

## **Charles Lamb's Love for Mystification of Facts and Fancy in the 'Essays of Elia'**

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Charles Lamb is acknowledged by the common consent as the Prince of English Essayists His essays touch the level of perfection. The charm of his essays is due to the charm of his personality. He is one of the most autobiographical of the English essayists and at every step his essays reflect nobility of his soul, his good nature, his charity, his simplicity, his innocence and his limitless kindness.

Lamb is constantly autobiographical in his essays. Lamb's Essays of Elia have the Charm of autobiography Hugh Walker has emphatically commented that a character such as this, freely self-revealed, could not fail to be among the most attractive things in literature. But his essays cannot be studied as a mere record of the various events and experiences of their author's life. Lamb was above all an artist and mystification is one of the devices he has used very artistically to enhance the charm of his essays. His only aim in writing the essays was the readers' and his own pleasure. With this aim he is often seen to transform his experiences, according to his will, in factual autobiographical details. Every essay is transformed into little wonder in which fancy and wit embroider the most unexpected variations upon a background of reflection and anecdote. He could achieve this by artistically bringing facts within the magic fold of fiction. Lamb takes pleasure in deceiving his readers. He had a love of mystifying his readers and putting them on a false ascent.

His love of mystification has been borrowed from the prose writing of the seventeenth century writers. He was instinctively drawn towards the seventeenth century mystic philosophers like Sir Thomas Brown, Robert Burton and John Donne. He loved their rich and curious imagination. Very often it becomes rather difficult to get at the truth in his essays because he is often most outspoken, when a reader expect him to be silent and also he alters the names of the persons and the places when there would seem little reason for it. But it is admitted by all the critics that his habit of throwing a veil of mystery over the facts of life, does not deprive the essays in any way of their perennial charm. This veil of mystification is so transparent that the veiled truth in his essays becomes more charming. His essays covered by that veil appear more beautiful as we see in nature that the natural objects appear before us with added charms under the veil of thin mist.

The very structure of Lamb's essays is fantastical. First of all, he has assumed the pseudonym Elia for himself. His imagination naturally transforms the actual figures into more charming creatures. Thus his sister Merry is Bridget and his brother John is James. His father becomes Lovel and his beloved Ann Simmons is Alice Winterton in his essays. His grandmother Mary Field retains her original name but her native place is changed; she is a caretaker of house, living in Norfolk instead of Blakesware, where she actually lived. This imaginative transformation or mystification is best seen in the essays in which Lamb describes his friends, relatives and acquaintances. The Old Benchers of the Inner Temple, the students and friends of the Christ Hospital and also his relations, all of them seem to be the creatures of artist's imagination rather than of real life. Yet they are the real people and in fact, there is an artistic blending of the fact and fiction in most of his essays.

The whole of the essay Dream Children is founded on fancy that would have been children look as real as children of real flesh and blood. Alice and John in the Dream Children are lovingly portrayed. As for the other persons, his grandmother and his brother John the facts are changed in most of the narration. The dwelling place of the grand

mother is change in the course of narration. His brother John was indifferent to the welfare of the family but Lamb portrays him as the man of great love or sympathy possessing many noble qualities. Thus actual details in the essay are mystified. In the essay *Christ Hospital*, Lamb makes the reader believe that the account is written not by Lamb himself but by Coleridge. Besides this change there are several other imaginary details in the essay such as the reference to his stay at St.Omer. In the essay, *A Dissertation upon Roast Pig*, the curious discussion on the method of whipping a pig to death in order to soften its skin, is total mystification.

“Our ancestors were nice in their method of sacrificing these tender victims. We read of pigs whipt to death with something of a shock, as we hear of any other obsolete custom. The age of discipline is gone by, or it would be curious to inquire (in a philosophical light merely) what effect this process might have towards intenerating and dulcifying a substance, naturally so mild and dulcet as the flesh of young pigs.” (Lamb, 1888)

Lamb also takes resource to humorous exaggeration in the portrayal of the characters. In his essay ‘*The Old and the New School Master*’ he exaggerates his own portrait by pretending ignorance he writes: “My reading has been lamentably desultory and immethodical” (Lamb, 2003)

