamb's genius lies in his power of visualizing memories. He cherishes the memories of bygone times more than the present actualities. But Lamb's memories are not like Wordsworth's "emotions recollected in tranquility." He recalls them not to draw from them some spiritual rapture or ethical significance, rather Lamb uses his memories as material for his intellect and fancy to play upon.

Lamb's genius lay in his power of visualizing memories. His style is a mixture of many styles. His matter harmonizes with his manner. It is the shadow of bygone times that he sees rather than present actualities- a vanished face, a hushed voice, a recollected gesture, some familiar friends from boyhood, the memories of some treasured joyance. But Lamb's memories are not like Wordsworth's "emotions recollected in tranquility". He recalls them not to draw from them some spiritual rapture or ethical significance, but he rather uses them as material for his intellect and fancy to play upon. Dearly he loves to dally with his dreams, to re-invest his experiences with a glamour of retrospective fancy.

Lamb had a turn for mystification and delighted in weaving threads of fiction in a web of truth. But rarely do the fictions seriously interfere with the genuineness of his descriptions. There are, sometimes, deviations in his essays from the precise truth. But, these deviations do not alter the essential fact that throughout the *Essays of Elia* Lamb is personal and autobiographical to a degree almost without parallel in English literature. In *Dream Children: A Reverie* Lamb speaks to us of little boy and a little girl who approached him with the request that he should tell them stories about their elders, depicting the time when they were children. The idea of a bachelor's parenthood is incongruous and funny, but pathetic at the same time. Lamb's dream of having children and a happy home is the outcome of the sensitive awareness of his pathetic forlorn life and his yearnings for married domesticity.

The house where grandmother Field lived as a caretaker seems to belong to a fairy land. The grandmother's fondness for the author and her care and affection for all those who came in contact with her, are described with so much tenderness that it helps us to recapture our own childhood days when we read the piece. The house is situated at a spot tinged with the sad story of the 'Babes in the Wood', the orchard in the compound of the house, the placid pond nearby and the colours of so many fruits are rendered vividly to us by the wonderful charm of their descriptions. Along with this, the picture of James Elia, at once a lover of the mansion with its gardens and orchards, and a handsome young boy of energetic spirit roaming about in the countryside and joining the hunters on their way to the forests and fields, is left indelible in the reader's memory.

The author's sedentary nature, his passionate love for the placid beauty of the gardens, his deeply reflective character in boyhood- all have been rendered with uncommon romantic charm and artistic skill and sincerity. If little John is the picture of Lamb's elder brother, James Elia in this essay, little Alice is the picture of Ann Simons whom Lamb courted for several years. The picture is tinged with Lamb's memory of her as she was in her younger days. Lamb was a refined humanist whose smile could be both satirical and tender. In him humour and pathos are, indeed very often allied. Lamb could not prevent his mind from passing at times to the sadder aspects of life, and there is a belief that he laughed to save himself from weeping. The truth is that he retained a sanity of temperament reflected although his writings, and this sanity that survived in the midst of all his

misfortunes lies at the root of his humour. The essay abounds in brilliant instances of Lamb's rainbow humour where he seems to smile with tears in his eyes.

Although the melancholy of the author's mood is quite apparent, although he feels deep regret at the contrast between early hopes and love and gradual disillusionment and dwindling friendship of later life, his melancholy is far removed from that of the man who concentrates upon his personal sorrow alone and sees those of the rest of the world only in so far they refer to himself. Such essays could not have been written by one who was shut up in self-contemplation. Still we may conclude that the charm of Lamb's essays is the charm of personality which he is able to display with unfailing artistic sincerity. Lamb's genial amiability, unmistakably distinct in "Dream Children: A Reverie" and his smile through tears give the essay a delicate flavour.

Lamb's Essays of Elia have been universally extolled by reviewers since their initial appearance. Indeed Lamb's critical writings testify to his versatility and insight. The charm of Lamb's essays reflects the charm of his personality. His genial amiability is unmistakably distinct in his essays and his smile through tears gives the essays a delicate flavor. Certainly this is the reason why, even today Lamb is remembered as a perceptive critic and the finest practitioner of the familiar essay form in English.