

The Superannuated Man

Lamb's "The Superannuated Man" is a personal essay included in his *Essays of Elia*. Here he gives vent to his feelings after he gave up the job prematurely. The essay begins with an address to the reader wherein he painfully utters that he has wasted the golden years of his life – the shining youth – in the irksome confinement of an office. He calls the office a prison where he spent his life from the "shining youth" through the middle age till decrepitude and silver hairs, without any hope of release or respite. He lived to forget that there were such things as holidays, and with a note of pathos he remarks that these were the prerogatives of childhood. The essayist remarks that if there are such men, only then they will be able to appreciate "his deliverance".

The author spent thirty-six years at his desk in Mincing Lane, and when at the age of fourteen he took the seat in his office melancholia overtook him as he was suddenly incarcerated from the free life when he had abundant playtime and frequently intervening long vacations. At the office, which was a counting house in Mincing Lane he had to work for eight, nine and even ten hours a day. In a moralising tone, Lamb says that as "time partially reconciles us to anything", he gradually became content – doggedly contented, as wild animals in cages. The note of pathos in the writer's feelings is markedly poignant.

The author says that he had Sundays but they being days of worship, he hardly found them recreational. On a Sunday, he found the city gloomy and felt a weight in the air. He missed the cheerful cries of London, the music, and the ballad singers – the buzz and stirring murmur of the streets. The bells striking the hours depressed him, and the closed shops repelled him. Besides Sundays, he had a day at Easter, and a day at Christmas, with a full week in summer to go and air himself in his native fields of Hertfordshire. This was a great indulgence that made his "durance" tolerable, and Lamb waited for one full year for the time to come again. Always feeling that he was a captive prisoner, the prospect helped him sustain his thralldom.

With increasing years, his health and good spirits flagged. Besides his daylight servitude, he served over again all night in his sleep as he suffered perpetually from a dread of crisis. He would often wake up in terror of imaginary false entries, errors in his accounts, and the like. He became fifty, yet had no prospect of emancipation from the prison. Lamb's pathetic statement: "I had grown to my desk, as it were; and the wood had entered into my soul" – is very moving.

Soon it happened that his colleagues discovered in his countenance marks of weariness. The junior partner of the firm also noticed this change in his appearance, and when he enquired Lamb of the reason behind, he "honestly made a frank confession of his infirmity" and expressed his thought that one day "he should eventually be obliged to

resign his service.” The author opens up his heart to say that he passed a whole week labouring under the impression that he had acted imprudently in his disclosure, that he had foolishly given his bosses a handle against himself. This expression of the feeling is indeed sincere and touching.

The most desired day at last came when he was given the farewell. Lamb gives a minute description of his torrid hours as the senior partner lectured on his length of service and his meritorious conduct. When he descanted on the expediency of retiring at a certain time of life, Lamb’s heart panted. He was granted a pension for life to the amount of two-thirds of his salary. He considered it a magnificent offer. The essayist gives account of his reaction without inhibition. He says he did not know what he answered between surprise and gratitude, but he remembers that he stammered a bow and at ten minutes after eight he went home forever. The author’s narration of the incident that came very suddenly and yet astonishingly is frank. It seems he is incapable of expressing his feelings that were chaotic at that hour. He hails his freedom saying “*Esto perpetua*” ie. “let it be perpetual”.

Lamb now goes on to describe his life after his retirement. For the first two or three days he felt stunned – overwhelmed. He compares himself to a prisoner let loose after a forty years of confinement. The freedom came to him so suddenly that he could hardly believe it. While he ran short of time when he was in service, he is now in possession of Time that required management by a bailiff or a steward. Having all holidays he thought he had none. During his service life, he used to walk thirty miles a day, to make most of the holidays, but now time hangs heavy upon him as he could not walk it away.

The tone of pathos is suddenly lightened by humour when he describes that if his hours spent for the benefit of others be deducted from the fifty years of his life, he is still a young fellow. He asserts that the time a man has all to himself is the real time that he enjoys. The author is again overcome by pathos when he rues over his loss of association with the partners and the clerks of the Counting House with whom he spent so many years. Being suddenly removed from them, he feels that they are dead. Quoting from *Tragedy* by Sir Robert Howard, he says: “Time takes no measure in eternity.” To be relieved of this awkward feeling, he visited his office once or twice – to meet his old desk-fellows – his co-brethren of the quill. He mentions with sadness that during his visits he did not feel the warmth of pleasant familiarity, which he had enjoyed before among them. He cracked jokes, but they went off faintly. He felt sad to note that his desk and the peg had been allotted to another person, and the sight aroused in him a feeling of remorse. In this mood he gives farewell to some of his colleagues – one by one.

