

Dream Children: A Reverie

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Charles Lamb

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Paper - IV (English Essayist)

Dream Children: A Reverie is an extremely moving essay written by Charles Lamb, a 19th century essayist known as the Prince among English essayists. Lamb belongs to the class of intimate and self-revealing essayist like Montaigne and Cowley. He combines in him the massiveness of Bacon and rhythmic eloquence of Browne. His Elia essays, in which he writes under the pen name of Elia, are a living testimony to his sweetness of disposition and gentleness of heart. His blending of humour and pathos is praiseworthy.

Lamb's early life was ravaged by a series of tragedy in the family. He grew up to shoulder the life-long responsibility of his crippled sister Mary Lamb. He decided to stay single for his sister's sake. He, however, loved children greatly. In order to overcome the trauma of this unfulfilled desire, he gave expression to it and the result is this essay. Here he imagines himself sitting before his own children, narrating to them the stories of his own grand mother.

The essay begins with an interesting aspect of child-psychology: "children love to listen to stories about their elders, when they were children..." The dream children of Lamb, John

and Alice, creep ab around him to listen to the story of their great grandmother Field who lived in a great house at Norfolk. Lamb tells them the entire background details of the locality called Norfolk, the story of the children in the wood, the kind gesture of Robin Rendbreasts. Then he narrates to them how religious and how good their great grandmother Field was. She was loved and respected by one and all. The children show their involvement in the story by responding with their gestures. Continuing his narration, Lamb tells them how when lady Field died of Cancer, her funeral was attended by all the poor and some of the gentry, too. Because she remembered nearly the whole of the Bible. She had been a tall, upright and graceful in her youth and was known as the best dancer. This part of the story makes Alice tap her right foot on the ground. Lamb tells them - how she lived in the big house all alone and would often see the apparition of the two little infants at midnight, but remained unafraid. John reacts by looking courageous at this part of the story.

Not to let the interest and attention of the children sing, Lamb now tells them how much lady Field loved all her grand-children, but more specially their own uncle John Lamb. Because he was so handsome, spirited and adventurous. He could ride and control any horse in the

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stable. He would carry Lamb upon his back many a mile when he couldn't walk. His death, Lamb reminisces, haunted him long after. The children of Lamb's fancy are deeply touched when Lamb tells them how much he loved and missed his own brother, "I missed his kindness and his love, his goodness, and missed him to be alive and to be quarrelling with him, rather than now having him again." The dream children start crying and request Lamb not to go on about their uncle but to tell them some stories about their beautiful dead mother. Lamb, then, tells them how for seven years he courted their mother Alice, who she would respond, sometimes with coyness, sometimes with difficulty. It is at this point of the story that Lamb discovers strange similarity between his dead wife and the little Alice, his daughter. No sooner does he start gazing, than both the children start receding from the scene till they are replaced by two mournful features seen quite far away, trying to impress upon him the effects of the speech in the following words:—

We are not of Alice, nor of thee, nor are we children at all. We are nothing, less than nothing, and dreams. We are only what might have been, and must wait upon the tedious shores of Lethe Millions of ages before we have existence, and again

At this point Lamb wakes up from his reverie and finds himself sitting

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in his armchair, where he had dozed off. The essay begins with a curious note but ends on a note of pathos. It is partly autobiographical and contains intimately personal details. Lamb's inability to Mary Ann Simmonds (portrayed as Alice W-n) and his life-long devotion to his ailing sister are the facets of his life duly reflected in this essay. Lamb is able to keep the readers, along with his dream children, spell bound. The references to Red Robin-brooks, the ballad of "The Baboon in the Wood" and the create an atmosphere of mystery and awe. The style and the content is remarkable revealed in the present essay.

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