

# Moral Wisdom in the 'New Year's Eve': A Brief Analysis

Paper Submission: 15/12/2020, Date of Acceptance: 25/12/2020, Date of Publication: 26/12/2020

## Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to make a critical analysis of the celebration of a new year by Charles Lamb. The essay "New Year's Eve" seems to be his reflections on the idea of death and mortality that is an inevitable part of the human existence, though he does not become ready to accept the realities of life that people grow old and pass away at a certain point of time. In the Romantic literary period, the works of many well-known authors are usually classified by genre on not only the time, in which they are produced, but essential form and subject matters. His works in some cases have similarities to works of other authors. His use of different literary tools helped him to create an individual style. 'New Year's Eve' is an autobiographical essay, revealing the innermost feelings and nature of lamb. It is a day of celebration in which he pours his imagination, fancies reminiscences which are certainly part of his personality.

**Keywords:** Pen-name, idiosyncrasies, tributary backwater, subject-matter, veracity persuasion, extraordinary, retrospect, smallpox, successor, inescapable, immortality, cheerful, melancholy, eccentricity, braving death, brooding atmosphere, extravagant fancies

## Introduction

Charles Lamb was an English essayist, poet, and antiquarian, best known for his *Essays of Elia* and for the children's book *Tales from Shakespeare*, co-authored with his sister, Mary Lamb. Friends with such literary luminaries as S T Coleridge, Robert Southey, William Wordsworth, and William Hazlitt, Lamb is at the centre of a major literary circle in England. He has been referred by E.V. Lucas, his principal biographer, as the most lovable figure in English literature. He found his real literary ability when he began to write essays. He earned the name of "the English Montaigne" with the series of essays he began to publish in London magazines in 1820, under the pen-name of Elia. His two volumes of *Essays of Elia* appeared in 1823 and 1833. He led to a delightful interpretation of the life of London, as it appeared to a quiet little man who walked unnoticed through its crowded streets.

William Hazlitt remarks: "The prose essays, under the signature of Elia form the most delightful section among Lamb's works. They traverse a peculiar field of observation, sequestered from general interest, and they are composed in a spirit too delicate and unobtrusive to catch the ear of the noisy crowds, clamouring for strong sensations."

Alfred Ainger remarks: "It is in vain to attempt to convey an idea of the impression left by Lamb's style. It evades analysis: one might as well to account for the perfume of lavender, or the flavour of quince. It is in truth an essence, prepared from flowers and herbs gathered in fields where the ordinary reader does not often range. And the nature of the writer... the alembic, in which these various samples were distilled... was as rare for sweetness and purity as the best of those enshrined in the old folios... his "midnight darlings."

Lamb is one of the greatest exponents of the personal essay in English literature. His dependence upon facts or theories or arguments is far less than that of any great writer. There is no other writer who may be said to have started on the career of authorship with less premeditation or planning. What he did was to make himself and all the events of his simple and single life, and the subject-matter of his astonishing elaborations. His use of autobiography is not only on an unprecedented scale, but also from the point of view of a persistent idealisation which heightens without falsifying the outlines. In one of his letters, he said that "the more my

**Niraj Kumar Sonkar**  
Assistant Professor,  
Dept. of English  
M.G. Kashi Vidyapith,  
Varanasi, UP, India

character comes to be known, the less my veracity will come to be suspected." In fact, when we read his descriptions of men and things, they appear to be the product of imagination. But the diligent researches have revealed a fidelity to the fact and truth which is very nearly complete. His mystifications are so thorough that for a long time no attempt has been made to look for facts in this seeming fiction.

The revelation of him, recorded in the essays, fills in the outlines of an extraordinarily lovable figure. Gentleness is the hallmark of his personality. There is nothing aggressive about him, nothing to offend the man of taste or the scholar or the philosopher. He holds hard to the fundamental verities of life, and even when he indulges in his paradoxes, there is such a gentle persuasion, such a tentative disinterested experimental approach as to disarm all opposition. By becoming merged in the past, he does not lose his individuality but becomes more than ever original. The extraordinary and universal appeal of the personal essay owes almost everything of its vitality and variety to the example of him. He lived in an age of great essayists-William Hazlitt, De Quincey, Leigh Hunt, Christopher North, Lockhart and Sydney Smith. But while he has something of the manner of them, not one of them is able to capture his incommunicable graces.

