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An Analysis of the Life and Works of Charles Lamb

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Abstract

Charles Lamb was an essayist held in the highest esteem in the English literary world. He was a man small in stature and fragile in appearance, but strong in character and quick of wit. Colleagues often described him as a shy, gentle man. Lamb himself did not like to be depicted as a gentle person, because to him it held Shakespeare's connotation of the word poor spirited. This Lamb definitely was not. When he was among friends, his humor was witty, and puns rolled from his lips the instant they formulated in his mind. He loved life and had no desire to change his lot. Lamb bore his burdens as fate.

AN ANALYSIS OF THE LIFE AND WRITINGS OF
CHARLES LAMB

Presented to
Department of Library Science
University of Northern Iowa

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Master's Degree
Library Science

by
Donna Goettsch

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Charles Lamb was an essayist held in the highest esteem in the English literary world. He was a man small in stature and fragile in appearance, but strong in character and quick of wit. Colleagues often described him as a shy, gentle man. Lamb himself did not like to be depicted as a gentle person, because to him it held Shakespeare's connotation of the word poor spirited. This Lamb definitely was not. When he was among friends, his humor was witty, and puns rolled from his lips the instant they formulated in his mind. He loved life and had no desire to change his lot. Lamb bore his burdens as fate.

All the writings Charles Lamb did during his lifetime come together in three groups. The children's stories Charles and Mary collaborated on formulate the first grouping. The second category is Lamb's witty and subtle humor recorded under the pseudonym, Elia. Showing yet another side of his personality are Lamb's letters to friends and colleagues. From each of the three groupings, a distinct side of Lamb's personality escapes onto paper.

The circumstances of his early years proved to be the source for materials in many of his later writings. Charles was born in 1775, the last of seven children, four of whom had died in infancy. His father was in his fifties when Charles was born and his mother was an invalid. At a very young age Charles and Mary, ten years his senior, began to depend on one another for a personal security they could not get from their parents. Mary became a mother image to Charles rather than a sister. This was probably the first link in the chain of devotion that

was to develop between the two Lambs.

At the age of seven Charles was able to go to a school for the poor, Christ's Hospital. It was here that he met his lifelong friend, Sameul Coleridge. During the next seven years at Christ's Hospital, Lamb walked amongst a circle of geniuses: Hazlitt, Wordsworth, Southey, Keats, Keigh Hunt, Godwin and others.

Lamb himself was extremely bright in school. However, he was denied entrance into an institution of higher learning because of his stuttering. The disability would plague him inwardly all his life. Despite this Lamb recognized his limitations in public speaking and as a young man turned his interests to writing.

During his early teen years, Lamb fell in love with a young girl named Ann Simmons, whom he met while visiting his grandmother in the country. After almost a year of courting, Ann broke off their relationship. The loss Charles suffered caused him to have a nervous breakdown resulting in a six week confinement to a mental hospital. Lamb was torn between the loyalty he felt toward Mary and the rejection by the girl he loved. While in the hospital, guilt compelled him to ask Mary's forgiveness in a poem he wrote for her. But all through the years, Ann continued to be the subject of many of his essays.

Any dreams Lamb might have had as a young man perished on the day Mary, in a fit of insanity, stabbed her mother. Lamb immediately committed himself to Mary's care. He would not allow her to spend the remainder of her life in an insane asylum as John, their older brother demanded. Charles faithfulness to his sister Mary is in contrast to John's indifference toward his family. Lamb later described his brother in an essay as marching in a quite opposite direction. The eldest

brother must keep his state, but the criticism and sarcasm Charles felt remained visible in his writings.

Charles' deep affection toward Mary furnished him with a commitment that would last until his death. Mary's condition forced Lamb to maintain his job as a clerk at India House. He once said that "instead of writing to live, he clerked in order to be free to write".¹

Some of his best writings were done on snatches of company time. The majority, however was done during the evenings and on Sunday. His first love was to be a playwright, but his recognition in the literary world came about in a different way.

Children living in Lamb's lifetime did not get to read the romances, nonsense rhymes and adult books such as Robinson Crusoe and Pilgrim's Progress which both Charles and Mary devoured as children. It greatly disturbed Charles to see the books for children filled with the literary writings of Mrs. Barbauld and her crew. A child reading one of her geography or nature stories could not escape the blunt moral lesson embodied within the tale. For a man who had no children of his own, Lamb had a keen insight into the mind of a child. He said:

We crush the single faculty and wonder in children, by explaining everything. We take them to the source of the Nile and show them the scanty runnings, instead of letting the beginnings of that seven fold stream remain in impenetrable darkness, a mysterious question of wonderment and delight to ages.²

According to Lamb, children do not need to be spoon feed. Some things

¹John Mason Brown, Dramatic Personae (New York: Viking Press, 1963), p. 366.