This assumed ignorance is only to mystify his readers. In this essay there are a number of references to his informalities and shortcomings which point him as a senseless buffoon in the portraits of other people. He also resorts to exaggeration. There are portraits of many of his relations and friends which stand evidence to Lamb’s habit of mixing facts with fiction. These two elements, facts and fiction, are so artistically blended in Charles Lamb’s essays that the facts appear to be fiction and the fiction appears to be convincing facts. The two elements are woven together very closely. Sometimes the subject matter of his essays seems to be drawn entirely from his own experiences but the readers suspect that imagination has supplied some picturesque touches and heightened the effect of the account. Lamb always had taken delight in pure fun and this delight inclined him naturally to these harmless descriptions through which his excellent humor is created and his gentle expostulations only deepened the narration.

Cazamian opines that Lamb’s personality is unique. Essay form was his favorite mood of expression. Essay becomes in his hand precious instrument of constant self-revelation. (Kolanchery, 2015) The fictitious figure of Elia is the main center of the secret magnetism of his essays. This center organizes the reflections of the memories of places, persons and things, the diversity of opinions and characters, the comedy and drama of each day. One theme around which all this gather is the particular reaction of a soul to life. He reflected the ordinary life of the world with added light and color of his imagination.

When he blends facts with fiction, he takes childlike delight in including a few false threads every now and then in his essays. This love of mystification is very innocent because he does not deliberately want to deceive any one. These fictions are totally harmless and they do not take away the spontaneity or sincerity of the author. In the essay, ‘*My Relations*’ he writes:

“Brother or sister I never had any- to know them”

This is not true. He had brothers and sisters but we do not mind this deception because these are very transparent disguises. The essay on *Christ Hospital* begins as if Coleridge is the author of this narration and it ends with an apostrophe to Coleridge. Due to this love of mystification he utters names and places without any reason. “It is the pleasure of the disguise, in a word, the mystification within which Lamb felt most alive: it is enough to remember that his tightrope-walking letters contained, along with real news, funny ‘whoppers’ of every kind.” (Riehl, 2006)

Lamb loved drama and looked at life as a spectator. This attitude explains his love of mystification. What Elia tells us as of himself, was often true only of another. This took a peculiar turn in Lamb's style of writing. He does not deal in problems but in memories of every simple thing and simple people but these memories are often tinged with the pathos of death or oblivion. This is definitely a mystic tendency.

The tragic horror or fear and memory which lay under Lamb's life and exquisite wit and humor which brightened its surface, were a peculiar mystic strain in his temperament. It is an extraordinary quality of his style. It has been wonderfully portrayed in the essay, 'Dream Children'. This essay is a brilliant play of fancy in which, towards the end, Lamb tells us

“...both the children gradually grew fainter to my view, receding, and still receding till nothing at last but two mournful features were seen in the uttermost distance, which, without speech, strangely impressed upon me the effects of speech: “We are not of Alice, nor of thee, nor are we children at all. The children of Alice call Bartram father. We are nothing; less than nothing, and dreams.” (Lamb, *Dream Children: A Reverie*)

Here, Lamb surely shows a very remarkable mystic turn of his mind but he has not mystic learning after the manner of Shelley and other Romantic poets. He did not like the word unearthly and he did not like the things of unearthliness, imagination of more ethereal kind as in P. B. Shelley or of a grosser and more concrete kind as in Walter Scott or of the remote and mythological kind, as so, they never attracted Lamb. His own imagination glances off upon the edge of humor and becomes a glittering spray of freak and sallies. He has from first to last a boyish delight in play. The ease with which he blended fact with fiction is uncommon device in English literature. Of course, his fiction never seriously interferes with genuineness of his account. His disguises, usually transparent, do not alter the essential fact. Lamb is personal and autobiographical. He may occasionally deviate from actual fact to confuse, bewilder, deceive or mystify the reader but he is always true to his emotional reality. “Lamb delights the reader with his personal details, genial humour, amiable personality and sweetness of disposition.” (Prasanth, 2016)

It is always to be noticed that Lamb had a highly sensitive disposition. As a result of it his work is a varied meditation on the sad mystery of time and change. His natural tastes make him dwell in the kingdom of imagination and dreams and his artistic soul belongs to the past. Lamb is not a moralist, nor is a psychologist, his object not to research like Sir Browne. He is above all an artist. He weaves around each of his essays a little wonder to mystify his readers.

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