"Every man has two birthdays: two days, at least, in every year, which set him upon revolving the lapse of time, as it affects his mortal duration." With this line, the narrator quickly grabs reader's attention and forces the reader to think about mortality. The narrator further says his charm and language choices keeps the reader engaged as they feel they are talking with an old friend. Lamb's ability to achieve with the essay, the same qualities that his contemporaries achieved with poems shows not only his worth as a canonized writer of the Romantic period but also his creative abilities that serve as an example of stepping outside of the usual accepted literary practices to create works of literature.

The New Year is like a common birthday to all mankind. One's personal birthday is not celebrated as one grows older; it is celebrated only when one is a child. Children do not think upon the true significance of a birthday. They are only concerned with the eatables. The birth of the New Year is the birthday of our common Adam. Lamb finds the occasion of the departing of the old year solemn, though others around him enjoy it. The sound of the bells ringing out the year makes him melancholy and he thinks of all that passed in the last year. Lamb by nature loves old things and tends to disapprove of anything new, whether it is a new book or a new year. Even the unpleasant incidents of the past are taken on a pleasant aura. In retrospect, disappointments lose their sting, and enemies can be forgiven or defeated in imagination. He is glad to have loved Alice W-n even though his love was hopeless. He loves the child Elia and this kind of self-love, he feels, is excusable, because he was as different as a child. He does not like his present self, which is full of faults. He recalls with sympathy, the various misfortunes that befell him as a child. The reason for his tendency of

looking too much into the past could be a sign of morbidity. Another reason could be that having no child of his own, he has no one to play. As a result, he looks to his own image as a child for comfort, and adopts him for heir and successor. If the readers are too impatient with Lamb for such musings, he will hide himself behind that protective disguise of Elia.

'New Year's Eve' brings the thoughts of death and makes Lamb sad. He thinks more of the year that has passed than of the year that is going to come. He does not want to leave this earth which, for him, holds great joys. He would like to stop time's movement, for the charms of maturity do not appeal to him. He is horrified to think that with death he would lose all the joys of life like the solitary walks, the sun, the breeze, the sky and the good food and drink. He feels worse when he thinks that death will deprive him of his favourite books. In summer, the thoughts of death are thrust away and one even entertains ideas of immortality, but winter's cold winds bring back the thoughts of death. Like Robert Browning in "Prospice", Lamb does not consider death to be a refuge from the storms and troubles of life or as a pleasant escape. Sir Francis Bacon also observes about death in his famous essay "Of Death." Death is an ugly phantom to be hated by mankind and banished like a criminal. No antidote can be effective against his fear of death:

"I saw the skirts of the departing Year".

Lamb finds no consolation in the fact that after death he will lie on equal terms with kings and emperors. But he takes joy in the fact that he is alive and thus superior to the dead men. With this spirit, he bids farewell to the departing year and welcomes the New Year. He quotes Charles Cotton's cheerful song on the subject of the New Year and says that the poem should have the effect of a tonic on the reader. These lines drive away all thoughts of death from the mind.

Undoubtedly, "New Year's Eve" is a personal essay, revealing the innermost feelings and nature of Lamb. It is a day of celebration, but it generates a mood of melancholy in the mind of Lamb. He broods over the past year. Like all romantics, Lamb also takes refuge in the past, which soothes troubled soul: 'Welcome the coming, speed the parting guest'.

Lamb feels that his nostalgia for childhood must be due to some morbid eccentricity or because of his bachelorhood-"and having no offspring of my own to dally with, I turn back upon memory, and adopt my own early idea as my heir and favourite." He always shows cleverness in the depiction of his characters in his essays and at same time he becomes mysterious and vogue. He keeps certain names of his characters elliptic and abbreviated. Sometimes, he omits the inner spellings of their names and writes only the beginning and ending letters, i e Alice W—n .Lamb reveals himself to be fearful of death. He hates the thought of dying and nothing can mitigate his fear of death and its horrors. Indeed, New Year's Eve makes him count the days of his duration on earth. He loves the earth and would not like to leave it. He does not make himself out to be a hero braving death, or a mystic welcoming it. He is

an ordinary man and confesses his horror of death, which is to him an ugly phantom, a universal viper.

