

# Charles Lamb as an essayist

Charles Lamb (1775-1834) was English essayist and critic, best known for his *Essays of Elia* (1823-1833). Scholars say that Charles Lamb carried on the tradition of English essays that found its first biggest proponent in Bacon, was afterwards perpetuated in the periodical essays of the eighteenth century and found its, arguably, fullest expression in the *Essays of Elia*.

Lamb, consciously and unconsciously, modelled his writings on the old masters of English prose. Like his predecessors, Lamb has frequently quoted old English Classics. The names of Sir Thomas Browne, Fuller, Butler, Marvel, Shakespeare are those which most often appear in his essays along with their quotations. There are also references to Coleridge, Hunt, Hazlitt- his contemporaries, in his autobiographical essays. Contrary to the instructive tone of his predecessors, Lamb's essays are deeply personal and often autobiographical. Lamb once wrote to his publishers, "my essays want no preface; they are all preface. A preface is nothing but a talk with the reader; and they do nothing else".

Lamb frequently startles his readers by some profound observation in the midst of seemingly trivial talk. It is Lamb's versatility, his protean temper, his facility of surprise make his essay appear rather tall amidst other essayists. Lamb's felicity of prose in terms of metaphors, similes and allusions makes him a playful yet dignified writer. Not to forget the humour he inserts in between the gravest prose. His essays are marked with all shades of humour and delicate irony. He balances his humour though with a dash of sadness and reflectiveness. Nostalgia and wistful longing often underlie his laughter.

In skilful handling of the materials with which essayists have worked, aphorism, epigram, character-writing, literary criticism, etc., he has proved himself second to none, and in versatility, whether of style, mood or wit, superior to all the rest.