

Research Essay Final Version Template

Name: Patrick Wolff

Research Essay Title: An Unlikely Friendship: William Hazlitt and Charles Lamb

William Hazlitt was not particularly well known for his ability to maintain friendships. He was noted for his brash and overly critical nature, and as Philip Lopate puts it, “he quarreled with nearly all his friends and was reckless and frustrated in matters of love” (Lopate 180). One person, however, remained a loyal friend to Hazlitt throughout the extent of their relationship, which ended only as a result of Hazlitt’s death. This friend was Charles Lamb. Lamb was a contemporary of Hazlitt’s, who wrote alongside him at *The London Magazine*. Although Hazlitt and Lamb were close in their friendship, their literary works were worlds apart. In fact, the two had quite little in common aside from the fact that they were both renowned essayists, great lovers of Shakespeare, entirely luckless in love, and members of the Romantic Movement. The vast differences between the works and personal lives of these two monumental essayists provide a stark contrast to their close and long-lasting relationship.

Throughout his life, but particularly during his younger years, Lamb suffered through a number of tragedies, both economic and personal. To begin with, he was born into a relatively poor family. His father was a servant and a clerk who raised the family in a poor area of London. Lamb’s immediate family consisted of his mother, his father, his older brother, and his sister, Mary, who helped raise him and with whom he would

develop a close relationship over the years, often collaborating on literary projects together. Eventually, Lamb was sent on a scholarship to the Christ's Hospital school, which was a charity boarding school for children from poor backgrounds. The school was notorious for the viciousness and cruelty of its teachers. It was here that Lamb would meet and befriend Samuel Taylor Coleridge, whom he would remain close friends with over the course of his life (Lopate 158). Lamb, however, was luckier than most of the boys at the school as he lived quite close to it and was able to return home whenever he wanted. Lamb himself would later comment on this in his essay, "Christ's Hospital, Five and Thirty Years Ago," referring to himself in the third person simply as L.:

I remember L. at school; and can well recollect that he had some peculiar advantages, which I and other of his schoolfellows had not. His friends lived in town and were near at hand; and he had the privilege of going to see them, almost as often as he wished, through some invidious distinction, which was denied to us (Lamb 6).

Although this may seem like a stroke of good luck for the perennially melancholy Lamb, it was only a small lapse in an otherwise perfectly unlucky life. Following his dropping out of the boarding school as a result of his family's poverty, Lamb entered the workforce, eventually taking an unglamorous job as a clerk, a position which he would hold until his retirement.

When it came to love, Lamb was as unlucky as he was in most other areas of his life. He fell in love with a woman, whom he calls Alice W-----n in his essays, who never returned the feelings that he harbored for her. The echoes of the melancholy that resulted from this unrequited love can be found in a number of Lamb's essays, but one in particular provides a haunting insight into the emptiness that Lamb felt as a result of his circumstances. In "Dream Children: A Reverie," Elia, the fictionalized persona that Lamb adopted during the works of his later years, is recounting a story to his children about their great-grandmother Field. At the end of this story, Elia tells of how he fell in love with and began courting Alice W-----n, the mother of the children, but as the children begin to fade, they say to Elia:

'We are not of Alice, nor of thee, nor are we children at all. The children of Alice call Bartrum father. We are nothing; less than nothing, and dreams. We are only what might have been, and must wait upon the tedious shores of Lethe millions of ages before we have existence, and a name,'

and the reader is struck by the realization that Elia was having a dream, and that he, in fact, does not sleep next to the woman he loves (Lamb 172). The final stroke of bad luck that would haunt both Lamb and his family was mental illness. He himself had been committed to a mental institution for six weeks, and following his release, his sister suffered a breakdown and killed their mother. Lamb was able to keep her out of prison or a permanent institution only by taking on the role of her caretaker, which would burden him for the rest of his life.

Hazlitt, although not the victim of tragedies akin to those that haunted Lamb, grew up under unconventional circumstances. His father was a Unitarian who had studied at Glasgow University and who had had a relatively successful career as a preacher. His father was also a “fundamentalist of reason,” who worshipped the “Enlightenment values of rationality and autonomy” (Grayling 3). As a result of his father’s preaching, Hazlitt inherited a “freethinker’s love of liberty and republicanism,” views which he would continue to champion for most of his life, and which would shape his future writings. His father’s outspoken Unitarian fundamentalism would eventually catch up with him and he would be forced to “go where he could command a living,” frequently moving the entire family to places like County Cork in Ireland and, very briefly, the United States (Grayling 6). Hazlitt’s introduction to Coleridge and Wordsworth at the age of nineteen would also have a significant influence on his decision to pursue a career in writing (Lopate 179).

