UNIT 24 CHARLES LAMB: “A DISSERTATION UPON ROAST PIG”

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24.0 OBJECTIVES

After a careful reading of the unit, you will be able to:

- explain the theme of “A Dissertation upon Roast Pig”;
- relate the essay to Lamb’s personality, tastes and temperament;
- identify the devices used by Lamb to provoke humour;
- appreciate the prose style of the essay.

24.1 INTRODUCTION

In this unit we shall look at Charles Lamb’s essay “A Dissertation upon Roast Pig” and discuss it in terms of its theme, use of literary devices and style. After you complete reading the essay, you should be able to answer the in-text questions and thus discover it for yourself. We will help you in discovering it by providing you with answers to the questions which you should read only after you have written your answers.

Since Lamb’s essays bear essentially the imprint of his personality, you should begin by reading the brief biographical sketch of the author. The study of the theme will make you familiar with the content of the essay. From the theme we go on to observe the humorous aspects of the essay and take a look at the devices that Lamb uses to evoke humour. Then we shall proceed to examine the prose style of the essay to see it in relation to Lamb’s life and times.

We have placed exercises for you at the end of sections 24.2 and 24.6 so that you may be able to ‘check your progress’ before you move on to the next topic. The answers are provided at the end of the unit.

24.2 CHARLES LAMB: A BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Charles Lamb (1775-1834), one of the most engaging personal essayists of all
Temple, London. His father held the post of clerk to Mr. Samuel Salt, a barrister and one of the benchers of the Inner Temple.

Charles Lamb spent his youth at Inner Temple and went to school in 1782 at Christ's Hospital and remained there till 1789. At Christ's Hospital, Charles formed a lasting friendship with Samuel Taylor Coleridge. Coleridge was his elder by two years. Lamb had great respect for Coleridge's genius which lasted until death dissolved their friendship. Lamb was able to read Greek, and had acquired great facility in Latin composition when he left the Hospital.

For a short while Lamb was employed in the South Sea House where his brother John held a good appointment. On 5th April 1792, he joined as a clerk in the Accounts office of the East India Company and continued there till his superannuation in 1825.

The circumstances of his personal life were harsh and even tragic. Charles and his sister Mary Ann both suffered periods of mental illness, and Charles spent six weeks in a psychiatric hospital during 1795. After 1799 they lived together and collaborated on several books for children, publishing in 1807 their famous Tales from Shakespeare. Literary fame came to Lamb relatively late, after many attempts in the fields of drama and poetry. He wrote four plays, none of which was successful. However, his essays, Specimens of English Dramatic Poets (1808), established his reputation as a critic and did much in reviving the popularity of Elizabethan drama.

Lamb began publishing his Essays of Elia in the London Magazine in 1820; they were so immediately popular that a book-length collection was published in 1823. These essays touch upon a wide range of compelling subjects from the humorous “A Dissertation upon Roast Pig” to the reflective “New Year’s Eve” and collectively they also comprise a fascinating personal memoir, veiled under the pseudonymous disguise of Elia.

Lamb’s personality was a happy blend of tenderness, good sense and humour and he had a strong aversion to pretence and hypocrisy. His close-knit, subtle organization, his self-revealing observations on life, and his humour, fantasy, and pathos combine to make him one of the great masters of the English essay. Lamb was a gifted conversationalist and was friendly with most of the major literary figures of his time. William Hazlitt found him to be “the most delightful, the most provoking, the most witty and sensible of men.”
Check Your Progress 1

a) At what age did Charles Lamb join Christ’s Hospital?

b) With which important writer did Charles Lamb form a friendship at Christ’s Hospital that lasted a lifetime?

c) Name the authors of Tales from Shakespeare.

24.3 AN INTRODUCTION TO “A DISSERTATION UPON ROAST PIG”

In September, 1822, Charles Lamb published his classic essay “A Dissertation upon Roast Pig” in London Magazine under the pen name of Elia. This is an essay that shows Lamb at his humorous best. It is full of fun from beginning to end. In this unit we shall examine both content and style of the essay and observe the various devices that Lamb uses to portray a humorous account of the origin of mankind’s practice of roasting pigs besides giving us insight into his own temperament and tastes.