"New Year Eve" is certainly one of Lamb's more serious essays. It is not playfully witty or boisterously funny. Indeed, his typical humour is not too much in evidence in this essay. A solemn tone governs the writing. However, humour is not entirely absent. There is a touch of it even while Lamb is talking so intensely of his fear of death. "Know thy betters", he says to the dead men, because he himself is living. Furthermore, the melancholy and brooding atmosphere is mixed with a cheerful optimism and hopefulness and pathos which re-establish itself at the end of the essay.

The style of the essay is fairly simple, and it contains no allusions. Felicity of expression marks some of the effective phrases. Some of the statements have epigrammatic touch, for example:

"I am armour-proof against old discouragements."

"In a genial August noon, beneath a sweltering sky, Death is almost problematic."

"I do not want to be weaned by age; or drop, like mellow fruit, as they say, into the grave."

"I am not content to pass away like the weaver's shuttle."

Hugh Walker observes, "Lamb's style is inseparable from his humour. His whim-whams as he called them, found their expression in the quaint words and antique phrases and multiple words and sometimes far fetched yet never forced comparisons in which he bounds. Strip Elia of these and he is nothing."

#### **Lamb's Place in English Literature**

Charles Lamb occupies a significant place in the history of English literature. Lucas has stated that his writings form no integral part of the history of English literature. It is not in the main current, hardly even in the side current of the great stream but a kind of tributary backwater. Further, Lucas says that the Essays of Elia are perhaps as easily dispensed with as any work of fancy and imagination in the language. The main contention of the essayist is that his influence is indirect, he is original and inimitable. Certainly, we find the evidence deep observations of life and art of living in his essays. While Lamb's works are unlike the works of other English Romantics in form, his use of the form and the subjects and ways he used language throughout his essays help to situate him in amongst the other Romantics.

#### **Conclusion**

New Year's Eve's opening lines serves as an epitome of the Romantic qualities that Lamb writes about his essays. It gives us glimpses into its author's mind and temper. It is, in fact, a document, the imaginative self-projection, presented to us by Elia. It is enlivened by the charming egotism of its author

who cannot bear the idea of leaving "the greenness of fields, and the delicious juices of meats and fishes, and society, and the cheerful glass, and the candle-light and fireside conversations and innocent vanities, and jests, and irony itself." Lamb reflects man's morality and feelings in this essay. He ponders the meaning of life and his own importance to the society, pours forth his imaginings, fancies and reminiscences which are certainly part of his personality.

#### **Literary Review**

"I have heard some profess an indifference to life. Such hail the end of their existence as a part of refuge; and speak of the grave as some soft arms in which they may slumber as on a pillow."

"Some have wooed death –but out upon thee, I say, thou foul, ugly phantom! I detest, abhor, execrate...as...in no instance to be excused or tolerated, but shunned as a universal viper; to be branded, proscribed, and spoken evil of! In no way can I be brought to digest thee, thou thin, melancholy privation, or more frightful and confound positive."

#### **A Veteran Observer**

"Not only is he... unique among English writers, but he is equally unique among the smaller and especially national body of English humorists. Nobody has ever succeeded in imitating him even in his most obvious quaintness, while the blending of these quaintnesses with a Pathos which is never mere sentiment, is a secret not merely undiscovered yet by imitators, but escaping even any complete analysis- a Proteus never to be bound by the most enduring Ulysses, but fortunately amiable enough to bestow his wisdom and his graces without any such process."

#### **George Saintsbury**

#### **References**

1. Charles Lamb Wikipedia dated 23.08.2019, p-01
2. Charles Lamb's Essays of Elia by S. Sen, Unique publishers New Delhi 2004. P-116,118
3. A.H. Thompson (Ed): The Last Essays of Elia.
4. N.L. Hallward and SC Hill (Ed.): The Essay of Elia, 2013 p-41.
5. New Year's Eve by Emmanuel Martinez dated: 09. 01. 2021,p-02
6. Legouis and Cazamian : A History of English Literature.etc
7. A short note on New Year's Eve, Dated: 16.11.2020, p-02
8. Sir Francis Bacon's text "Of Death".
9. Charles Lamb's Essays of Elia by S. Sen, Unique publishers New Delhi 2004. P-336,337
10. Daishes, David: Critical Approaches to Literature. Prentice-Hall, 1956.