²Cornelia Meigs and others, A Critical History of Children's Literature (Toronto: Macmillan Company, 1969), p. 302.

are learned best if the child has to use his own imagination.

Lamb wanted the child to be exposed to the best in literature. This was not the moralistic writing of Mrs. Barbauld. In a letter to Coleridge, Lamb questioned if there was not something that could be done about this kind of publication.

Taking a firm stand against the writings of the time, Charles and Mary accepted the offer of William Godwin, a publisher of children's books, to retell some of Shakespeare's plays. It was the hope of the two Lambs that through this effort, young children of the time would have before them some literature that was of a quality equal to their intelligence.

The Tales from Shakespeare was published in 1807. It was the first book of literary quality that was written specifically for children. Reading the tales retold by Charles and Mary Lamb are not like reading Shakespeare's plays. In the preface Lamb described their writing as a book for children, especially young girls, which is to serve as a preparation for the reading of the original Shakespearean dramas.³

There is a freshness about the stories as if they were being told for the first time. The Lambs did not try to retain the style of sentence structure used by Shakespeare when retelling the tales for children. It was Charles' desire to keep the language of Shakespeare's time alive so that children could experience the same joy he experienced as a child reading the original plays. The theme of the plays and the theme of the Lamb's stories remained the same.

³Charles Lamb and Mary Lamb, Tales from Shakespeare, Vol. VII, in The Life and Works of Charles and Mary Lamb (London: Macmillan Company, 1899), p. xviii-xix.

Charles wrote the tragedies and Mary undertook the comedies. All of them are equally well-done. Mary had the most difficulty writing "As You Like It". She did not like dressing so many boys in girls clothes. Her brother thought "Othello" was his best work. Their tales for children have never been equaled.

The stories are written in words a young reader can understand. At the same time the actions and emotions of the characters become a part of the reader.

Both Charles and Mary Lamb had been trained in the beat of Elizabethan sonnets. Thus they had the skill and knowledge of the metric beat to weave Shakespeare's words with their own narrative without any recognition of the old mingled with the new.

Again Othello and Desdemona met, and he accused her more plainly of being unfaithful, and of loving another man, but he did not name whom: and Othello wept and Desdemona said, 'Alas, the heavy day! Why do you weep?' and Othello told her...⁴

The paragraph develops and moves into Shakespeare's words as if Lamb had been the creator of the entire paragraph. This is where his success lies. He was able to retell the story and still retain the flavor of Shakespeare's style of writing.

The harmony of the text resolves many of the difficulties the child would encounter if he were reading the original. The condensing of many of the long repetitious passages also clarify the text for a child.

The Lamb's publisher, Godwin stifled many of the ideas Charles and Mary had about how the plays should be retold. Charles wanted to

⁴Ibid., p. 286.

include more humor in the stories, but Godwin was most concerned about the effect this would have on the sale of the book. Further disagreement arose when Godwin gave Charles credit for some of Mary's works. In a letter to Wordsworth, Lamb expressed even greater disgust at the preface Godwin wrote to which he signed Lamb's name. In another letter Lamb admits having written most of the preface. He goes so far as to tell Wordsworth to tear out the cuts and give them to his son as "Mrs. Godwin's fancy". His attitude toward her prints correlates with his idea about leaving something to the child's imagination, which would in every case be better than her illustrations.

The differences of opinion existing between Lamb and Godwin were never resolved. Before a complete split ended Lamb's career as a children's author, he and Mary would do a few more books for Godwin.

Lamb had never read the original version of Homer's Ulysses. He had read Chapman's translation and from this version Godwin enticed Lamb to write an edition for children.

Lamb's Ulysses is written in a simple, easy flowing style of writing. It is very similar to the Elizabethan sonnet used by Shakespeare.

The elaborate metaphors used are an example of Lamb's gift with descriptive words. The sentences are balanced and flow effortlessly from the reader's lips.