24.3.1 Text

1) MANKIND, says a Chinese manuscript, which my friend M. was obliging enough to read and explain to me, for the first seventy thousand ages ate their meat raw, clawing or biting it from the living animal, just as they do in Abyssinia to this day. This period is not obscurely hinted at by their great Confucius in the second chapter of his Mundane Mutations, where he designates a kind of golden age by the term Cho-fang, literally the Cooks’ holiday. The manuscript goes on to say, that the art of roasting, or rather broiling (which I take to be the elder brother) was accidentally discovered in the manner following. The swine-herd, Ho-ti, having gone out into the woods one morning, as his manner was, to collect mast for his hogs, left his cottage in the care of his eldest son Bo-bo, a great lubberly boy, who being fond of playing with fire, as younkers of his age commonly are, let some sparks escape into a bundle of straw, which kindling quickly, spread the conflagration over every part of their poor mansion, till it was reduced to ashes. Together with the cottage (a sorry antediluvian make-shift of a building, you may think it), what was of much more importance, a fine litter of new-farrowed pigs, no less than nine in number, perished. China pigs have been esteemed a luxury all over the east from the remotest periods that we read of. Bo-bo was in the utmost consternation, as you may think, not so much for the sake of the tenement, which his father and he could easily build up again with a few dry branches, and the labour of an hour or two, at any time, as for the loss of the pigs. While he was thinking what he should say to his father, and wringing his hands over the smoking remnants of one of those untimely sufferers, an odour assaulted his nostrils, unlike any scent which he had before experienced. What could it proceed from? - not from the burnt cottage -- he had smelt that smell before -- indeed this was by no means the first accident of the kind which had occurred through the negligence of this unlucky young fire-brand. Much less did it resemble that of any known herb, weed, or flower. A
premonitory moistening at the same time overflowed his nether lip. He knew not what to think. He next stooped down to feel the pig, if there were any signs of life in it. He burnt his fingers, and to cool them he applied them in his booby fashion to his mouth. Some of the crumbs of the scorched skin had come away with his fingers, and for the first time in his life (in the world's life indeed, for before him no man had known it) he tasted -- crackling! Again he felt and fumbled at the pig. It did not burn him so much now, still he licked his fingers from a sort of habit. The truth at length broke into his slow understanding, that it was the pig that smelt so, and the pig that tasted so delicious; and, surrendering himself up to the new-born pleasure, he fell to tearing up whole handfuls of the scorched skin with the flesh next it, and was cramming it down his throat in his beastly fashion, when his sire entered amid the smoking rafters, armed with retributory cudgel, and finding how affairs stood, began to rain blows upon the young rogue's shoulders, as thick as hail-stones, which Bo-bo heeded not any more than if they had been flies. The tickling pleasure, which he experienced in his lower regions, had rendered him quite callous to any inconveniences he might feel in those remote quarters. His father might lay on but he could not beat him from his pig, till he had fairly made an end of it, when, becoming a little more sensible of his situation, something like the following dialogue ensued.

2) "You graceless whelp, what have you got there devouring? Is it not enough that you have burnt me down three houses with your dog's tricks, and be hanged to you, but you must be eating fire, and I know not what -- what have you got there, I say?"

3) "O father, the pig, the pig, do come and taste how nice the burnt pig eats."

4) The ears of Ho-ti tingled with horror. He cursed his son, and he cursed himself that ever he should beget a son that should eat burnt pig.

5) Bo-bo, whose scent was wonderfully sharpened since morning, soon raked out another pig, and fairly rending it asunder, thrust the lesser half by main force into the fists of Ho-ti, still shouting out "Eat, eat, eat the burnt pig, father, only taste -- O Lord," -- with such-like barbarous ejaculations, cramming all the while as if he would choke.

6) Ho-ti trembled every joint while he grasped the abominable thing, wavering whether he should not put his son to death for an unnatural young monster, when the crackling scorching his fingers, as it had done his son's, and applying the same remedy to them, he in his turn tasted some of its flavour, which, make what sour mouths he would for a pretence, proved not altogether displeasing to him. In conclusion (for the manuscript here is a little tedious) both father and son fairly sat down to the mess, and never left off till they had despatched all that remained of the litter.

7) Bo-bo was strictly enjoined not to let the secret escape, for the neighbours would certainly have stoned them for a couple of abominable wretches, who could think of improving upon the good
meat which God had sent them. Nevertheless, strange stories got about. It was observed that Ho-ti's cottage was burnt down now more frequently than ever. Nothing but fires from this time forward. Some would break out in broad day, others in the night-time. As often as the *sow farrowed*, so sure was the house of Ho-ti to be in a blaze; and Ho-ti himself, which was the more remarkable, instead of *chastising* his son, seemed to grow more indulgent to him than ever. At length they were watched, the terrible mystery discovered, and father and son summoned to take their trial at Pekin, then an *inconsiderable assize town*. Evidence was given, the *obnoxious* food itself produced in court, and verdict about to be pronounced, when the foreman of the jury begged that some of the burnt pig, of which the culprits stood accused, might be handed into the box. He handled it, and they all handled it, and burning their fingers, as Bo-bo and his father had done before them, and nature prompting to each of them the same remedy, against the face of all the facts, and the clearest *charge* which judge had ever given, -- to the surprise of the whole court, towns-folk, strangers, reporters, and all present -- without leaving the box, or any manner of consultation whatever, they brought in a simultaneous verdict of Not Guilty.

