

Charles Lamb

Charles Lamb is an English essayist, poet, and antiquarian. E. V. Lucas calls Lamb as “the most lovable figure in English literature”. Charles Lamb was popularly known as the “Prince among English Essayists” Lamb used the pseudonym Elia in 1820 while writing for the London Magazine (Bridget Elia for Mary Lamb). He wrote Sonnets, tragedy, farce, etc. and later appeared the text titled *Tales from Shakespeare* in 1807 along with Mary Lamb (Charles Lamb handled the tragedies; his sister Mary, the comedies) which became a best-seller. His essays achieved immense admiration and the collection of essays, under the title *Essays of Elia*, was published in 1823.

Lamb was chiefly known for the elements of nostalgia or the love for antiquity and humanity. His most popular essays are, “Dream Children”, “Old China”, “Poor Relations”, “A Dissertation Upon Roast Pig”, “A Bachelor’s Complaint of the Behaviour of Married People”, “Oxford at the Vacation”, etc. Lamb’s essays are highly subjective or ‘Personal’ and true to life. The ‘self’ becomes the subject and his writings are a kind of self-revelation. Lamb perfectly blends humour and pathos and also fact and fiction.

‘Mackery End, in Hertfordshire’

“Mackery End in Hertfordshire,” deals with the theme of human relations with a striking piece of portraiture of Elia’s cousin, Bridget (really Mary Lamb – 10 years difference between Mary and Charles). In depicting his sister he was of course hampered somewhat by her terrible affliction, but wonderfully has he surmounted it, and delightful indeed it is to follow the narrative of the “cousins” visit to unknown cousins at the old place in “the green plains of pleasant Hertfordshire.”

The essay can be divided into three parts – the first part which deals with the description of their life together (Bridget and Elia), the second which describes the character of Bridget Elia and third which narrates their visit together to meet their old acquaintance at ‘Mackery End in Hertfordshire’.

Highly personal essay with numerous memories of the author’s early life – nostalgic – blend of humour and pathos – recollection of the past.

Lamb begins his essay by stating that Bridget Elia has been his housekeeper and companion for many years. They live together – “old bachelor and maid, in a sort of double singleness”. Regarding their common tastes, he says that they both agree on almost everything (in tastes and habits) but at time there arose a difference too. She was

so emotional at times that she couldn't even tolerate a slight change in the voice of Elia. She suddenly complained that he has "altered".

Regarding their reading habits (choice of books), both Bridget and Elia had different tastes. Elia loved to read old books like that of Robert Burton or his contemporaries but Bridget enjoyed reading modern books with full of adventures and therefore her table was always full with latest books. The slow-paced narrative of story books irritated Elia (Lamb) while Bridget (Mary Lamb) wanted a story with numerous events in the books she read. Elia also points out that Bridget did not like anything "odd or bizarre" (something different). She also severely criticized certain favourite writers of Elia which is created an irritation in him. He says that it is tough for her to change (her character remains the same) and she values those things still which gave her happiness during her childhood days.

Regarding remembering certain things, Elia says that "in matters of fact, dates, and circumstances" he was always right but regarding taking certain important decisions or about "moral points" Bridget was always right. Elia also writes about certain weaknesses in the character of Bridget. He says that "Bridget does not like to be told of her faults". She loves to read in company which is again a bad habit and also gives answers without much thinking. In certain trying contexts she can easily control herself but falters at certain trivial situations. He also says that Bridget had missed her education in her childhood but he says that it did not hamper her much because she was able to read maximum books without any prohibitions. Elia says that if he had girl children he would have brought them up exactly in the same manner of Bridget.

Bridget is good in all ways but turns an excellent companion when you are on a journey. Elia recollects a journey they had done sometime before "into Hertfordshire, to heat up the quarters of some of our less-known relations in that fine corn country" (to meet their old acquaintances).

