

Background for Lamb

The term Essay comes from the French word “essai” which means “attempt”. Pope’s *Moral Essays* being an exception, it is a composition usually in prose, which may be of only a few hundred words like Bacon’s *Essays* or of the length of a book like Locke’s *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. It discusses, formally or informally, a topic or a variety of topics and is one of the most flexible and adaptable of all literary forms. Bacon observes that “the word is late, but the thing is ancient”. It was known to the classical writers and the *Characters* of Theophrastus, the *Meditations* of Marcus Aurelius and Seneca’s *Moral Epistles* all qualify for inclusion in the genre.

Non-fiction writing has existed for nearly as long as writing itself. There are no philosophical texts written by Socrates since writing was likely not used as a method of recording philosophy in his time. But the trend shifted by the time his student Plato had achieved intellectual maturity, resulting in foundational philosophical works like the *Republic*. Philosophical writing represents the genesis of the essay form, but the essay itself would not surface until the European Renaissance, roughly 1,800 years later.

The man credited with creating the essay is the French philosopher Montaigne, who was more revered as a politician than as a writer during his own time. The very term essay comes from the title of his collection of philosophical writings, *Essais*. Etymologically, *essai* is derived from the French verb “essayer”, which means “to try”. This was an ideal title for his philosophical work, which oscillated between various topics relayed with a less conventional and more subjective voice. Hence, Montaigne was always trying when it came to delving into whatever subject he chose, trying to make sense of idleness, or vanity, or cripples, or thumbs. He famously wrote “I am myself the matter of my book” and that very subjectivity would define the essay form. No matter what subject he tackled, it was clear that he was addressing it because it was of some concern to himself. Besides, he never shied away from inserting himself into his subject matter. While he was discursive, informal and intimate, writing on such subjects as *Liars*, *The Custom of Wearing Clothes* and *The Art of Conversation*, Bacon was terse, didactic and aloof, though choosing not dissimilar topics such as *Of Envy*, *Of Riches*, *Of Negotiating*, *Of the Vicissitude of Things*. Montaigne’s essays are often rather lengthy, while Bacon’s seldom exceed a few hundred words.

As essay is a thing which someone does himself; and the point of the essay is not the subject, for any subject will suffice. It lies in the charm of the writer’s personality. The charm of the essay depends upon the charm of the mind that has conceived and recorded the impression. It need not have an intellectual or a philosophical or a religious or humorous motif. But none of these subjects are ruled out. The only thing necessary is that the thing or the thought should be vividly apprehended, enjoyed, felt to be beautiful, and expressed with a certain gusto. The essay

is like a soliloquy. The personal essays should not aim at preaching a moral or ought to have any moral content. They are practically diaries written by a man having a sensitive and to some extent imaginative mind. Lamb, like Hazlitt, De Quincey, Leigh Hunt and Stevenson wrote very much in the tradition of Montaigne as his essays demonstrate.

Lamb's essays are considered to be among the best English prose work. In his essays he never pays tribute to the Frenchman. But Montaigne's mark is all over Lamb's essays. Like Montaigne, Lamb dove deep into subjects that were either of utmost relevance to existence and humanity as well as into the seemingly most superfluous. Like him, Lamb had a personal and personable style, and never asserted his own point of view as the absolutely authoritative one. He is appreciated for his genial humour, humanity, wisdom and profound pathos that is reflected in his writings. *Essays of Elia* (1828) and *The Last Essays of Elia* (1833) have a unique combination of wit, reflection, anecdote and fancy. They express his whimsical personality, humour and his love of London. What both writers displayed in their essay writing was their own humanity.

Lamb should get at least some credit for helping modernize the form. Essays written in the period between Montaigne and Lamb more closely resembled philosophical texts than Lamb's easy-going, conversational style. By taking the license afforded by the Romantic movement and inserting his whim and whimsy into his writing, Lamb helped define the essay as a truly personal form of writing. Perhaps we can attribute this to the fact that Lamb was also a poet, and that he never totally left his poetic sensibilities behind when moving into this other genre. According to Albert, "no essayist is more egotistical than Lamb; but no egotist can be so artless and yet so artful, so tearful and yet so mirthful, pedantic and yet so human."