8) The judge, who was a shrewd fellow, winked at the manifest iniquity of the decision: and, when the court was dismissed, went *privily*, and bought up all the pigs that could be had for love or money. In a few days his Lordship's town house was observed to be on fire. The thing took wing, and now there was nothing to be seen but fires in every direction. Fuel and pigs grew enormously dear all over the district. The insurance offices one and all shut up shop. People *built slighter and slighter* every day, until it was feared that the very science of architecture would in no long time be lost to the world. Thus this custom of firing houses continued, till in process of time, says my manuscript, a sage arose, *like our Locke*, who made a discovery, that the flesh of swine, or indeed of any other animal, might be cooked (burnt, as they called it) without the necessity of consuming a whole house to dress it. Then first began the rude form of a *gridiron*. Roasting by the string, or spit, came in a century or two later, I forget in whose dynasty. By such slow degrees, concludes the manuscript, do the most useful, and seemingly the most obvious arts, make their way among mankind.

9) Without placing too implicit faith in the account above given, it must be agreed, that if a worthy pretext for so dangerous an experiment as setting houses on fire (especially in these days) could be assigned in favour of any culinary object, that pretext and excuse might be found in *ROAST PIG*.

10) Of all the delicacies in the whole *mundus edibilis*, I will maintain it to be the most delicate -- *princeps obsoniorum*.

11) I speak not of your grown *porkers* -- things *between pig and pork* -- those *hobbydehoys* but a young and tender suckling -- *under a moon old* -- *guiltless as yet of the sty* -- with no original speck of the *amor immunditiae*, the hereditary failing of the first parent, yet manifest -- his voice as yet not broken, but something between a childish treble, and a grumble -- the mild forerunner, or *praeludium*, of a grunt.
12) He must be roasted. I am not ignorant that our ancestors ate them seethed, or boiled -- but what a sacrifice of the exterior tegument!

13) There is no flavour comparable, I will contend, to that of the crisp, tawny, well-watched, not over-roasted, crackling, as it is well called -- the very teeth are invited to their share of the pleasure at this banquet in overcoming the coy, brittle resistance -- with the adhesive oleaginous -- O call it not fat -- but an indefinable sweetness growing up to it -- the tender blossoming of fat -- fat cropped in the bud -- taken in the shoot -- in the first innocence -- the cream and quintessence of the child-pig's yet pure food -- the lean, no lean, but a kind of animal manna -- or, rather, fat and lean (if it must be so) so blended and running into each other, that both together make but one ambrosian result, or common substance.

14) Behold him, while he is doing -- it seemeth rather a refreshing warmth, than a scorching heat, that he is so passive to. How equably he twirleth round the string! -- Now he is just done. To see the extreme sensibility of that tender age, he hath wept out his pretty eyes -- radiant jellies -- shooting stars --

15) See him in the dish, his second cradle, how meek he lieth wouldst thou have had this innocent grow up to the grossness and indocility which too often accompany maturer swinehood? Ten to one he would have proved a glutton, a sloven, an obstinate, disagreeable animal -- wallowing in all manner of filthy conversation -- from these sins he is happily snatched away --

"Ere sin could blight, or sorrow fade,
Death came with timely care---"

his memory is odoriferous -- no clown curseth, while his stomach half rejecteth, the rank bacon -- no coalheaver bolteth him in reeking sausages -- he hath a fair sepulchre in the grateful stomach of the judicious epicure -- and for such a tomb might be content to die.

16) He is the best of Sapors. Pine-apple is great. She is indeed almost too transcendent -- a delight, if not sinful, yet so like to sinning, that really a tender-conscienced person would do well to pause -- too ravishing for mortal taste, she woundeth and excoriateth the lips that approach her -- like lovers' kisses, she biteth--she is a pleasure bordering on pain from the fierceness and insanity of her relish -- but she stoppeth at the palate -- she meddleth not with the appetite -- and the coarsest hunger might barter her consistently for a mutton chop.