Elia says that he does not actually remember whether it is "Mackery End; or Mackarel End, as it is spelt, ...in some old maps of Hertfordshire; a farmhouse, delightfully situated within a gentle walk from Wheathampstead". They had visited that place long back and had forgotten almost everything regarding the same. He says that the house was occupied by the Gladman family at that time and his grandmother belonged to the family of Brutons. She married to a Field (another family name). He thus writes about the family ties and also says that forty years have elapsed since their last visit. Finally, they were able to reach the destination and "the sight of the old farm-house" provided him utmost pleasure. Seeing it, he felt that he "knew the aspect of a place". Elia began to feel happiness with the "heart of June" (pleasant season) and thought of the lines written by

Wordsworth – comparison between the image of the place in real and also the image in imagination.

Bridget had her memories of the house fresher and Elia watched her bubbling with happiness and moving from one place to another “with a breathless impatience of recognition”. Now, one question remained for them – how to enter the house? Bridget was really good at making friendships while Elia was a bit shy. He writes, “Love, stronger than scruple, winged my cousin in without me”. Bridget went into the house and returned with a girl who seemed like an image with a welcome board. The girl was the youngest of the Gladmans who had married a Bruton and had become mistress of the old mansion. Elia was impressed by their hospitality and felt that the girl was really pretty. Soon, they were able to strengthen the ties of relationships and “in five minutes we were as thoroughly acquainted as if we had been born and bred up together”. Later, they had food from the house and also met the neighbours around the house. The essay ends with a note of sadness when Elia writes – when Bridget falls into oblivion (loss of memory), the only thing which might still linger in her memory is the thoughts of this trip and fond moments associated with it.

‘A Dissertation Upon Roast Pig’

The essay titled ‘A Dissertation Upon Roast Pig’ is a reflection of Lamb’s epicurean tastes. This is a light-hearted essay regarding the qualities of roasted meet especially that of the pork. He uses the technique of hyperbole to highlight the qualities of the meat. He begins with a humorous story regarding the origin of roasted pork which was discovered after a house fire in China. Lamb considers the roasted pig as the greatest delicacy in the world.

Lamb begins the essay with reference to his friend Thomas Manning. Charles Lamb believes that the custom of roasting pigs arose in China. For that, he narrates the story of a father named Ho-ti and his mischievous son Bo-bo. Once, the cottage of a shepherd caught fire, and nine young China pigs got burnt to death. The son of the shepherd found an alluring smell coming out of the burnt bodies. When he touched the dead pigs, his fingers got burnt and to cool them, he put them in his mouth. On tasting the outer skin, he found it to be delicious. For the first time, man had tasted roasted meat. The boy’s father soon returned and he was shocked to see Bo-bo eating the pig’s meet. Ho-ti cursed Bo-bo but the impish boy tempted him to taste the dead pig. Soon Ho-ti also did the same thing and he too found the flesh very enjoyable. From that day onwards, they started setting fire to their cottage every now and then, and leaving some pigs to get roasted in it. By and by, the secret leaked out and father and son were put to trial. The roasted meet was brought to the court and all the people including the judge associated with the system had

the taste of it. They were soon acquitted because the jurymen, on examination, found the burnt flesh to be irresistible.

Lamb believes that if ever there was an adequate reason for burning down a house, it is that of procuring roast pig. According to Lamb, it is the most delicate of all the various delicacies on this earth. But to be really enjoyable, the pig must be of the right age. A grown pocker would not do for this purpose. It must be a young and tender suckling, more than a month old. Then he must be really roasted and not seethed or boiled, as was the practice at one time. If the animal is not overloaded, the outer skin, called crackling, is very appetizing. The roasted pig seems to be lying quietly, as if in a second cradle. Lamb thinks that this death is the right one for the young pig, for if he had lived longer, he would have grown into a greedy gross hog. Roast pig is a unique dish because every part of it is equally useful and uniformly delicious. Lamb would ordinarily like to share all delicacies with his friends, but in the case of roast pig, he thinks he must draw a line. Towards the end, he also refers to an incident. Lamb says about an aunt of his who gifted him a delicious cake. On the way, out of clemency, he gave the cake to a beggar who was obviously a swindler. After the process, Lamb felt extremely disappointed thinking about the effort taken by his aunt for preparing the cake and also her affection for him. Thus, he realized the value of a delicious piece of food through this instance.

