

Analysis of Punctuation Marks and Diction in the Essay 'Oxford in the Vacation' by Charles Lamb

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Abstract: This paper deals with the punctuation and the choice of words used in the essay, 'Oxford in the Vacation' written by Charles Lamb. The research regarding punctuation marks has been limited to dash, comma, parenthesis, colon, semicolon, and exclamation mark. The undertaken study aims at the standard usage of these marks and looks at how Lamb has used all of these in his essay under the question has been found that at some places, Lamb has violated important grammatical rules, which are blunders, but it has also been observed that to create a specific effect one will have to do the way Lamb did. The error analysis to some extent, has been used to explain the text and inner and deep understanding of the essay. This also opens up the question of when, how and why inversions, figurative of speech, and flamboyant style are rudimentary but necessary tools to acknowledge a good understanding of the writer's overall meaning.

Key Words: Essays of Elia, Oxford in the Vacations, Charles Lamb, Punctuation Marks

Introduction

Punctuation marks are used to denote through symbols which help understand the textual clarity to of any written language. The same is also applied to the spoken language, but there, the language is not recorded through memory but is analyzed as it is being spoken. There has always been a struggle made by linguists to establish a connection between syntactical structures and grammatical correlation. Quirk gives its definition as 'words are considered to be orthographic either attached or surrounded punctuations from either side such as spaces, commas, or the like (Quirk et al.). The significance of punctuation is often undervalued or ignored, yet it plays a vital role in comprehending the overall meaning of a text (Crystal 2003b:278). Homer comes by saying that punctuations are strikingly amazing features and can be used as an independent skill. Many readers use them as tools and more important elements for reading the text, but without them they consider the text as a barren field (Homer, 2004: 5). Metaren (2002:166) stresses on the fact that poor punctuation can mislead the reader and changes the meaning and context altogether.

Research Questions

- Q 1:** What are the various punctuation marks that either mislead readers or help them understand the text presented in Charles Lamb's Essay 'Oxford in Vacations'?
- Q 2:** What are the significant implicatures of Lamb's writing style in 'Oxford in Vacation' in relation to punctuation marks?

Significance of the Stud

The study is very in line with the modern research dynamics, as it stresses the importance of punctuation and it does play an instrumental role in clarifying and comprehending a text. As the 18th century and its forthcoming neighbourhood research focused on mannerism in style, structure and linguistics decorum of literary texts, Lamb had been no exception. He played an important part in complicating a text yet making ways for the readers easier to under textual vagaries through the dexterous use of linguistic features such as style, complex but meaningful punctuations, ellipses, dark words, and so on. Therefore, this study owes its significance to the modern quiddities in lingual analysis.

Objectives of the Study

The study is especially aimed at exploring the connection between Lamb's stylistic ability to understand the unusual and usual punctuation marks which contribute to inversion and anomalies. The study finds out what, why and how they are significant and important to our understanding of the text as readers, and critical appreciators of his essays are. This is also aimed at the readers enhancing the readers' power to analyze texts and comprehending beyond the apparent/visual texts/words.

Delimitation of the Study

Although Charles Lamb's style and linguistic ability is not confined in terms of punctuation to his essays or 'Oxford in Vacation' alone but as the space is limited to undertake the nature of the study under question, this paper is delimited to his essay 'Oxford in Vacation' only.

Research Methodology

The study owes its debt to the theory of punctuation presented by [Scott Baldwin \(1970: 2\)](#) in his seminary work 'Psycholinguistic Approaches to a Theory of Punctuation' published at Ohio University. The theory presents a detailed recount of how grammatical structures are rooted in relation to grammatical expectations and punctuations. His tool of the following guidelines has been adopted for this study. Some features such as commas, long pauses, deep punctuations, lexical spaces, truncations, ellipses, and contractions are given special focus and treatment. The study is qualitative by nature, but it still adds elements from linguistics numbering which contribute to numbering such as two commas, three spaces, four question marks and five full stops etc.