17) Pig -- let me speak his praise -- is no less provocative of the appetite, than he is satisfactory to the criticalness of the palate. The strong man may batten on him, and the weakling refuseth not his mild juices.

18) Unlike to mankind's mixed characters, a bundle of virtues and vices, inexplicably intertwined, and not to be unravelled without hazard, he is good throughout. No part of him is better or worse than another. He
helpeth, as far as his little means extend, all around. He is the least
envious of banquets. He is all neighbours' fare.

19) I am one of those, who freely and ungrudgingly impart a share of the
good things of this life which fall to their lot (few as mine are in this
kind) to a friend. I protest I take as great an interest in my friend's
pleasures, his relishes, and proper satisfactions, as in mine own.
"Presents," I often say, "endear Absents." Hares, pheasants, partridges,
snipes, barn-door chicken (those "tame villatic fowl"), capons,
plovers, brawn, barrels of oysters, I dispense as freely as I receive
them. I love to taste them, as it were, upon the tongue of my friend.
But a stop must be put somewhere. One would not, like Lear, "give
everything." I make my stand upon pig. Methinks it is an ingratitude
to the Giver of all good flavours, to extra-domiciliate, or send out of
the house, slightly, (under pretext of friendship, or I know not what)
a blessing so particularly adapted, predestined, I may say, to my
individual palate -- it argues an insensibility.

20) I remember a touch of conscience in this kind at school. My good old
aunt, who never parted from me at the end of a holiday without
stuffing a sweet-meat, or some nice thing, into my pocket, had
dismissed me one evening with a smoking plum-cake, fresh from the
oven. In my way to school (it was over London bridge) a grey-headed
old beggar saluted me (I have no doubt at this time of day that he was a
counterfeit). I had no pence to console him with, and in the vanity of
self-denial, and the very coxcombry of charity, school-boy-like, I
made him a present of -- the whole cake! I walked on a little, buoyed
up, as one is on such occasions, with a sweet soothing of self-
satisfaction; but before I had got to the end of the bridge, my better
feelings returned, and I burst into tears, thinking how ungrateful I had
been to my good aunt, to go and give her good gift away to a stranger,
that I had never seen before, and who might be a bad man for aught I
knew; and then I thought of the pleasure my aunt would be taking in
thinking that I -- I myself, and not another -- would eat her nice cake --
and what should I say to her the next time I saw her -- how naughty I
was to part with her pretty present -- and the odour of that spicy cake
came back upon my recollection, and the pleasure and the curiosity I
had taken in seeing her make it, and her joy when she sent it to the
oven, and how disappointed she would feel that I had never had a bit
of it in my mouth at last -- and I blamed my impertinent spirit of
alms-giving, and out-of-place hypocrisy of goodness, and above all I
wished never to see the face again of that insidious, good-for-nothing,
old grey impostor.

21) Our ancestors were nice in their method of sacrificing these tender
victims. We read of pigs whipt to death with something of a shock, as
we hear of any other obsolete custom. The age of discipline is gone
by, or it would be curious to inquire (in a philosophical light merely)
what effect this process might have towards internerating and
dulcifying a substance, naturally so mild and dulcet as the flesh of
young pigs. It looks like refining a violet. Yet we should be cautious
while we condemn the inhumanity, how we censure the wisdom of the
practice. It might impart a gusto.

Charles Lamb:
“A Dissertation upon Roast Pig”
I remember an hypothesis, argued upon by the young students, when I was at St. Omer's, and maintained with much learning and pleasantry on both sides, "Whether, supposing that the flavour of a pig who obtained his death by whipping (per flagellationem extremam) superadded a pleasure upon the palate of a man more intense than any possible suffering we can conceive in the animal, is man justified in using that method of putting the animal to death?" I forget the decision.

His sauce should be considered. Decidedly, a few bread crumbs, done up with his liver and brains, and a dash of mild sage. But, banish, dear Mrs. Cook, I beseech you, the whole onion tribe. Barbecue your whole hogs to your palate, steep them in shallots, stuff them out with plantations of the rank and guilty garlic; you cannot poison them, or make them stronger than they are -- but consider, he is a weakling -- a flower.

24.3.2 Glossary

my friend M.: the reference is to Thomas Manning (1774-1840), eastern traveller and linguist. In 1799 Charles Lamb visited Cambridge, and there made the important acquaintance of Mr. Thomas Manning, then a mathematical tutor in the university.

Confucius: the famous Chinese sage and moralist of sixth century B.C.


