

## "A Dissertation Upon Roast Pig" - Charles Lamb

### A Dissertation on Roast Pig - by Charles Lamb

#### **Charles Lamb :**

Charles Lamb (1775-1834). one of the most engaging personal essayists of all the writers of English Literature. He wrote his essays under the **pen name Elia**. 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. Lamb began publishing his **Essays of Elia** in the London Magazine in 1820;

#### **Introduction to the essay:**

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. Lamb uses various devices that to portray a humorous account of the **origin of mankind's practice of roasting pigs** besides giving an insight into his own temperament and tastes.

#### **Cook's holiday :**

The narrator opens the essay by asserting that for a long period **of early human history**, people did not cook their meat but ate it raw. He claims that this was hinted at in the writings of **Confucius**, who mentioned an era known as the "cook's holiday," implying that the Chinese did not cook animals prior to his writings. According to the narrator, Confucius' essay goes on to describe how roasting was discovered by Bo-bo, the son of swineherd Ho-ti.

#### **An Anecdote :**

Lamb brings in a humorous **anecdote** about the Chinese Bo-bo and Ho-ti 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.

#### **Fire in the cottage:**

Bo-bo was one day playing with fire, as he always do, and accidentally burned down his family's cottage along with the nine pigs that were trapped in the blaze. While trying to devise an explanation for what happened, Bo-bo was tempted by the smell of the burnt pigs and went to taste them.

He found these burnt pigs delicious and could not stop eating them. Ho-ti was not just upset with Bo-bo for burning down the cottage, but for being enough of a fool to eat the pigs. Bo-bo eventually convinced his father to try the pig, and the father loved it too, but they agreed to keep the burnt pigs a secret. Yet, more and more frequently, a cottage fire could be seen at Ho-ti's property, at all hours of the day and night.

**The Secret is revealed:**

When their secret was found out, Ho-ti and Bo-bo were placed on trial in their town. During this trial, the jurors asked to try the burnt pig in question, and finding it delicious, they decided to let the father and son off. The judge was outraged, but a few days later there was one of those mysterious fires at his house too. Soon enough, these fires were occurring all around town, and the burnt pig became a cherished food.

**The taste of the roasted pig:**

Done with this history, the narrator begins singing the praises of roast pig, speaking of the crackling skin and succulent fat. He draws a humorous link between the swine—so often considered a gluttonous, base animal—and the type of man who enjoys eating that swine.

**Plum cake:**

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.

**Lamb's desire:**

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.

**Fine meal:**

The narrator admits to enjoying all of the fine meats available, from strange fowl to oysters, and sharing them with friends. He then recalls how, as a child, having nothing to offer a beggar on the street, he brought that beggar a plum cake his auntie had baked. He blames the hypocrisy of his giving spirit on the indiscretion. The essay concludes with an anecdote about how ancient people used to sacrifice pigs by whipping them, raising a moral conundrum about enjoying the meat of that animal. But the narrator seems indifferent to the conundrum, and suggests a tasty sauce made of shallots to eat the pig with.

**The Prose style of Lamb:**

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"<sup>7</sup>--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 him serve as appropriate illustrations of the point he is trying to make. 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.

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Upon Roast Pig

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