Perhaps as a result of these different upbringings, Lamb and Hazlitt vary significantly in the ways in which they examine themselves through the art of the personal essay. In the case of Lamb, an eccentric and often self-deprecating tone can be found in his works. One particular example of this is in the essay “A Chapter on Ears,” in which Lamb, speaking through the persona of Elia, begins “I have no ear” (Lamb 165). This odd opening sentence causes the reader to come to attention for a moment, wondering what exactly the author means by “I have no ear.” As Brent L. Russo notes in his article, “Charles Lamb’s Beloved Liberalism: Eccentricity in the Familiar Essays,” this opening serves a specific purpose:

Readers of “A Chapter on Ears” quickly learn that they are not being confronted by a deformed character after all, and that the essay has no interest in either their pity or their squeamishness. On the contrary, what readers have on their hands with Elia is a much more playful and mischievous character, one who will feign gravity, indulge paradoxes, and create confusion for no other reason than to poise himself to make his actual eccentricity seem that much more exuberant and amusing once revealed (Russo 444).

Russo makes the case here that Lamb is using eccentricity as a means to entertain the reader while simultaneously revealing himself, albeit quite subtly. By highlighting the eccentric, Lamb not only provides a look into his personal self but also manages to make the reader feel somehow connected to himself through the persona of Elia, as though he were a friend or a sympathetic stranger. In fact, E. V. Lucas, who published the seminal biography of Lamb, makes mention of this in his work, claiming:

Elia describes with so much sympathy most of the normal feelings of mankind, because Lamb understands so much, and is so cheering to the lowly, so companionable to the luckless. He is always on the side of those who need a friend (Lucas 44).

According to Lucas, because of Lamb’s experience of life, particularly his struggles with mental illness, both within himself and within his sister, he understands those who are lowly, and as a result, the eccentric persona of Elia becomes, in a way, a person.

In contrast to Lamb's eccentric and somewhat cryptic nature is Hazlitt's blunt and honest expression of himself and his misgivings about the world around him. Hazlitt pulls no punches in expressing his views on whatever it is that he feels strongly about. Of particular note is perhaps one of Hazlitt's best-known essays, "On the Pleasure of Hating." In this essay, Hazlitt straightforwardly claims that hating, a feeling that people tend to regard as negative, is really rather enjoyable. He provides a number of examples to make the case that, although people say it is wrong, hating things is enjoyable and is in fact an innately natural thing. Hazlitt exemplifies this by affirming that:

Animals torment and worry one another without mercy: children kill flies for sport: every one reads the accidents and offences in a newspaper as the cream of the jest: a whole town runs to be present at a fire, and the spectator by no means exults to see it extinguished" (Hazlitt 190).

Hazlitt's bluntness about such a touchy social subject exemplifies the state of mind that the man had. Hazlitt, unlike Lamb who enjoyed playing games with words, simply "wrote and spoke about things chiefly as 'he found them', rarely relying on 'preconceived notions and abstract dogmas'" (Halpin 295).

Finally, there remain between Lamb and Hazlitt the differences in their political and philosophical tendencies. In a collection of letters and records by both Lamb and Hazlitt, Hazlitt's grandson, William Carew Hazlitt, notes that the intimacy between the two writers "was an intimacy maintained under rather difficult circumstances,

inasmuch as the two men, in their political opinions (or, rather perhaps, their ways of looking at public concerns) were so widely discordant" (W.C. Hazlitt, *Lamb and Hazlitt* xliii, xliv). Lamb, for the most part, was indifferent to politics, in so far as his essays are concerned. Rarely are issues regarding politics or philosophy spoken of within the works of Lamb. This lack of any easily-discernible philosophical or political discussions has prompted Tim Milnes to dub Lamb the "Professor of Indifference," noting that "Lamb's avowed carelessness about matters philosophical is as familiar to his readers as the persona of 'Elia' adopted for the essays he wrote for the *London Magazine* in the early 1820s" (Milnes 324). In his essays, Lamb seems to lack any measure of interest in the concerns of the philosophical, often musing on his own personal situations and feelings.

Hazlitt is quite the opposite of Lamb in this regard. Hazlitt, as a result of his father's fundamentalist preaching and encouragement of political study, took a large interest in politics and philosophy at a young age. In his writings he consistently expresses his favor of liberty and republicanism and "consistently raged... against the way in which powerful minorities, and monarchs in particular, seek to subjugate majorities, limiting their freedom of expression and livelihood" (Halpin 295). This political fervor was something that Hazlitt would never relinquish over the course of his life, and it would cause him many problems. For example, although he had at one point been great friends of Wordsworth and a fan of his work, Hazlitt became angry with him, and many more of his contemporaries, when they began abandoning progressive politics in favor of conservative positions (Lopate 179). Hazlitt's political

and philosophical feelings, particularly his unrelenting support for Napoleon, even began to affect his relationship with Lamb, as Adrian Poole claims: “The friendship was shaken by political differences; Hazlitt was bitterly disappointed at Lamb’s failure to sympathize over Napoleons fall” (Poole 2).