Literature Review

There is no such research paper available online on the works of Charles Lamb which we can use in our literature review except for some review articles which deal with very limited aspects of his works, especially his essays. So this article can be of enormous help to the researchers who want to analyze him from various angles.

GluedIdeas discusses his humor, personal life, the charm of his writings and love for the past. It also analyzes his essays in terms of wits, humanity, tone, sentimentality, observation and reflection, whimsicality, and unexpectedness in ideas.

W. L. MacDonald has written a paper titled "Charles Lamb, the Greatest of the Essayists", on the natural aspects and destiny portrayed in essays of Elia. He has also discussed his relation to the past masters like Shakespeare and Hazlitt. His style has also been discussed to extent.

The Guardian has presented a review on his essays regarding his occasional obsolete change of word patterns, demonstrating a strange combination of scholarly knowledge & learnedness, of his gravity and fun, as that of his ancestors such Montagne.

But the research which I have undertaken is about the use of punctuation and diction by Charles Lamb in one of his famous essays, 'Oxford in the Vacations'.

Content Analysis and Discussion

Charles Lamb has used all important punctuation marks in this remarkable essay like 'Dash', 'Comma', 'Bracket', 'Hyphen', etc. Sometimes they have been used inappropriately and at others, they hit the mark exactly. Apart from this they have their personal beauty and charm and have enhanced the quality of the essay. We are up to analyze some of them.

Dash

Lamb is inclined to the excessive use of 'dash', which includes parentheses, truncations, contractions, ellipsis, commas, indicated and stressed patterns, semicolons, an interception or an instance subtlety in the meaning. Veteran writers are self-conscious of this static and unchanging position of punctuation marks. [Straus Stern and Kaufman \(2010\)](#) also underpin the idea that punctuation marks are fixed but their use is expansive. Two main types surround this: En-dash & Em-dash.

The dash used by Lamb is known as an em-dash, which looks like two hyphens connected into one long line. This dash has a three-fold purpose. One is to lay emphasis on the thing mentioned earlier. The other is to show what the writer means by what he says, and the last is to give information which are extra and could be omitted without losing the meaning of the passage.

The first dash we come across in the essay is in the first line of the essay, which serves the purpose of emphasis; otherwise not to put a dash over there could have no negative effect at all in the essay, but as it is where we feel something very necessary in the information.

“Casting a preparatory glance at the bottom of this article—as the wary connoisseur in prints, with cursory eye...” (Lamb, 1823)

We see if someone removes the dash between 'article' and 'as', the meaning would still be conveyed but without emphasis, which Lamb wanted not to miss.

In the second paragraph of the essay, there is another dash which intends to reflect the second purpose i.e. 'what the writer means by what he says.

"Because in my last I tried to divert thee with some half-forgotten humours of some old clerks defunct, in an old house of business, long since gone to decay; doubtless you have already set me down in your mind as one of the self-same college—a votary of the desk—a notched..." (Lamb, 1823)

Here the dash after 'the self-same college' reflects what Lamb meant when he wrote that sentence.

In the same paragraph there is another dash revealing the third purpose—to give extra information which clarifies the statement but if omitted will not affect the authenticity of the statement.

“and cropt scrivener—one that sucks his sustenance, as certain sick people are said to do, through a quill.” (Lamb, 1823)

Here are some lines from the essay which have dashes for the purpose of emphasis:

1: “I confess that it is my humour, my fancy—in the fore-part of the day, when the mind of your man of letters requires some relaxation...” (Lamb, 1823)

In this line there is no need of putting a dash but if one wants his reader to pay special attention to a specific part of his writing then he has this strategy to use.

2: not to say, that your outside sheets, and waste wrappers of foolscap, (...)—so that the very parings of a counting-house are, in some sort, the settings up of an author (Lamb, 1823)

Here 'dash' after the word 'essays', is of no use because we have a coordinating conjunction 'so' which does everything save the 'emphasis'.

