

## **WIT AND HUMOR IN LAMB'S 'THE TWO RACES OF MEN'**

**Savan Kumar** Department of Basic science and humanities, Asst. Professor Raajdhani  
College, Bhubaneswar, Odisha, India

### **Introduction**

'*The Two Races of Men*' is an essay which was written around early 1820's and was first published in *The London Magazine* in December 1820. The essay along with Lamb's other essays was finally collected in the *Elia* in 1823 under Lamb's a fictitious name Elia. *Elia* was written about himself and his sister Mary Lamb. The essays were being published in *The London Magazine* since 1820 to 1825, even after the publication of *Elia*. What charmed the reader, in his essays is the friendly tone and personal touch to it, and hence there came many more edition of it till the publication of '*The Last Essays of Elia*' in 1828 in Philadelphia, America.

The Essay '*Two Races of Men*' is a wonderful text which shows the witty and humoristic characteristics of the author. It is a sheer product of 'wit' and 'humor'. Lamb as a writer is witty and clever, his indirect indication to his victim with subtle humor makes the reader more interested in his work. This is one of the reason why he gained popularity in Europe in the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and even today Charles is remembered for his *Elia* essays.

### **Introduction to the Essayist**

Charles Lamb (1775-1834) was a British writer, poet, essayist, critic and a philosopher who is extensively known for his essays. He was born in Inner Temple, London on 10<sup>th</sup> February 1775 and spent his young days there. John Lamb, father of Charles Lamb was a clerk to a lawyer and spent most of his professional life as an assistant barrister to Samuel Salt. Charles portrayed his father by fictitious name 'Lovel'. He was the youngest child of his parents and all other four children died who were born after Lamb. He had an elder brother and an elder sister but the gap between Lamb and his elder brother was huge so he was more close to his elder sister named Mary Lamb. However, Mary herself was about ten years older than Lamb. Mary lamb is referred as Bridget Elia in his essays.

Both Charles and Mary suffered a mental illness in their life which Charles himself confessed in a letter to Coleridge in 1796. He was working as a clerk in British East India Company where his salary was not much to take care of the whole family but still he managed somehow. Lamb had spent six weeks in a mental facility during 1795. Mary's mental illness was however, fatal and was the cause of her mother's death during September of 1796. He kept Mary in a private mental asylum and the relationship between both is very profound. Lamb again wrote to Coleridge about the mishappening in the family. S.T Coleridge was the only friend who was very close to Lamb and they both had shared the same school since their childhood. Lamb could befriend Williams Wordsworth and her sister Dorothy later only because of Coleridge.

Lamb tried Poetry, like sonnets, in his earlier career but soon realised that his talent and interest lies in prose than verse, and hence he tried his hand on 'essays' and became extensively popular. Lamb's first fictional work is a short novel entitled *A Tale of Rosamund Gray and Old Blind Margaret* which display the influence of the sentimental writers of the eighteenth century. Once Wordsworth wrote to John Scott in 1815 that Lamb, "writes prose exquisitely". Wordsworth could see the talent of writing better prose than poetry in him and the above comment came approximately eight years before Lamb wrote *Elia*.

### **What is Wit & Humor?**

Wit, according to oxford online dictionary is "The capacity for inventive thought and quick understanding; keen intelligence" and also "A natural aptitude for using words and ideas in a quick and inventive way to create humour". So according to the definition, the use of 'wit'

and ‘humor’ are interrelated to each other but not always. Wit may and may not be necessarily humorous all the time however most of the times it is funny and comes with humor.

On the other hand Humor always involves amusement and is manifested by a chuckle or laughter. According to Merriam Webster online dictionary, Humor can be defined as “something that is or is designed to be comical or amusing”. Humor is the ability of a person to express what is funny.

William Hazlitt says, “Humor is describing the ludicrous as it is in itself; wit is the exposing it by comparing or contrasting it with something else”. He also says that “Humor is the growth of nature and accident; wit is the product of art and fancy”. Hazlitt further says, “Humor, as it is shown in books, is an imitation of the natural or acquired absurdities of mankind, or of the ludicrous in accident, situation, and character; wit is the illustrating and heightening the sense of that absurdity by some sudden and unexpected likeness or opposition of one thing to another, which sets off the quality we laugh at or despise in a still more contemptible or striking point of view” (Hazlitt, *On Wit and Humor*). Relationship between wit and humor is: humor is funny whereas wit requires something which is already humorous.

