THE SUPERANNUATED MAN

Charles Lamb

Question: Discuss Charles Lamb’s The Superannuated Man as a personal essay.

Or

Discuss the autobiographical elements in Lamb’s essay The Superannuated Man.

Or

Elaborate the main ideas contained in the essay The Superannuated Man.

Answer: Charles Lamb’s essay The Superannuated Man is a personal essay included in his volume Essays of Elia. In his essay the writer reveals his feelings after he leaves his job permanently. The essay unveils Lamb’s ability of arousing pathos and sentiments in the minds of the readers.

The essay begins with an address to the readers wherein the writer 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 middle ages to decrepitude (old age) without any hope of release and respite. He forgot that there were such things as holidays and with a note of pathos he remarks that those were the prerogatives of childhood. Lamb remarks that if there are such men, only then they will be able to appreciate “his deliverance” or release from work.

The author spent thirty six years at his desk in the counting office at Mincing Lane. When at the age of fourteen he took his seat in his office melancholy overtook him as he was suddenly incarcerated (imprisoned) from the free life when he had abundant playtime and frequently intervening long vacations. At the office which was a counting house at Mincing Lane he had to work for eight, nine and even ten hours a day. In a moralizing tone Lamb says that as time partially reconciles us to anything, he gradually became content doggedly content 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, the author found the city gloomy and he 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’ (stay) 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 (enslavement).

With increasing years, his health and good spirits diminished. Besides his daylight servitude, he served over again all night in his sleep as he suffered perpetually from a dread (fear) of crisis. He would often wake up in terror of imaginary false entries, errors in his accounts, and the like. In this way he became fifty, yet he had no prospect of emancipation (liberty) 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 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 laboring under the impression that he had acted imprudently in his disclosure, that he had foolishly given his bosses a handle against himself. The most desired if undesired at last came when Lamb 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, his heart panted. He was given a pension for life to the amount of two thirds of his salary and he considered it a magnificent offer. The author gives account of his reaction without inhibition. He says she 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 suddenly and astonishingly is frank and it seems the author is incapable of expressing his feelings that were chaotic at that hour. He hails his freedom in enchantment.

Lamb reveals his remarkable gift of humour and pathos as he now goes on to describe his life after retirement. For the first two or three days he felt stunned, in fact overwhelmed. He compares himself to a prisoner who is released after a long period of imprisonment. His liberty was too sudden to be believed. While he was in service he was short of time, but after retirement he had all the time in the world. He felt he needed a steward or a bailiff to manage his time. Having all holidays he thought he had none. The tone of pathos is suddenly lighted by humour when he describes that if his hours spent for the benefit of others are 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 his partners and clerks of counting house at Mincing Lane with whom he had worked for a long period of time. Being suddenly removed from them he feels they are dead. To be relieved of this awkward feeling he visited his former colleagues once or twice. However, he mentions with sadness that during his visits he did not feel the warmth of pleasant familiarity which he used to enjoy in the past. In solemn mood he gave farewell to his friends one by one.

Towards the end of the essay Lamb again provides instances of palpable humour. 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. Lamb even remarks that if he had a son he would have named him as “Nothing to Do”. It reveals his longing and a personal touch, because he remained unmarried and deprived of the happiness of fatherhood. The tone of the essay becomes sober when Lamb calls himself “Retired Leisure”. His face is now vacant without any expression of purpose. Lamb’s humour flashes once again when he says that when he takes up a newspaper, it is to read the state of opera, because he feels that his work is done and he has the rest of the day for himself.

The essay is indeed a long and grand soliloquy. It is not a treatise, but an expression of the author’s mind in certain moments of life. It appears to have been derived from the pages of Lamb’s personal diary. The Superannuated Man is one the best personal essays of Charles Lamb who stands out conspicuously as the prince of the English essayists.