



Element of Self-Reflection in the Essays of Charles Lamb



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Abstract

The Romantic period was a time in which prose writing witnessed a rapid development. Writers such as Charles Lamb and William Hazlitt changed the styles and topics of the eighteenth-century essay. They also created new forms of writing in which their personal impressions and the subjects of everyday life were central. But the best-known essayist of the 1820s was Charles Lamb. His essays gave him a very high reputation. The element of his self-reflection in his essays gave a personal touch to the readers that they took him to their hearts. This paper explores the literary essays and various elements that made his autobiographical aspect visible and tangible to the readers.

Key Words: Charles Lamb, Lamb, autobiographical element, self-reflection

Introduction

It is a characteristic of the Romantic writer that he should be confidential. As a rule, he tells the world more about himself than he tells of his friend. This is due to no morbid egotism, no mere loquacity; it is a necessity of his nature to express himself. A novelist may disguise his self-revelation but an essayist has the freedom of writing in any way he likes. Therefore he gives his intimate, confidential note in his essays in the most obtrusive form.



It is the reason that essay in Lamb's hands becomes the precious instrument of a constant self-revelation. In fact this form provided him most natural mode of self-expression. In writing essays, Lamb practiced art for art's sake, but since he was essentially a romantic, therefore, he felt an urge to provide outlet to those sentiments that constantly neat upon his inner walls. And like lyrical poets o his age, he could not submerge his personal note in the art of mystification. A lover of antiquity, Lamb was temperamentally fitted to voice what had moved him, to look to those old familiar faces that haunted him in his arm-chair. These things made his essays subjective. They can, with the addition of a few links, constitute a substantial account of a large part of his life and a complete biography might be constructed with them. No doubt, he constantly indulges in mystification, but his disguises are thin. They do not hinder us from realizing that Lamb himself is the subject-matter of his essays. I Milton is the hero of 'Paradise Lost', Lamb is the real subject of the 'Essays of Elia'.

Charles Lamb achieved lasting fame as a writer during the years 1820-1825, when he captivated the discerning English reading public with his personal essays in the *London Magazine*, collected as *Essays of Elia* (1823) and *The Last Essays of Elia* (1833). Known for their charm, humor, and perception, and laced with idiosyncrasies, these essays appear to be modest in scope, but their soundings are deep, and their ripples extend to embrace much of human life—particularly the life of the imagination. For students of Lamb and for his recent biographers, Lamb's poetry is mainly of interest as autobiography and as light on the essays, often treating the same subjects.

Memories of the Past

Every essay of Elia is a window to the mind and heart of Lamb. In his essays, Lamb takes readers into his confidence and chats with them about his memories of different places, his relations and friends, his likes and dislikes, and his psychological fears and doubts. Thus in the essays we get the whole life of Lamb, thought often under a cloak fiction, he describes his childhood in 'Inner Temple', in 'the Old-benchers of the Inner Temple'. In the



'Recollections of Christ's Hospital', he speaks of his school days. 'The South Sea-house' puts before us his recollections of his profession. In 'Superannuated Man', he speaks of his good-bye to the East India Company. 'The Christ Hospital Five and Thirty years ago' gives the penetration character sketch of his friend Coleridge. His brother James Elia in 'My Revelations' again remembers him with gratefulness and wifful melancholy in 'Dream Children'. 'Dream Children' also records his unfortunate love affair with Alice Winsterton, his grandmother Mrs. Field. It reveals how his hopes were belied, and how his life was rendered lonely by the freak of fate. Such intimate and personal touches we find in 'Old China' and 'New Year's Eve'. The former presents his economic hardships and his life with cousin Bridget. The latter give a peep into his psychology, his fear of death, his love of this green earth. Matters more personal he describes at various places-his want of skill in figuring, his dread of novelty, his imperfection of speech, his incapacity for music, his want of personal beauty, his short stature, his love of good cheer, his weakness for wine and tobacco. He is silent only about the insanity of his cousin. Thus in his essay, he is himself the subject; not the mere individual Lamb, but Lamb as he was connected with his numerous friends and relation, and as his sympathy identified him with the inhabitants of the great city in which he lived.

Unique Blending of Fact and Fiction

In recoding these personal notes, Lamb avails himself of the art of mystification. He makes a unique blending of fact and fiction with perfect ease. These two elements are so closely blended that his personal facts seem to be the product of powerful imagination. This art heightens the effect of picturesqueness and makes a fiction of the fact. His delight in the pure fun, his gentle exposition comes to deepen the mystery and clothe his personal elements with fictitious garb. He often puts his readers on a false account, alters the names and places. All this transmutes even his confessions into the things of fiction. But this mystification does not seriously interfere with the genuineness of his confidence.

Conclusion



Hugh Walker says that such deviations from precise truth, the disguises do not alter the essential fact that throughout Lamb is personal and autobiographical. But these little pieces of autobiography are so delightfully presented that they've overcome the crudity of autobiography and become the pure pieces of literature. Lamb's greatest achievements were his remarkable letters and the essays that he wrote under the pseudonym Elia for London Magazine, which was founded in 1820. 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.

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