But when he approached near, a horrid sound of a huge sea beating against rocks informed him that there was no place for landing, nor any harbour for man's resort, but through the weeds and the foam which the sea belched up against the land he could dimly discover the rugged shore all bristled with flints, and all that part of the coast one impending rock that seemed impossible to climb...while these thoughts distracted him

with diversity of dangers, one bigger wave drove against a sharp rock his naked body, which it gashed and tore...with both hands he clasped, wrestling with extremity, till the rage of that billow which had driven him upon it was past; but then again the rock drove back that wave so furiously, that it reft him of his hold, sucking him with it in his return, and the sharp rock (his cruel friend) to which he clinged for succour, rent the flesh so sore from his hands in parting, that he fell off, and could sustain no longer...⁵

Any child reading this passage encounters the agony and desperation of Ulysses. The use of words like belched, bristled, flints and cruel friend draw excellent pictures for the reader. Lamb had the ability to interpret Chapman's translation into words that were recognizable in a child's vocabulary, yet had the romantic quality of the period of literature Lamb loved so much. Having grown up with it, he probably remembered the difficulty he and Mary encountered in reading and interpreting the romantic writers. This and the concern for the lack of this kind of literature for children of his time no doubt led him and Mary to spend hours retelling these tales for children. Lamb did such a good job of vividly recreating Chapman's translation of Ulysses that Godwin was afraid many of the "nice people" would think the passages were more horrible than impressive. Godwin warned Lamb that women were one half the populations. They were the buyers who would determine what their children would read. Lamb's reply was a take it or leave it attitude. He changed just enough of his interpretation to satisfy Godwin, and stood firm on all other passages.

Mary's major contribution was Mrs. Leicester's School. Although

⁵Charles Lamb and Mary Lamb, Mrs. Leicester's School, Vol. V, The Life and Works of Charles and Mary Lamb (London: Macmillan Company, 1899), p. 188.

Charles was given credit for the book on the title page, he admits in personal letters that Mary has written most of the stories.

Mary writes with the same poetic truthfulness of her brother. Again, the training she received as a child in Elizabethan sonnets is evident in the short and balanced sentences she used when relating the childhood experiences of Mrs. Leicester's students.

Critical as Charles was of the moralistic teachings of Mrs. Barbauld, both he and Mary were guilty of the same acts. In almost all of her stories, Mary rewards the little girls who can recite their A B C's and downgrades the child who can not accomplish this skill. In "Father's Wedding Day", Mary describes Elinor Forester as a "sad little dunce, and scarcely knew my letters...when I said my lesson well, I was always rewarded with some pretty story of my mother's childhood..."⁶ Lamb was never critical of such moralizing by his sister. Charles felt her literary ability surpassed that of other moralistic writers of children's poetry and moralizing was not the theme of Mary's stories. The praise given the book by Charles and other colleagues was truly due Mary because the book went through ten printings between the years 1809 and 1827.

Lamb was most critical of the Poetry for Children he and Mary wrote in 1809. He tells Coleridge "you must read them remembering they are task work."⁷ Most of the poems are centered on events out of the Lambs' past. They write about simple things as "The Ride", "The Peach",

⁶Ibid., p. 65.

⁷Edna Johnson, Carrie E. Scott, and Evelyn R. Sickele, Anthology of Children's Literature (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1948), p. 980.

"The Newborn Infant". The list goes on, almost to one hundred poems. "The First Tooth" is typical of the poems. There is a touch of moralizing about the jealousy between a little boy and his older sister. There is also a parallel drawn between the brother and sister and the childhood of Charles and Mary. The work was probably instigated by Mrs. Godwin in an attempt to publish a rival to the Taylor's Original Poems. Charles was a man who wrote with a free pen and the restrictions his publishers placed on his works were probably the main reason for the Lambs fading from the world of children's writers. Children up to the present time have probably suffered a loss because of the strong disagreement that existed between Lamb and Godwin.

Charles Lamb was not a man who would easily be swayed in his ideas about literature. Apart from his translations for children, two different Lamb's emerge from his writings. One side is seen in his most well-known Essays of Elia, the other in his personal letters written to friends.

Lamb is one of the few famous authors who had left behind such a complete autobiography. Unlike many other poets of the time, Lamb made no mention of political, governmental or scientific happenings of the day. The richness of living life itself supplied Lamb with all he needed for a lifetime of writing.

Letters scrawled in swift longhand freely convey Lamb's impressions and amusements encountered in everyday life. The rigid sentence structure found in his formal prose is absent. None of these letters are dated, and all are simply constructed. The subject matter of many of the letters centers on the critical analysis of plays, prose, and poetry. It was very common for Lamb to question the opinion of his colleagues

on a play or book. Criticisms made in these letters were usually whims and not intended to persuade others as to the worth of the material. In this respect Lamb was not a true critic, yet his word held great value in the literary world.