The author closes the essay with a description of his life after “the date of first communication.” He took fifteen days to arrive at a state of tranquillity. The first flutter had by now diminished and he discovered “an unsettling sense of novelty.” Plenty of time in hand, he found himself in the morning at Bond Street, and it seemed to him he

had been sauntering there at that very hour for years past. He digressed into Soho to explore a bookstall. He stood before an old picture in the morning and doubted if it had been there so long.

Deep in his heart, Lamb felt as if time was flying past. Lamb thought he had passed into another world. His mind experienced contrasting feelings. At times, it appeared life had become so uneventful. Time appeared to stand still. He lost track of the calendar. The yearning for the Sunday was not there. Nor did he experience the typical mid-week feeling on Wednesday. Saturday nights had lost their characteristics. Now all days of the week appeared equal with no torment, no anxiety and no worries.

Lamb did not feel it bothersome to visit the church, which trip previously irked him because it cut short his holiday. His humour is palpable when he says that he could visit a sick friend, and interrupt a man of business with a proposal to take a pleasure trip to Windsor on a fine May-morning. He could now have Lucretian pleasure to watch the toilers, and if he had a son, he would name him Nothing-to-do. Lamb could not marry and have children as he had to look after his insane sister; but always in his heart of hearts, he longed to have John and Alice. A touch of this feeling is discernible in his wish to christen his dream son Nothing-to-do if he had had a child. Finally, he gives his feeling: "Man, I verily believe, is out of his element as long as he is operative; I am altogether now contemplative."

The tone of essay is deeply sobered when Lamb calls himself "Retired Leisure." His face is now vacant, his gesture is careless, he perambulates at no fixed pace, nor does he have any settled purpose. Lamb's humour flashes again when says: "When I take up a newspaper, it is to read the state of opera", because he finds that his work is done or "Opus operatum est". He is satisfied and now he has the rest of the day to himself.

The essay is indeed a long and grand soliloquy. The author gives an account in detail of how felt when he was an employee in the Counting House in Mincing Lane, how he wished to have freedom from the exacting job, how finally he found his freedom and how generous were the partners of the firm. He also narrates his post retirement life – his joy and remorse, his initial boredom, and finally his reconciliation with life. It is an ideal essay in as much as the author does not theorise on a subject. It is not a treatise, but an expression of the author's mind in certain moments of his life. It seems to be pages lifted out of his personal diary. The essay is charming, but it is charming not because of its content but because the contents reveal the charm of the mind that has conceived and recorded the impression. "The only thing necessary," says Benson, "is that the thing or the thought should be vividly apprehended, enjoyed, felt to be beautiful, and expressed with a sudden gusto." "The Superannuated Man" having fulfilled all the conditions, can rightfully claim to be a good personal essay.

Dream Children

“Dream Children” is a unique essay, channeling the logic and flow of a dream in a series of long sentences of strung together. Lamb deftly uses these stylistic conceits to pull the reader into a reverie, creating a sense of tumbling through this dream world with its series of dovetailing tangents. In fact, the essay could prove confusing and hard to navigate until the reader gets to the end when. We are ripped out of this odd dream state into the most familiar state Lamb can be found in—sitting next to his sister.

To some extent, this piece blurs genre lines between essay and fiction. Commonly, we understand essays to be works of non-fiction, but in this one Lamb uses his typical interior-facing autobiographical approach to make room for a fictional narrative inside of a dream. The fact that his children exist is a fiction, as is the idea that he married Alice, as may be the existence and deaths of Field and John L. We know that the real life Charles had a brother John Lamb, but in choosing the rare occasion to write of his real life brother inside of this vivid dream, Lamb seems to be choosing to write about a fantasized version of his real life. Here, Lamb models his essay on a dream, bringing the fantasy that fuels his creative energies to the fore, blurring the lines between that fantasy of his past life and that life to which he dedicates his writing practice.