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Dream Children; A Reverie & The Superannuated Man

Charles Lamb is commonly regarded as the greatest essayist of the Romantic Age. He wrote his essays under the pseudonym 'Elia'. His The Essays of Elia and The Last Essays of Elia reveal his own tastes and memories and depict many phases of life in London with the vividness that comes from personal delight. The charm of his personality constitutes the charm of his essays. He reveals himself as a gentle egoist, as a sympathetic commentator upon life and as a minute observer of details.

Blend of Humour and pathos

If we go through the essays of Lamb, we find that he has a tendency towards fusing the serious with the light hearted, He deals with the sadder aspects of his life ; broods over his own misfortunes. But he does not wallow in sentimentality or self-pity, Humour runs through his essays even when he touches on the misfortunes of himself or of others.

What is remarkable is that Lamb Smiles through his tears and we can see his rainbow humour through the teardrops his eyes shed. Humour with Lamb is never far from tragedy. His humour and pathos are really inseparable from each other. They are different facets of the same gem.

Lamb's celebrated essays Dream Children and The Superannuated Man are about his miserable lot. In Dream Children Lamb , haunted about by a dread of loneliness, recalls the days that are no more.

The reminiscences of which the essay consists are far from joyous. He recalls the memories of his grandmother and brother who are no longer alive and of a great house in ruins. Poetry is breathed into the descriptions. Pathos underlines the descriptions. With a felling of sorrow he recalls how “a cruel disease, called a cancer, came, and bowed her down with pain”. He pathetically describes how he responded to the death of his brother ;

“ I missed his kindness, and I missed his crossness, and wished him to be alive again, to be quarrelling with him, rather than not have him again...”

The parting words of the dream children are charged with pathos :

“ We are not of Alice, nor of thee, nor are we children at all . The children of Alice call Bartrum father. We are nothing; less than nothing, and dreams. We are only what might have been, and must wait upon the tedious shores of lethe millions of ages before we have existence, and a name.”

We feel acutely the intensely tragic life of a lonely bachelor ie Charles Lamb who also wanted to lead a family life with a wife like Ann Simmons (Alice Winterton) and children like John and Alice.

There are however, humorous touches in Dream Children. They occur when Lamb refers to the reactions of the children to his stories. When Alice hears that Mrs Field was regarded as the best dancer in her youth, Alice's right foot begins to play an involuntary movement. John also responds in his own way. He tries to look bold and courageous when Lamb says how frightened he was in his childhood by his grandmother's account of two infants gliding up and down the stairs at night .

In The Superannuated Man we also find the blend of humour and pathos. The first half of the essay concerns itself with the melancholy life lived by Charles Lamb. The opening paragraph describes the painful transition to a life of bondage from a happy childhood. The second paragraph also touches on the feelings of unhappiness that overcame him. He describes how he failed to enjoy his holidays. What was worse was that a sense of his own inefficiency haunted him and deprived him of peaceful sleep. The life of the Clerk is indeed described with a poignant sense of its soul killing drudgery :

“I had grown to my desk, as it were, and the wood had and entered into my soul”.

But the pathos in the essay is relieved by lighter touches. There are some whimsical and fanciful details, e.g. it is in a light-hearted mood that Lamb tries to establish the fact that he is quite young even though he is above fifty. Similarly, in a fanciful vein, he claims to be an author and wishes that his works may be preserved on the shelves of his former office. Fully enjoying his leisure, he humorously observes that if he had a child, he would christen him 'Nothing-To-Do'.

Lamb's Romanticism

In Charles Lamb's essays we find some of the features of romantic literature. Instead of seeking to give a better tone to manners and morals as Addison did, Lamb gives vent to his own personal feelings. Indeed, the essence of Lamb's romanticism lies in his intense subjectivism. Lamb is intimately personal. He tells us of his likes, dislikes and prejudices as unashamedly as Montaigne who as an essayist aimed at self-revelation. He also brings to light the bare facts of his life. His essays may be looked upon as fragments of his autobiography. Lamb's Dream Children and The Superannuated Man acquaint us primarily with the sadder aspects of his life.