“Only in a custom of such long-standing, methinks, if their Holinesses the Bishops had, in decency, been first sounded—but I am wading out of my depths. (Lamb, 1823)

In these lines we see there is another conjunction 'but' after the 'dash' which is against the rule of grammar because there is no need of it, but to

emphasize that phrase using a dash before the conjunction is inevitable.

The dash in the above lines after the phrase 'I am plain Elia' is unnecessary because a comma would better serve the purpose but if his ultimate aim is to emphasize the phrase 'no Selden' then that dash is justified rather better used.

5: [A] votary of the desk—a notched and cropt scrivener—one that sucks his sustenance, as certain sick people are said to do, through a quill. (Lamb, 1823)

In this quotation from the essay, we see the 'dash' after 'self-same college' serving the purpose of explanation but the one following the phrase 'a votary of the desk' shows how much it matters to Lamb that he has used a dash instead a comma.

Besides emphasis Lamb has used dashes to explain some ambiguities. Some lines from the essay show this purpose very clearly. Let's have a look at them:

1: “I am not the man to decide the limits of civil and ecclesiastical authority—I am plain Elia—no Selden, nor Archbishop Usher—though at present in the thick of their books, here in the heart of learning, under the shadow of the mighty Bodley” (Lamb, 1823)

2: “And here I must have leave, (...) through the four seasons, —the red-letter days, now become, to all intents and purposes, dead-letter days” (Lamb, 1823)

En-dash

Beside em-dash Lamb has also used en-dash which is not so important to discuss as there is nothing new or amazing

in that. We all know why they are used. They have only one purpose—to enhance the beauty and to save space and time. Some of them are:

1. Self-same
2. Cart-rucks
3. Carpet-ground
4. Doing-away
5. Chapel-bell
6. Dim-eyed
7. Bed-makers
8. Fore-part
9. Counting-house
10. Over-looked
11. Moth-scented

Parenthesis

Parenthesis are used to enclose information that is extra, but can clarify the statement. ([Straus, Kaufman and Stern, 2014](#)). Lamb has used parenthesis at various occasions in this essay to give extra information as we see in the following lines, “—as the wary connoisseur in prints, with cursory eye ((which, while it reads, seems as though it read not), never fails to consult the *quis sculpsit*.” ([Lamb, 1823](#))

According to [Straus, Kaufman and Stern \(2014\)](#) if the extra information within the parenthesis do not end a sentence, no mark should be used after the parenthesis but Lamb has used a comma after the round brackets in these lines, discussed above, “(which, while it reads, seems as though it read not),”. This comma after the parenthesis is a blunder according to grammatical rules.

Another example of extra information from the essay is: “—only methought I a little grudged at the coalition of the *better Jude* with Simon—clubbing (as it were) their sanctities together.” ([Lamb, 1823](#))

In the above example, a comma could have been used instead of the parenthesis, but the use of parenthesis indicates that the writer considered the information less important. This rule has been explained by [Straus, Kaufman and Stern 2014](#)) in “*The Blue Book of Grammar*”.

Parenthesis are used instead of a dash if the writer wants to lesser the importance or emphasis of a certain word, phrase or a sentence. There are different examples from the essay which we can quote to prove this point. For example:

“and pay a devoir to some Founder, or noble or royal Benefactress (that should have been ours) whose portrait seems to smile.” ([Lamb, 1823](#))

In this example, if the parenthesis are replaced by dashes, the meaning would still be conveyed, but emphasis will be put in that case and the message will be of more importance than it is now with parenthesis.

