

## The Superannuated Man as a Personal Essay

The term **Essay** comes from the French word '**essai**' which means 'attempt'. An essay is a composition usually in prose, which discusses, formally or informally, a topic or a variety of topics and is one of the most flexible and adaptable of all literary forms. Montaigne coined the word '**essai**' when in 1550 he gave the title **Essais** to his first publication. While Montaigne 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'. Lamb like Hazlitt, De Quincey, Leigh Hunt and Stevenson wrote very much in the tradition of Montaigne as his **Essays of Elia** (1823, 1833) demonstrates.

Lamb's essay '**The Superannuated Man**' is a personal essay included in the author's volume **Essays of Elia**. In this essay the writer 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 (old age, decay) 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. The author says that he had Sundays but they being days of worship, he hardly found them recreational. 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.

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. In this way he became fifty, yet he had no prospect of emancipation from the prison. Lamb's pathetic statement that – I had grown to my desk, as it were; and the wood had entered into my soul – is very moving.

Soon the most desired or if undesired, day at last came when he was given the farewell. 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, and it seems the author is incapable of expressing his feelings that were chaotic at that hour. He hails his freedom saying "Esto perpetua."

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’ 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. Quoting from **Tragedy** by Sir Robert Howard, he says: “Time takes no measure in eternity.”

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 at 11 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. He thought he had passed into another world. Time stood still in a manner to him. To him all days were now the same, be there on a day any occasion or not. He did not feel it bothersome to visit the church, which business previously irked him because it cut short his holiday.

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.” 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 (Opus operatum est). He is satisfied that his task is done 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. If Benson’s prescription is valuable, ‘The Superannuated Man’ passes the test of a good essay. “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, it can rightfully claim to be a good personal essay, and we have no doubt that it is so.

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