Cho-fang: another term invented by Lamb.

the elder brother: the older custom of the two.

mast: fruits of the beech, oak, chestnuts and other forest trees used as food for pigs.

lubberly: awkward, clumsy.

younkers: youngsters.

a sorry antediluvian make-shift: a poor, prehistoric, substitute for a building.

litter of new-farrowed pigs: A 'litter' is a brood of young ones. To 'farrow,' to bring forth young, is only used of swine.

consternation: surprise and fear.

tenement: cheap dwelling place.

assailed: attacked violently.
fire-brand: incendiary, troublemaker.

premonitory moistening: he was forewarned of what was coming by his mouth beginning to water because of the delicious odour of the burnt pigs.

nether: lower.

crackling: the crisp, outer skin of roast pork.

rafters: the sloping beams forming the framework of a roof.

retributory cudgel: a heavy stick or club the father brought to beat his son with for starting a fire.

lower regions: the stomach.

callous: hardened; unfeeling.

lay on: deal blows with vigour.

graceless whelp: mischievous young cub.

devouring: eating hungrily or greedily.

burnt me down: ruined me by burning down.

be hanged to you: confound you.

cramming: stuffing himself.

enjoined: commanded.

abominable: causing hatred and disgust.

sow farrowed: the female pig gave birth to piglets.

chastising: punishing severely.

inconsiderable assize town: a small town in the countryside.

obnoxious: nasty.

charge: the address of a judge to a jury before they proceed to give their verdict, explaining the evidence against the accused.

winked at: shut his eyes to, connived at.

privily: privately or secretly.

built slighter and slighter: built their houses of more and more flimsy materials.
Locke: the English philosopher and thinker, John Locke (1632-1704).

Gridiron: framework of metal bars used for roasting meat or fish over a fire.

*mundus edibilis*: world of eatables (Latin).

*princeps obsoniorum*: the chief of dainties (Latin).

*porkers*: colloquial for pigs.

*between pig and pork*: too large and coarse to be sent up as 'roast pig'; not fully grown enough to be treated as pork.

*hobbydehoys*: word used to denote that awkward, self-conscious stage of youth between boyhood and early manhood.

*under a moon old*: less than a month old.

*guiltless as yet of the sty*: unsullied by the filth of the pig-sty.

*amor immunditiae*: love of filthiness (Latin).

*praeludium*: prelude (Latin).

*seethed*: boiled.

*exterior tegument*: the outer skin, which, when roasted, becomes crackling.

*coy, brittle resistance*: the resistance offered to the teeth by the hard but easily broken crackling.

*the adhesive oleaginous*: the sticky, oily, indescribable sweetness.

*cropped in the bud*: taken in the shoot, like a flower picked before it blossoms or a tender leaf not yet unfolded.

*the cream and quintessence*: the concentrated essence.

*animal manna*: heavenly food, consisting of flesh, not grain.

*Ambrosian*: heavenly. According to Greek mythology, ambrosia is the food of the gods.

*radiant jellies*: shooting stars. The heat of the fire causes the eyes of the pig to melt and drop out, like bright jellies or meteors.

*shooting stars*: meteors.
indocility: unwilling to be guided.
glutton: a person who eats too much.
sloven: a lazy fellow.
filthy conversation: filthy behaviour.
odoriferous: fragrant, sweet smelling.
bolteth: to swallow hastily.
sepulchre: tomb.
sapors: flavours.
excoriateth: pricks.
stoppeth at the palate: does not go beyond satisfying the taste; not substantial enough to be treated as food.
barter: exchange.
batten: grow fat on.
neighbours’ fare: food for good neighbours.
absents: absent friends.
villatic fowl: common or rural poultry.
upon the tongue of my friend: to enjoy the taste by thinking my friend is enjoying it.
like Lear, "give everything": like King Lear, in Shakespeare’s play, who said to his daughters: “I gave you all.”
make my stand upon: firmly draw the line at.
extra-domiciliate: an outside dwelling house (Latin).
predestined: fore-ordained, fated to happen.
counterfeit: made or done in imitation of another thing in order to deceive; fake.
the very coxcombr: conceited affectation or pretension.
buoyed up: feeling light-hearted and happy.
impertinent: irrelevant, out of place.
insidious: causing harm secretly; wicked.