Comma

According to Langan, commas are used mainly as follows:

- To distinguish elements by creating or putting commas in between to make pause for the speakers or readers who pronounce it
- To give or prepare an initial checkpoint or starting point
- It is either at either side, to create pause or space

- Used in situation where a pause or gap is used or needed to break thoughts and ideologies (Langan)

Pertaining to rule 1, Lamb has used comma in the following manner:

“amid an incongruous assembly of attorneys, attorneys' clerks, apparitors, promoters, vermin of the law, among whom he sits, 'in calm and sinless peace.” ([Lamb, 1823](#))

We find the following lines in the essay according to rule 2:

So that you see, upon the whole, the literary dignity of Elia is very little, if at all compromised in the condescension. ([Lamb, 1823](#))

Rule 3 has been applied at many occasions like:

1. Not that, in my anxious detail of the many commodities incidental to the life of a public office, (Lamb, 1823)
2. To such a one as myself, who has been defrauded in his young years of the sweet food of academic institution, ([Lamb, 1823](#))
3. No inconsiderable portion of his moderate fortune, I apprehend, is consumed in journeys between them and Clifford's Inn (Lamb)
4. D. has been engaged, he tells me, through a course of laborious years, ([Lamb, 1823](#))

As to rule 4:

1. I leave these curiosities to Porson, and to G.D. - whom, by the way, I found busy. ([Lamb, 1823](#))
 1. Surely the sun rose as brightly then as now, and man got him to his work in the morning? ([Lamb, 1823](#))

Exclamation Mark

[Trask, 1997](#), defines the punctuation mark (!) unofficially termed as scream or bang is categorically applied as a terse phrase that demonstrates an emotive aspect. Exclamation point is used to show emotion, emphasis, or surprise. (Straus, Kaufman and Stern) There is no doubt a man like Lamb would use it inappropriately. He uses it to show wonder, like:

Antiquity! thou wondrous charm, what art thou? ([Lamb, 1823](#))

To Show Emphasis

The mighty future is as nothing, being everything! the past is everything, being nothing! ([Lamb, 1823](#))

Here lamb (1823) has used the mark in its appropriate place and has conveyed his exact purpose

but he has not capitalized "the" as it comes after the exclamation mark. We know that exclamation mark ends a sentence and 'they' should have been capitalized in that sense.

To Show Emotions

What a place to be in is an old library! [\(Lamb,1823\)](#)
Lamb loves the old library in the Oxford. He has emotional touch with it and that's why he is using an exclamation mark to end the sentence. He could have been simply said, "It is a pleasure to be in the old library", but he will not because he does not want to sacrifice his feeling for his beloved library.

Colon

According to H. W. Fowler (1993), the colon "delivers the goods that have been invoiced in the preceding words." George Bernard Shaw tells us, when two statements are "placed baldly in dramatic apposition," use a colon. (Truss)

H. W. Fowler, 1993, argues that colon used to show delivery of the words described in the words that are preceding. George Bernard Shaw also supports this argument by stating when two dramatic situation is awkwardly placed, it's used with a 'colon'. A colon means "that is to say" or "here's what I mean." [\(Straus, Kaufman and Stern, 2014\)](#)

Rules that Rule on Colon

1. Colons start lists. [\(Truss, 2004\)](#)

Lamb has used colon appropriately according to rule 1:

"Then, to take a peep in by the way at the butteries, and sculleries, redolent of antique hospitality: the immense caves of kitchens, kitchen fireplaces, cordial recesses; oven whose first pies were baked four centuries ago..." [\(Lamb,1823\)](#)

Here we see all the items coming after the colon are related to the phrase, "redolent of antique hospitality". It also reflects what he means by the afore-mentioned phrase, according to the definition by [Straus, Kuafman and Stern \(2014\)](#).

2. According to grammatical rules, only a semicolon should be used to connect two independent clauses, but Lamb has used a colon which is not only inappropriate but a mistake we can say.

"and disappointed a second time, inquires for pen and paper as before: again the book is brought..." [\(Lamb,1823\)](#)

This error can be corrected by either splitting the independent clauses into two sentences or by putting a semi colon between the clauses.

Semicolon

A semicolon on top of a comma is not used with a dramatic effect, unnecessarily or without a proper plan, in other words, it's not an accident. A distinct pause is incorporated by semicolons which functions as the colons and slightly expanded than a comma can (Stern, Straus & Kaufman, 2014). However, there are occasions when full stops are replaced by semicolons; they are practically applied whenever sentences don't obey grammatical structures and act independently, while the meaning is compact and related [\(Swan, 2005\)](#).

