**Charles Lamb: Essays Summary and Analysis of "A Dissertation Upon Roast Pig"**

**Summary**

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](https://www.gradesaver.com/charles-lamb-essays/study-guide/character-list#bo-bo), the son of swineherd Ho-ti.

Bo-bo was one day playing with fire, as he was wont to 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.

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.

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.

The narrator admits to enjoying all of the fine meats available, from strange foul 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.

**Analysis**

Among the most light-hearted of Lamb's essays is this freewheeling comic dissertation on the pleasure of eating roasted pig. It features a copious use of the literary device of hyperbole, with Lamb going to all sorts of eccentric ends to extol the flavor of roasted pork. The logic of hyperbole is also evident in Lamb's use of a heightened tone to tell the absurd story of how roast pork was discovered after a house fire in China. Once again, Lamb construes literary devices and narrative forms in such a way that he manages to sneak some fiction into his essay work. The fable he constructs speaks to how odd it is that humans eat cooked animals at all.

We can see the tropes of Romanticism on full display in this essay, even though the subject of that Romantic meditation is a curious one. Lamb uses florid language and a subjective voice to give a vivid account of his experience with his subject. But whereas, for instance, fellow Romanticist Henry David Thoreau uses these techniques to describe Walden Pond and meditate on how his experience there reflects on man's participation in society, Lamb makes a culinary delight the subject of his Romantic inquiry, indulging his epicurean side and reflecting on the way good food makes friends out of those who may otherwise be suspicious of one another.

The culinary essay in and of itself is a storied subgenre. The most famous one may be Jonathan Swift's "A Modest Proposal," which satirically advocates cooking and eating England's children. A more recent popular example is David Foster Wallace's "Consider the Lobster," which like Lamb's essay explores the delights of eating lobster but, unlike Lamb's, lingers on the inherent cruelty of cooking and eating the animal. In the case of Swift's, Wallace's, and Lamb's essays, there is an essential social component to their discussion of a specific food, and they seek to extract some wisdom about the human condition from practices of cooking and eating.