Many times his letters had an element of play or make-believe in them. His humor was an expression of tenderness. Sometimes the humor was so obviously directed at an individual that it went unrecognized by that person.

Describing Lamb from his letters, we see a man who loved life. The city of London was his castle, books his dreamland, and people his subjects. Working within this triangle Lamb wrote many essays under the pseudonym of Elia. It was the name of a former clerk in South Sea House whom Lamb knew while he was employed there. The name served as the cover under which Lamb revealed his most intimate self, personal experiences and thoughts, distorting the facts just enough to remain anonymous.

The collections of Elia first appeared on a monthly bases in The London Magazine between 1820 and 1835. Up until this time Lamb's recognition as an accomplished author did not go beyond his translations of Shakespearean dramas. John Scott, editor of The London Magazine, took Lamb under his guidance and set the writer on a new literary path.

From the pen of Elia, an enriched flow of wit, anecdote, and wisdom transformed the pen of Charles Lamb into one of fame as an English essayist. "Recollections of Christ's Hospital Five and Thirty Years Ago" appearing in the August 1820 issue of the magazine, marked the beginnings of essays containing rare beauty and charm.

Once launched on a new literary path, Lamb began reminiscing about

fellow acquaintances. In the essay "The Old Benchers", Lamb depicts his father as a merry person full of jokes and antics. He was a man of deep conviction, never hesitating to stand up for a fellow victim of oppression. If Lamb gave an accurate description of his father, then it is clear to see where he himself acquired his subtle wit and humor.

Elia became more than a pseudonym for Lamb, it became a personality. A gay, whimsical and spirited author emerges in "Desertation On Roast Pig", one of his most famous essays. Poking fun at the custom of roasting a pig evolved from Lamb's keen sense of observance of people intertwined with the subtle humor that was molded into his personality. Many of the stories begin with a play on the meaning of words. In "A Chapter on Ears", the introduction describes the physical appearance of a man without ears. Reading on, you discover Lamb is describing himself as a man who has no ear for music.

Through Elia, Lamb freely confesses many other personal weaknesses. He realizes the dangers of his habits of smoking and drinking. The man even humbles himself to a confession of liking blue china, revealing a feminine taste. To readers of The London Magazine Elia's style, humor and sadness came to be regarded as Lamb's undoubted self-expression. The majority of papers signed "Elia" contained light prose or detailed characterizations of people Lamb knew and understood.

Only once did Lamb record on paper his hope of a life with his sweetheart, Ann Simmons. Even though Ann was the subject of many of his essays only in the poem "Dream Children" is there a hint of regret in Lamb's words as he speaks of Alice. The poem begins with Elia seated in his living room telling an old family tale to his children. Looking at his little girl Alice, he sees the fair young Ann he loved.

The reality of the dream fades when little Alice calls her father Bartrum, not Elia. Waking from this daze Elia says, "we are nothing; less than nothing, and dreams. We are only what might have been".⁸ Lamb stayed above his own burden in life living in dreams. This was one time he expressed how futile it was to put all ones hopes in a dream world.

Charles Lamb's essays were richly human and often touching on the suggestion of the deepest truths. His subjects were usually simple in nature, yet they took on a personality all their own. He left it to man's imagination to draw for himself the moral lesson woven into his stories. As with children, Lamb respected man's intelligence.

The Essays of Elia became even more popular after they were published as a collected work. The Last Essays of Elia, written for their financial benefits were not received by the public with the same enthusiasm as the first essays. Despite this, Charles and Mary were fortunate to sell a sufficient number of their works to realize some profit from their efforts. However, public acclaim was never great enough to rub out Charles' feelings of failure as an author.

The constant state of unrest in Lamb's personal life did nothing to lift his ego as a writer. His sister Mary, was an intelligent and inspiring woman, despite her frequent lapses of insanity. The influence she held over Charles remains one of mystery. The fact that neither of the Lambs married has suggested to some historians that the relationship between the brother and sister was physical rather than one

⁸Charles Lamb, Essays of Elia, Vol. I, The Life and Works of Charles Lamb (London: Macmillan and Company, 1899), p. 203.

of loyalty and devotion. Life for both of them was always a mesh of unhappiness and conflict.

Mary was repeatedly plagued with long periods of depression, requiring her to return to the country for extensive periods of confinement. Acquaintances of Charles, referred to him as being in a queer state at all times.