Charles Lamb: “A Dissertation upon Roast Pig”
impersonator: person pretending to be somebody he is not.
nice: particular.
obsolete: out of date.
the age of discipline is gone by: the age when men believed in the discipline of the rod has passed.
in a philosophical light merely: a question of purely philosophical interest, not with any view to practical experiment.
interetering and dulcifying: softening and sweetening.
dulcet: sweet, pleasing.
refining a violet: improving upon something already exquisite.
censure: criticize unfavourably.
a gusto: additional relish or flavour.
hypothesis: idea put forward as a starting point for reasoning or explanation.
St. Omer's: a Jesuit college in France, where many English and Irish Roman Catholics used to be educated more than a century ago.
per flagellationem extremam: by whipping to death (Latin).
I forget the decision: He will not say whether he thinks such treatment is justifiable or not. The whole of this invented incident is only a roundabout way of humorously suggesting that perhaps our ancestors, from a culinary point of view, were right.
a dash: a small quantity.
barbecue: roast whole.
to your palate: to suit your taste.
shallots: a kind of small size onion.
plantations: huge quantities.
the rank and guilty garlic: the coarse and pernicious garlic.
a weakling: a frail creature.
Lamb begins the essay with a humorous anecdote which his friend Thomas Manning seems to have shared with him. The anecdote reveals how the practice of roasting pigs began in primitive times with an accidental event in a Chinese village. After providing an extremely humorous account of the event, Lamb proceeds to describe with intense feeling his unusual passion for a roasted pig and says that though he would like to share all good things of life with his friends, he would never like to part with a roast pig even out of utmost compulsions of generosity.

You are already familiar with the essay. Given below are a few questions based on it. You may answer them and then read the answers provided by us.

1) Write in your own words the events narrated in the anecdote that leads Lamb to his dissertation on the origin of the practice of roasting pigs.

Lamb's story explains how one day a mischievous young child in a Chinese village accidentally set fire to a house that had a fine litter of pigs inside. After the fire, the boy felt an appetizing flavour coming from the burnt pigs. On tasting the crackling he found it delicious. His father returned at that very time and was shocked to see his son eating the flesh of burnt pigs. But on being urged by his son, the father too tasted the burnt flesh and discovered to his utter surprise its superior taste. For a while the father and the son kept the whole incident a closely guarded secret. But, since they allowed their cottage to be burnt quite frequently, the secret became known to the villagers who too were attracted by the aroma of succulent roast pork. Nobody had smelt anything like that before because, in that particular village, it had never been a custom to cook food. Even the jury and the judge found the taste of the burnt pigs irresistible. And so, from that time, the art of roasting was discovered. However, there was a problem. From then on every time the villagers wanted roast pork for dinner, they went and burned their houses down!

2) Narrate in your own words the anecdote pertaining to Lamb’s early life.

...
Lamb recounts how when he was a little boy at school, his good old aunt gave him a delicious plum-cake as a present at the end of a holiday. On his way to school (over London Bridge) a grey-headed old beggar saluted him and begged him for some alms. Since he had no penny to console the beggar with, Lamb made him a present of the whole cake and felt instantly elated at his act of charity. But by the time Lamb reached the end of the bridge, he reflected upon the whole event and regretted his action. He felt that his generosity in giving away the whole cake to a total stranger was an act of ingratitude to his aunt.

3) How is the above anecdote related to his love for the roast pig?

Lamb wants to emphasize his love for the roasted pig by stating that though he is generous enough to share with his friends all the good things of life, he would not under any circumstances ever desire to share with them this very delicacy. He may have given away the whole cake to please a beggar, but he wouldn’t like to part with a roast pig for anything in the world.

4) Do you notice any sign of cruelty when Lamb is describing his passion for the roast pig?

In waxing eloquent over his love for the roast pig, Lamb makes statements that seem to show signs of callousness towards the fate of the pigs. He enjoys the sight of the pig being roasted wherein the beautiful eyes of a pig melt and drop into the fire. Similarly, signs of cruelty can also be seen when he approves of a pig being whipped to death before being cooked.

5) The story of the origin of roasted pigs belongs to primitive times. But Lamb makes references to several elements in the narrative which may be called characteristically modern. Can you identify such elements?
Lamb refers to elements like a judge, a jury and a regular trial which are essentially not a part of a primitive scene. Even the statement, “The insurance offices one and all shut up shop” shows how Lamb places a primitive incident in the context of contemporary times.

24.5 HUMOUR

Avoiding public, philosophical and didactic topics, Lamb dwelt imaginatively in the historical past, or in that of his own memories and experiences, to create exquisitely beautiful essays that are a perfect blend of humour and pathos. A strong undercurrent of his great misfortunes and pity runs through most of his essays and it is perhaps rightly believed that he hastened to laugh at everything for fear of being obliged to weep. His subject matter is always intimately related to himself. He projected in his highly personalized essays the pretty, the humorous, the pathetic in the life and incidents around him. Yet, Lamb’s “A Dissertation upon Roast Pig” is an exceptionally brilliant piece of prose where you may not find any trace of personal agony or pain. It is an essay where boisterous humour dominates the narrative from beginning to the end. This essay reveals to you the peculiar flavour of his humour.

