

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 tranquillity." 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.

In *The Superannuated Man*, Lamb communicates to his readers the story of his life with its aspirations and disappointments. Here is presented a vitally important and long chapter of Lamb's life- his life of confinement in the office of Mincing Lane. In the course of the essay, Lamb recollects how after long thirty six years of service, 'at just ten minutes after eight', he 'went home- for ever.' As a freed man, Lamb now remembers the relief and strangeness of his freedom from his irksome job. Here it is worth mentioning that, Lamb had to leave Christ Church School in his teens to shoulder the responsibility of a family headed by a doting father and intermittently insane elder sister. The way Lamb relates how he missed frequent vacations, abundant playtime and other pleasures of childhood, certainly has much truth in it. Again, Lamb also tells us how his life in chains ruined the romantic hopes of his 'shining youth' and how the wood of his desk entered into his soul with the passage of time. Indeed such descriptions are fraught with pathos, as we remember Lamb as an avid reader, who dreamt of being a university scholar. In the course of the essay, friendships are also recorded briefly but vividly. Lamb describes his 'co-brethren of the quill' with whom he had shared his days of confinement. Pleasures are indicated as Lamb tells how after his retirement, he could visit not so well known streets and lanes of the city.

The Superannuated Man also reveals Lamb's passionate love for books. Thus, he refers to his expedition to Soho Street to explore any old book shop. Lamb further writes- "If time were troublesome, I could read it away, but I do not read it in that violent measure, with which having no time but candle light time..." The essay also comprises numerous references and literary echoes. We have references to Carthusian monks, St. Thomas Aquinas, Lucretius, tragedy by Sir Robert Howard and echoes of Milton's *Il Penseroso* in the final lines where Lamb writes- "I am Retired Leisure".

Romantic literature is essentially imaginative. Lamb, no doubt wrote in prose, but there is much of the lyrical fancy in his writing. In *The Superannuated Man*, he compares his condition to that of a prisoner of Bastille, who has suddenly obtained his freedom after forty years of prison life. Lamb further says that he had suddenly passed from kingdom of time to the Kingdom of Eternity. Now, such humorous analogies definitely corroborate Lamb's fanciful imagination.

Mysticism is also an essential part of the romantic writing. Lamb too had a turn for mystification and delighted in weaving threads of fiction in a web of truth. In *The Superannuated Man*, the author amuses and misleads his readers by describing himself as the employee in the firm of Boldero, Merryweather, Bosanquet and Lacy. But, as a matter of fact, Lamb had no connection with any such firm which possibly did not exist at all. He actually worked in South Sea House and the India Office and retired from the latter, after a prolonged drudgery of thirty six years. Again, his desire to Christian his child as 'Nothing To Do' may possibly lead one to believe that he was a childless married man, but he was actually a life-long bachelor. Therefore, it can be said that Lamb always blends fact with fiction which makes his essays so personal and yet so romantic and entertaining.

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.