A bright spot in the lives of Charles and Mary Lamb came in 1824 when they adopted an orphan girl named Emma Isola. She became the daughter Charles never had. The two people spent their most enjoyable moments together walking through the streets of London. Even from this relationship a question arises as to the kind of love Lamb felt toward Emma. In 1831, at the age of fifty-six, in a moment of serious confession Lamb hints at the love he has found in the last lines of this poem:

Scornful beauty may deny him---
 He hath spells to charm disdain;
 Homely features may defy him---
 Both at length must wear the chain.
 Haughty Youth in Courts of Princes---
 Hermit poor with age o'er come---
 His soft plea at last convinces;
 Sooner, later--Love Will come.⁹

Nothing was to develop of the relationship. A short time later Emma began working as a governess. Lamb was left to bear his loneliness without further consolation from Emma.

Since 1825, Lamb had been in retirement from his job at India House. At long last he had gained the freedom to write that he had yearned for during all the years he worked as a bookkeeper. Ironically

⁹Katharine Anthony, The Lambs (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1945), p. 187.

now that he was no longer committed to a working routine, long uninterrupted hours for writing became a misery rather than a pleasure. Writing was no longer the escape from reality it once had been.

From this time until his death nine years later, Lamb slumped into a long period of depression. He began drinking more and more. Many of his friends were now gone. His adopted daughter was married. Waiting out the final days were all that remained for Charles Lamb.

Coleridge died in 1834 leaving Lamb to bear his heavy burden alone. It was decided between him and Mary that she would die first, but this was not to be the case. On December 22, Lamb fell and received a gash on his cheek that developed into erysipelas. He died five days later at Edmonton on December 27, 1834. Mary would out live him by thirteen years.

During his lifetime Lamb wrote poems, plays and prose. His name first appeared on four sonnets he contributed to a volume published by Coleridge in 1796. Two years later he turned out a story entitled Rosamund Gray.

One of the greatest disappointments in Charles Lamb's life was his failure as a playwright. He wrote two plays, "John Woodvil" and "Mr. H. _____", neither being successful. Showing deep embarrassment, Lamb was forced to laugh at the failure of his own plays so members of the audience would not recognize him as the author of such a farce.

The Lambs' success as writers of children's literature compensated for Charles failure as a playwright. The quality and popularity of the Tales from Shakespeare and the Adventures of Ulysses were instrumental in the revival of Elizabethan drama. Along with the return of

imaginative literature, children received the recognition never before given them. For the first time they could read a book written especially for them that had a literary quality they were capable of reading.

Lamb's figure in the public eye did not last for long. It was true that the Essays of Elia and the Tales from Shakespeare were popular, but Lamb felt the decline in his appeal to the English people. The news of his success in America proved to be of little consequence to him in his later years. Articles in the New York newspapers contained many accounts of the whimsical English essayist. The honor bestowed on him in this country belonged to the future. Charles Lamb's domain lay in the past.

One can only speculate at what the Lambs might have contributed to literature had their personal lives been different. Charles' devotion to Mary, which he once likened to a "tooth ache and his friend gum boil", influenced both people in their ability to develop as individual personalities.

It was Charles Lamb, more than anyone else, who in the eighteenth century brought to prose a flavor of imagination and creative treatment. Although he was unaware of it during his lifetime, his influence was silently making its mark on the writers of future generations.

The life and writings of Charles Lamb are like a puzzle. From within each of his letters, essays and poems a part of this remarkable man's life slips into place. He has become a legend as a writer of humor and English wit. He meant no harm to anyone. He was gifted with the ability to explore in writing the habits and emotions of all human beings including himself. His love for life and books far outweighed the burdens of life he bore as fate.

Robert Southey, a lifelong friend and colleague of Charles Lamb wrote these words about one of England's great essayist.

Charles Lamb, to those who know thee justly dear
For rarest genius, and for sterling worth,
Unchanging friendship, warmth of heart sincere,
And wit that never gave an ill thought birth,
Nor ever in its sport infix'd a sting;
To us, who had admired and loved thee long,
It is a proud as well as pleasant thing
To hear thy good report, now borne along
Upon the honest breath of public praise:
We know that with the elder sons of song,
In honouring whom thou hast delighted still,
Thy name shall keep its course to after days...¹⁰

¹⁰Edmund Blunden, Charles Lamb (London: Longmans, Green and Company, 1954), p. 36.

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