Despite these seemingly insurmountable differences, both in their work and in their personal lives, Lamb and Hazlitt remained close friends for almost the entirety of their relationship. The two writers met for the first time in 1803, at the house of William Godwin, a novelist and philosopher. The meeting is described by Hazlitt’s grandson in the *Memoirs of William Hazlitt*:

My grandfather had made the acquaintance of Lamb himself at the house of his brother’s friend Godwin; where he found, one day, Godwin, Holcroft, and Coleridge in a hot controversy, as to whether it was best to have man as he was, or as he is to be. “Give me man,” said Lamb, “as he is not to be!” It was the first time the two had met; it was the commencement of a life-long friendship, which met with few interruptions (W.C. Hazlitt, *Memoirs of William Hazlitt* 126).

Indeed, following this interaction, Hazlitt and Lamb would become quick friends. By 1806, the third year of their friendship, Hazlitt had become “a frequent guest at Lamb’s and a brilliant ornament of the parties which the latter now began to collect on Wednesday evenings” (W.C. Hazlitt, *Letters of Charles Lamb* 386). Over the years the two would continue to correspond and work together, eventually holding positions together

at *The London Magazine*. Although their writing differed greatly in style and subject matter, Lamb and Hazlitt nonetheless had great respect for each other's work. In 1817, "Hazlitt dedicated his collection of Shakespearean criticism, *Characters* to Lamb 'as a mark of old friendship and lasting esteem'," and, upon his deathbed, Lamb would declare Hazlitt to be "worth all modern prose-writers put together" (Poole, 2).

As essayists, both Lamb and Hazlitt made tremendous contributions to the evolution of the personal essay, bringing to the world new styles, new politics, and new philosophy. Their work in the genre of the personal essay would influence generations to come. Despite their differences in politics, philosophy, writing style, and personal lives, the two writers remained great friends for the entire duration of their relationship, and when Hazlitt finally passed away in September of 1830, Lamb, along with Hazlitt's own wife and son, would be at his bedside (W.C. Hazlitt, *Memoirs* 238).

Works Cited

- Grayling, A. C. "Introduction." *The Quarrel of the Age: The Life and Times of William Hazlitt*. London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 2000. N. pag. Print.
- Halpin, David. "Hazlitt's Contrariness and Familiar Prose Style: Lessons on How to Be Critical." *London Review of Education* 9.3 (2011): 292-303. *MLA International Bibliography [EBSCO]*. Web.
- Hazlitt, William C., Charles Lamb, and William Hazlitt. *Lamb and Hazlitt: Further Letters and Records Hitherto Unpublished*. N.p.: Dodd, Mead, 1899. Print.
- . *Memoirs of William Hazlitt with Portions of His Correspondence*. London: Richard Bentley, 1867. Print.
- Hazlitt, William. "On the Pleasure of Hating." *The Art of the Personal Essay: An Anthology from the Classical Era to the Present*. Ed. Philip Lopate. New York: Anchor, 1994. 189-98. Print.
- Lamb, Charles. "A Chapter on Ears." *The Art of the Personal Essay: An Anthology from the Classical Era to the Present*. Ed. Philip Lopate. New York: Anchor, 1994. 165-69. Print.
- . "Christ's Hospital, Five-and-Thirty Years Ago." *Republic of Letters: A Weekly Republication of Standard Literature* (1835): 6-11. Web.
- . "Dream Children: A Reverie." *The Art of the Personal Essay: An Anthology from the Classical Era to the Present*. Ed. Philip Lopate. New York: Anchor, 1994. 169-72. Print.
- . *Letters of Charles Lamb: With Some Account of the Writer, His Friends and Correspondents, and Explanatory Notes*. Ed. William C. Hazlitt and Thomas N. Talfourd. Vol. 1. N.p.: G. Bell, 1886. Print.

Lopate, Philip. *The Art of the Personal Essay: An Anthology from the Classical Era to the Present*. New York: Anchor, 1994. Print.

Lucas, Edward V. *The Life of Charles Lamb*. Vol. 2. London: Methuen, 1905. Print.

Milnes, Tim. "Charles Lamb: Professor of Indifference." *Philosophy and Literature* 28.2 (2004): 324-41. *Project MUSE [Johns Hopkins UP]*. Web.

Poole, Adrian. *Great Shakespeareans: Lamb, Hazlitt, Keats*. London: Continuum, 2010. Print.

Russo, Brent L. "Charles Lamb's Beloved Liberalism: Eccentricity in the Familiar Essays." *Studies in Romanticism* 52.3 (2013): 437-57. *MLA International Bibliography [EBSCO]*. Web.