One of the devices that Lamb uses to provoke laughter in this essay is exaggeration. He succeeds in exciting laughter by exaggerating the sheer absurdities in a particular situation. When Ho-ti discovers his son Bo-bo eating the roast pigs, he starts raining blows as thick as hail-stones on his errant son, which Bo-bo heeded not “any more than if they had been flies.” Enjoying the tickling pleasure of tasting the crackling, Bo-bo remains unmindful of the beatings and says, "O father, the pig, the pig, do come and taste how nice the burnt pig eats." And even while offering his father the dainty meal, Bo-bo decides to keep the choice parts for his own self. Lamb’s description of the scene is hilarious indeed: "Bo-bo, whose scent was wonderfully sharpened since morning, soon raked out another pig, and fairly rending it asunder, thrust the lesser half by main force into the fists of Ho-ti, still shouting out 'Eat, eat, eat the burnt pig, father, only taste -- O Lord,' -- with such-like barbarous ejaculations, cramming all the while as if he would choke."

Exaggeration is again employed by Lamb to create delightful humour when he describes how the judge and the jury respond to the crime of eating meat that was not raw. The jury fortunately had their fingers burned in the same way and tried Bo-bo’s method of cooling them. And Bo-bo is promptly acquitted. The description related to the ensuing event which combines mock seriousness and gravity is humorous indeed. Lamb proceeds gravely:

"The judge, who was a shrewd fellow, winked at the manifest iniquity of the decision, and when the court was dismissed, went privily and bought up all the pigs that could be had for love or money. In a few days his lordship’s town house was observed to be on fire. The thing took wing, and now there was nothing to be seen but fires in every direction. Fuel and pigs grew enormously dear all over the district. The insurance offices one and all shut up shop. People built slighter and
slighter every day, until it was feared that the very science of architecture would in no long time be lost to the world.”

There is also abundant humour in the manner in which Lamb describes how “a sage arose, like our Locke, who made a discovery that the flesh of swine, or indeed of any other animal, might be cooked (burnt as they called it) without the necessity of consuming a whole house to dress it.” The situation is humorous again when Lamb addresses the matter of his own liking for the roast pig and describes with elaborate care the process of roasting the pig and how meekly the roasted creature lies on the dinner table. Lamb almost grows ecstatic in his narration while describing his preference for the delicacy.

What is noteworthy in these instances of Lamb’s humour is the lightness of tone which never borders on malice or cynicism. He is capable of making fun of himself as well as of others but his tone is always without spite. He highlights the incongruous by describing, in a very involved manner, the pleasant nonsense and gross absurdities that are an integral part of human life. In his narrative you can see how he explores and exploits all the elements in a situation that can make an event humorous and interesting. His close-knit, subtle organization, his self-revealing observations on life, and his harmonious blend of reality and fantasy, in evoking both humour and pathos, combine to make him one of the great masters of the English essay.

24.6 PROSE STYLE

Style may be defined as the way in which the writer uses the resources of language to achieve his purpose. The effectiveness of a style is to be judged in how well it is adapted to implementing the writer’s point of view which not only controls the content of what he writes but also the style in which he writes. So we shall study in this section the various devices that Lamb uses to relate the content to his mode of expression and technique.

Charles Lamb frequently developed his essays according to associational patterns. The sequence of associations in “A Dissertation upon Roast Pig” furnishes remarkable insight into the author’s personality. Both anecdotes in “A Dissertation upon Roast Pig”—one related to the events narrated in the—imaginary Chinese manuscript he refers to, and the other concerning his childhood experience of having to part with the cake which his aunt gifted to—serve as appropriate illustrations of the point he is trying to make. These anecdotes based on hearsay or personal experiences not only heighten the effect of the essay but also reveal to us the various dimensions of Lamb’s mind and the unique charm of his personality. His ability to enthusiastically relate universal interests to personal traits lends grace and charm to his narratives and gives his style a fascination of its own.