Lamb has heard that in the past, a pig was put to death by being whipped. To him, there is no question of any cruelty involved in it. If the wise ancients used to whip a young pig to death, it might be because whipping made its flesh more tender. Only Lamb thinks that this might not be very necessary because the flesh of a young pig is tender enough already. It would be like refining a violet to desire it to become more tender. Lamb implies that suffering inflicted on an animal is quite justified if it makes its flesh tastier and thus makes available to human beings a delicacy that would otherwise not be possible to get. The essay is a perfect specimen for Lamb's sharp sense of humour.

‘Oxford in the Vacation’

The essay, ‘Oxford in the Vacation’ is highly subjective as he writes about his personal experiences both as a clerk and also as a writer. Charles Lamb begins the essay by trying to address the reader's curiosity regarding the identity and meaning of the name Elia, under which he wrote his essays. He states that the reader might have already conjectured that he writes so knowledgeably about ancient clerks and old buildings, he must belong to some such place himself. Lamb admits this to be true. He works for the better part of the day, on files relating to prices and stocks and shares at an office. But he considers this as a mental preparation for his midnight literary endeavours. Lamb says that his pen gets a

promotion in the evening as he sits to write about his favourite things. His literally labours are all executed after he goes home from the office in the evening.

Lamb remembers with regret the good old times when the calendar was generously spotted with red-letter days in commemoration of the various saints. In those days, he was as good as an almanac because he would remember all the holidays. He felt resentful when two saints were accommodated in a single holiday. Now, unfortunately, most of these red-letter days have become dead-letter days for him because the days are no longer observed as holidays.

In the next part of the essay, Lamb narrates the details of his visit to the famous Oxford. It was during the vacation that Lamb had paid a visit to Oxford. Fortunately, his vacation coincides with that at the university. Lamb has a feeling as if he owns the whole place. He says that he can play the role of a gentleman as well as a student on this campus. He regrets for not studying there during his younger days but now he can feel as if he were a student at the university. Lamb moves from one place to the other with great enthusiasm and consider himself in diverse roles at Oxford. The pleasant walks seem provides him extreme delight. He sees that the halls are deserted. He peeps into all rooms. Everything and every person become hallowed in his eyes. He praises the concept of 'antiquity' and he says that though being nothing, you are everything. The concept of nostalgia and the love for the past are evident here.

He is delighted to be inside the famous, Bodleian library at Oxford. It seems to him as if the souls of all the old scholars were reposing there. He does not want to handle the books because it seems to be a profanation. The musty smell of old moth-eaten volumes becomes a pleasant fragrance to his nostrils. He seems to inhale learning with his very breath, so reading would be superfluous. He has even less inclination to disturb the old MSS in the library.

In the final part of the essay, Lamb writes about a scholar named George Dyer. Popularly known as G.D., George dyer is an industrious book-worm. Lamb had found him always poring over books. He says, humorously, that Dyer is more a book than a man, so that Lamb has an inclination to get him bound in the Russia leather and place him in the library among the books. Dyer must have spent most of his fortune in paying visits to Oxford and Cambridge. Dyer has been engaged in research on various affairs connected with the two universities of Oxford and Cambridge. Recently, he has become interested

in finding out as to which of the two universities was the first to be founded. Unfortunately, the ardour and zeal of Dyer have not been properly appreciated either at Oxford or at Cambridge.

Dyer is most delightfully absent-minded. He starts with fright when he's interrupted in studies. Dyer is very short sighted also. Once, he paid a second visit to a house to which he had gone a while before and been informed that the inmates had gone away for a week. He had already written his name in the visitor's book, but asked for pen and ink again on his second visit. He was ashamed to see that the last name written there was his own, of which even the ink had not fully dried so far. He made a resolution to avoid such lapses in the future. Dyer is a poet too, but his effusions have not received much appreciation. Dyer is delightful at any place, but he is really in his element only when he is at either Oxford or Cambridge.

Charles Lamb is chiefly renowned for his blend of humour and pathos in his essays. He is highly subjective/personal/autobiographical in his writings and the love of antiquity turns out to be a dominant theme. Like many Romantic writers, Lamb too expressed his admiration for the past, idealized and glorified it. Lamb is always appreciated for his wisdom, humaneness temperament and style. Often hailed as a 'visualizer of memories', Lamb is known for his inimitable style.