### **Wit and Humor in the Essay**

In this essay Lamb discusses humanity as he views it. He believes that there are two types of people, one is a lender and the other one is a taker. He describes the two distinct races as “*the men who borrow, and the men who lend*”. Men who borrow are designated “as *the great race*” and men who lend are termed as “born degraded”. “The great race” is “discernible in their figure, port, and a certain instinctive sovereignty”. We have been taught by our parents not to borrow money from anyone and borrowing money is not a good habit but here Lamb satirises the borrower resulting in the amusement of the reader and hence humor prevails in the mind of the reader. The wit of Lamb can be found throughout the essay and the use of different allusions prove that he is a well-read man. Lamb took the help of history and myth in the beginning in order to show the humanity and he argues that the existence of these two kinds of ‘men’ can be seen in all ages. Later we got to deduce that he is talking about the lending of his book to his friend S.T Coleridge as he gave the initials of his name at the end of the essay.

Lamb describes lenders and quotes, “He shall serve his bretheren”. Here he uses the allusion quotes the book of Genesis, and is a good example of use of wit. These witty descriptions arises humor in the reader as the writer is using serious allusions to deal with trifling or trivial issues like borrowing a book. Lamb describes borrower in humorous manner by stating that “He cometh to you with a smile, and troubleth you with no receipt; confining himself to no set season. Every day is his Candlemas, or his Feast of Holy Michael”. The borrower then gives “a pleasant look to your purse”. The borrower takes “handsomely” from “each man’s hand” and his victim who “struggles with destiny; is in the net”. Lamb also says that the borrower uses the proverb like lend to the poor and the lender will not lose in the end, as he will return his money back. Lamb gives an example of his friend who used to borrow money and boast “himself a descendent from mighty ancestors” who prior to now held the “ducal dignities in his realms”. His name was Ralph Bigod and his thought were “all regal” and hence “the idea of a king holding a private purse” is “revolting”. The borrower takes pride in counting on the number of his lender. Ralph, is represented as a borrower and his habits (which are “ducal”) are described. Lamb says that people like Ralph believes in an old aphorism, which they often repeats. Lamb quoted the aphorism, “money kept longer than three days stinks.” So Bigod “made use of it while it was fresh”. Lamb says, Ralph would drink away a good part of money which he received from lender as he “was an excellent tosspot”. Lamb criticised Ralph further by stating that Ralph would bury some money beside a river bank where even he would never seek it again. The use of wit arises humour in the reader.

Another instance where Lamb showed his wit and arouse humor in the reader when he talked about the man being “ideal” and “great at the midnight”. Lamb aroused the humor by comparing him wittily with the man and he says, “When I compare with him the companion with whom I have associated since, I grudge the savings of a few idle ducats, and think that I am fallen into the society of *lenders* and *little men*”.

Lamb then uses his pseudonym and calls himself Elia and tells the reader that his treasure is only the books which are “cased in leather covers than closed in iron confers...” In the later part of the essay Lamb talks about different books and its contents and also how his friend S. T Coleridge who had a habit of borrowing book from Lamb and marking annotations(which triples it's values) on it, borrows the book and sometimes return it back also.

In the end Lamb urges reader in a witty manner that if you have a modern collection then don't show it to anyone and even if you want to lend them then lend it to people like Coleridge who will return it on a time of his own choice. One should not “shut” his heart and library for person like S.T Coleridge.

Lamb's intellect can also be seen in the essay because he has discovered few new words like “visnomy” (for physiognomy) and “obolary” (for having less or little money).

### **Conclusion**

Lamb has used metaphors, irony, personification, hyperboles, and allusions while writing the essay. He has used the mixture of both formal and informal words in his writing style. These figures of speech are used with such cleverness that it arouse a feeling of humor among the readers and shows the wittiness of the writer.

### **Works Cited**

- “Humor.” *Merriam-Webster*, Merriam-Webster, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/humor>
- Maartensz, Maarten. “Introduction Hazlitt's Text: On Wit and Humour.” *Philosophy: "On Wit and Humour"* - William Hazlitt, [maartensz.home.xs4all.nl/log/2012/NL120307a.html](http://maartensz.home.xs4all.nl/log/2012/NL120307a.html).
- “The Two Races of Men.” *"The Two Races of Men"* by Charles Lamb, [http://www.essays.quotidiana.org/lamb/two\\_races\\_of\\_men/](http://www.essays.quotidiana.org/lamb/two_races_of_men/)
- “WIT | Meaning in the Cambridge English Dictionary.” *Cambridge Dictionary*, <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/wit>