Let's see how Lamb uses it:

"He made a call the other morning at our friend M.'s in Bedford Square; and, finding nobody at home, was ushered into the hall..." [\(Lamb,1823\)](#)

If the (;) is taken out, a period will come, and the sentence would split into two—He phoned to our colleague M.'s there at Bedford Square. When there was no one, he blustered into the room.

1. Grammatically intricate situation necessitate writers to use semicolons in order to identify and distinguish elements or ideas. [\(Swan, 2005\)](#).

Lamb has made use of this rule on more than one occasion, like:

And, therefore, his verses are properly, what he terms them, crochets; voluntaries; odes to liberty and spring; effusions; [\(Lamb,1823\)](#)

Here a comma would do as equal as the semicolon is doing, but the list is quite complicated, and he is using the semi colon as Swan is telling us.

Dog's Bollocks

There is a strange use of dash after colon and semicolon, like:

- so much did we love to keep holy memories sacred: — [\(Lamb,1823\)](#)
- And D. has been underworking for himself ever since; — [\(Lamb,1823\)](#)

The OED calls this mark the dog's bollocks, what he describes it as, "typo, a colon followed by a dash, regarded as forming a shape resembling the male sexual organs." [\(Dictionary, 2007\)](#)

OED does not further elaborate on its purported usage, but others do:

“The colon [is] never preceded by a white space; it is always followed by a single white space in normal use, and it is never, never, never followed by a hyphen or a dash — in spite of what you might have been taught in school.” ([Trask, 1997](#))

Diction

A study of diction is the analysis of how a writer uses language for a distinct purpose and effect, including word choice and figures of speech.

To understand ‘diction’ we need to understand a writer’s ability to understand what, why, how and to what extent he uses words to produce a good effect on readers to assimilate his language.

How a writer applies a language for a special treatment to a text and to what effect falls under the impression of ‘diction’, which also includes the extent to which he manipulates the figures of speech.

The diction Lamb has used is unique in the sense that when he is talking about the ancient past, he uses words that are themselves ancient, as we see in the paragraph which is about antiquity. Let’s have a look at the paragraph:

“Antiquity! thou wondrous charm, what art thou? that, being nothing, art everything! When, thou wert, thou wert not antiquity - then thou wert nothing, but hadst a remoter antiquity, as thou calledst it, to look back to with blind veneration; thou thyself being to thyself flat, jejune, modern! What mystery lurks in this retroversion? or what half Januses are we, that cannot look forward with the same idolatry with which we for ever revert! The mighty future is as nothing, being everything! the past is everything, being nothing!” ([Lamb, 1823](#))

Now if we replace thou with you, art with are, wert with were, hadst with had, remoter with far, calledst with called, thyself with yourself, it would seem he is not talking about the past but modern times.

Similarly, the use of exclamation mark in the above paragraph reflects nothing but his emotions about what he is saying. Had they not been there, the emotional effect of the paragraph would have been lost completely, and so its beauty.

When he talks about present: word choice in the essay

When he talks about beauty: word choice in the essay

When he talks about academics: word choice in the essay

When he is happy: word choice in the essay

When he is gloomy: word choice in the essay.

Conclusion

By analyzing the essay ‘Oxford in Vacation’ by Charles Lamb, we come to the conclusion that punctuation marks are important parts of any piece of writing. Without using these in their appropriate places, it is very difficult to comprehend even a single line. We have found that Lamb has used each important mark for decoration and convenience. It is true that he has committed mistakes at various places, but mostly they show each time you violate a grammatical rule; you are not condemned. There are times when you have to violate these rules in order to create some special effect. This has been found in the essay when analyzed. The diction used in the essay is also up to the mark. It has been observed that the diction employed by him is appropriate to the situation he is in. It has never been the case that he is talking of bad time using flowery words or talking of the past using modern words.

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