One of the ingredients of Lamb’s style is iteration or repetition. Separated by dashes, the phrases help in conveying the cumulative effect of impressions to the reader. In this essay Lamb uses a series of phrases to emphasize his ecstatic love for the roast pig. He writes: “There is no flavour comparable, I will contend, to that of the crisp, tawny, well-watchd, not over-roasted, crackling, as it is well called -- the very teeth are invited to their share of the
pleasure at this banquet in overcoming the coy, brittle resistance -- with the adhesive oleaginous -- O call it not fat -- but an indefinable sweetness growing up to it -- the tender blossoming of fat -- fat cropped in the bud -- taken in the shoot -- in the first innocence -- the cream and quintessence of the child-pig's yet pure food -- the lean, no lean, but a kind of animal manna -- or, rather, fat and lean (if it must be so) so blended and running into each other, that both together make but one ambrosian result, or common substance.”

Lamb’s style is sometimes perverse, outrageously overstuffed with archaic and pedantic words and phrases. In “A Dissertation upon Roast Pig” expressions like “the adhesive oleaginous,” “villatic fowl,” “intenerating and dulcifying,” etc. do sound tedious at times but they do not, in any way, hinder the otherwise smooth flow evident in the narration. Likewise, this essay also abounds in the use of Latin expressions. In paras 10 and 11 he uses Latin expressions like mundus edibilis, princeps obsoniorum, bamor immunditiae, praeludium etc. in quick succession. But, here again, the progression of thought is not very much obstructed since it is not altogether difficult for a reader to understand the meaning of such Latin phrases from the context of the passages in question. The scholarly words and phrases are used in the mock heroic mode. Such an elevated diction is suited to epic poetry, to describe great events. When he uses it to describe trivial incidents, it is a source of humour.

A study of Lamb’s style reveals his fondness for the styles adopted by various Elizabethan writers like Sir Thomas Browne, Spenser, Burton, Fuller and Izaac Walton. Lamb was undoubtedly fond of Elizabethan poets and playwrights and there are many points in which Lamb imitates these writers. But that does not mean that Lamb’s style lacks originality. He succeeded in endowing his own thoughts with the strong imprint of his personality to give to his writings a strong dramatic quality not to be found in any of the writers mentioned above. Like a true Romantic, Lamb allows the spontaneous overflow of his powerful individual feelings and emotions to ignore the considerations of traditional and accepted norms of style and technique.

Check Your Progress-II

a) Give examples of similes, one each from paragraphs 1 and 21.

b) Give an example of iteration (that is not mentioned in the discussion above) from the essay.

c) Identify from paragraph 1 of the essay three words or phrases that sound archaic or pedantic.

d) Give an example of conversational style used by Lamb in the essay.

24.7 LET US SUM UP

In this unit you have:

* examined the essay “A Dissertation upon Roast Pig” in the light of the distinctive features of Lamb’s style and personality;
Non-Fictional Prose-I: 
Essays, Letters, 
Travelogues

- observed and identified the striking traits of Lamb's humour that go on to make this essay so hilariously entertaining;
- become aware of the various literary devices that Lamb uses in this essay; and
- been able to relate features of his style to his personality and to the writers of the Elizabethan period.

24.8 SUGGESTED READING

To get a more comprehensive idea of the content and style of Lamb's writings, you may read the following essays from the Essays of Elia, a book that you may find in most book shops and libraries:

A Bachelor's Complaint of the Behaviour of Married People
Dream Children: A Reverie
Imperfect Sympathies
The Superannuated Man
The Praise of Chimney-Sweepers
Christ's Hospital Five and Thirty Years Ago
The Old and the New Schoolmaster.

24.9 ANSWERS TO EXERCISES

Check Your Progress-I

a) At the age of seven.
b) Samuel Taylor Coleridge.
c) Charles and Mary Lamb.

Check Your Progress-II

a) rain blows ...as thick as hail-stones.
so mild and dulcet as the flesh of young pigs.
b) In paragraph 16 Lamb's eloquent praise of the pine-apple provides a striking illustration of iteration: "Pine-apple is great. She is indeed almost too transcendent -- a delight, if not sinful, yet so like to sinning, that really a tender-conscienced person would do well to pause -- too ravishing for mortal taste, she woundeth and excoriateth the lips that approach her -- like lovers' kisses, she biteth—she is a pleasure bordering on pain from the fierceness and insanity of her relish -- but she stoppeth at the palate -- she meddleth not with the appetite -- and the coarsest hunger might barter her consistently for a mutton chop."
c) antediluvian, premonitory moistening, retributory cudgel.
Lamb ends the essay (paragraph 23) in conversational style where he addresses the imaginary cook thus: "But, banish, dear Mrs. Cook, I beseech you, the whole onion tribe. Barbecue your whole hogs to your palate, steep them in shallots, stuff them out with plantations of the rank and guilty garlic; you cannot poison them, or make them stronger than they are -- but consider, he is a weakling -- a flower."