Lamb is a romantic in so far as he liberates as from the prison-house of the present. The Romantics ,we know,are amorous of the far and the remote in space and time . Lamb too escapes into the past or into a dream world. In the essay Dream Children , Lamb momentarily takes refuge in a reverie. He fancifully deceives himself into believing that he is a married man and has children . Into the financial framework of a dream he weaves the memories of his childhood.

In Dream Children Lamb expresses his intense love for the physical nature. We know that love for nature is a romantic trait. Lamb tells us how in the garden adjoining the house of his grandmother Field he used to find himself in a visual banquet of attractive colours of fruits like 'nectarines', 'Peaches', 'Yew-trees' 'firs', 'red berries' and 'fir-apples'. His sensuous appreciation of nature receives an extra dimension when he tells us how he used to lie about upon the 'fresh grass with all the fine garden smells around me'.

A Romantic poet gives free play to his imagination. That is what Lamb does in Dream Children. He builds up a world inhabited by his dream children John and Alice by the sheer force of his romantic imagination . We forget at least for the time being that Alice and John are pure figments.

Prose-Style of Lamb

Now we would do well to throw light on the Prose-Style of Charles Lamb. The well known maxim- 'Style is the man Comes to our mind when we talk about Lamb's prose - style. His Style is in keeping with his own highly idiosyncratic personality.'

If we closely read the essays of Charles Lamb, we find that his style is a product of his reading. He browsed indiscriminately on the writings of his predecessors – Shakespeare , Milton, Browne, Fuller and Taylor, to name only a few. words and phrases used by them are frequently pressed into service by him, no matter whether they are archaic or old fashioned. But the fact remains that Lamb never produces the impression that he is a servile imitator of these writers . We have the feeling that he has thoroughly assimilated their style and made it his own.

The style of Lamb has been universally described as quaint, wearing an aura of strangeness which we associate with something old fashioned, There are, indeed , many points in which Lamb resembles the Elizabethan as well as the seventeenth Century writers. These are his love for word-coining, his fondness for alliteration, his use of compound words, his formation of adjectives from proper names and his frequent use of Latinisms.

An interesting aspect of Lamb's Style is his tendency to myself his readers . This incorrigible tendency to play hide and seek with his readers manifests itself in an adroit mixture of fact and fiction.

The Superannuated Man is written in a rather simple and straightforward style. There are of course the usual Latin expression and the usual quotations so typical of Lamb's style. But we do not come across any bombastic or inflated phrases in it. In this essay there are such Latin words as 'decrepitude', 'Prerogatives' , 'deliverance', 'peradventure.' Here his style therefore is pedantic.

The following sentence from "The Superannuated Man" is an example of Lamb's lucid prose-style;

"I have indeed lived nominally fifty years, but deduct out of them the hours which I have lived to other people, and not to myself, and you will find me still a young fellow."

The conversational ease as well as the humour of the style is very much evident in the above excerpt . The novel way in which he manages to become a 'young fellow' once again produces an unmistakable humorous effect.

It is well known that Lamb can suit his style to the subject he deals with. "Dream children; A Reverie" is written in a brooding, meditative style. The language employed here is simple and lucid. It is free from any Latin expressions or phrases. It is also marked by the absence of Compound words and Coinages. Lamb has not used any obsolete word in this essay .

The straightforward, chaste language employed in Dream children is in perfect harmony with the melancholy mood of the writer, Lamb's feeling of dejection and frustration is effectively Conveyed to us and the tone of sincerity of the familiar essayist is unmistakable.

The greatest feature of Lamb's style in this essay is its poetic quality. The essentially romantic nature of the subject has brought into play a prose style which is Impregnated with the quintessence of lyrical poetry. That is why, the essay Dream children has been described as a "lyric in prose".

Suggested Readings :

1. Hugh walker : The English Essay and essayists.
2. N.L. Hallward & S.C. Hill : The Essays of Elia
3. A.H. Thompson : The Last Essays of Elia