

# DREAM CHILDREN-A REVERIE

CHARLES LAMB

# CHARLES LAMB (1775-1834)

- ▶ The English author, critic, and minor poet Charles Lamb (1775-1834) is best known for the essays he wrote under the name Elia.
- ▶ He remains one of the most loved and read of English essayists.
- ▶ Charles Lamb was born on Feb. 10, 1775, in London. At the age of 7 he entered Christ's Hospital, a free boarding school for sons of poor but genteel parents.
- ▶ After beginning a lifelong friendship with Samuel Taylor Coleridge, a fellow student, Lamb left school in 1789. In 1792 he was hired as a clerk in the East India Company and worked there for the next 33 years.
- ▶ On Sept. 22, 1796, Lamb's sister, Mary, in a moment of anxious rage, stabbed their mother to death.
- ▶ An inquest found Mary temporarily insane and placed her in the custody of Charles.
- ▶ After the death of their father in 1799, Mary came to live with Charles for the rest of his life.



- ▶ This companionship was broken only at intervals when the symptoms of Mary's illness recurred so that she had to enter an asylum. This lifelong guardianship prevented Lamb from ever marrying.
- ▶ He himself had spent 6 weeks in an asylum during the winter of 1795, stuttered badly all his life, and became increasingly dependent on alcohol. It is quite possible that his responsibility to Mary helped him to keep a firmer grip on his own sanity.
- ▶ Lamb's literary career began in 1796, when Coleridge published four of Lamb's sonnets in his own first volume, *Poems on Various Subjects*.
- ▶ In 1798 Lamb published his sentimental romance, "A Tale of Rosamund Gray", and, together with Charles Lloyd, a friend of Coleridge, brought out a volume entitled *Blank Verse*.
- ▶ By 1801 Lamb had begun to contribute short articles to London newspapers and to write plays in an effort to relieve the poverty he and Mary endured. In 1802 he published *John Woodvil*, a blank-verse play which enjoyed no success, and on the night of Dec. 10, 1806, his two-act farce, *Mr. H.*, was greeted by "a hundred hisses" at the Drury Lane Theatre.
- ▶ In 1807 Charles and Mary together brought out *Tales from Shakespeare*, a collection of prose adaptations of Shakespeare's plays intended for young readers.


- The book proved popular with both young and old, and the Lambs followed up this success with others in the same vein.
- In 1808 Charles published his own version of Homer's *Odyssey* for children, *The Adventures of Ulysses*, and in 1809 he collaborated again with Mary on *Mrs. Leicester's School*, a book of children's stories, and *Poetry for Children*.
- Meanwhile Lamb began a new aspect of his career in 1808 by editing the anthology *Specimens of the English Dramatic Poets Who Lived about the Time of Shakespeare*.
- Lamb's brilliant comments on the selections he chose began his reputation as a critic, and the entire volume was largely responsible for the revival of interest in Shakespeare's contemporaries which followed its publication.
- Lamb furthered his critical career with essays "On the Genius and Character of Hogarth" and "The Tragedies of Shakespeare," published in Leigh Hunt's journal, the *Reflector*, in 1811. In 1818 he brought out a two-volume collection *The Works of Charles Lamb*. Ironically, his real literary career was yet to begin.
- In 1823 Charles and Mary met and eventually adopted an orphan girl, Emma Isola. In August the Lambs moved from London for the first time, to Islington and then to Enfield. Charles's health was weakening, and a long illness during the winter of 1824 led him to retire permanently from the East India Company. He now occupied his time with walking trips around Hertfordshire with Emma Isola.
- By 1833 the frequency and duration of Mary's attacks had increased so that she needed almost constant care, so the Lambs moved to Edmonton to be near Mary's nurse.
- Charles ended his literary career the same year with *Last Essays of Elia*. In July, Emma's marriage to Charles's friend Edward Moxon left him depressed and lonely. One year later the death of Coleridge made that loneliness acute. "I feel how great a part he was of me," wrote Lamb. Five weeks later, on Dec. 27, 1834, Lamb himself was dead.

## STYLE OF HIS WRITING

- Most of the essays of Lamb are deeply personal and autobiographical. Lamb uses the essay as a vehicle of Self-revelation. He takes the reader into confidence and speaks about himself without reserve.
- These essays, acquaint us with Lamb's likes and dislikes, his preferences and aversions, his tastes and temperaments, his nature and disposition, his meditations and reflections, his observations and comments, his reactions to persons, events, and things and so on without openly taking himself as a subject.
- Lamb is forever speaking of himself. This constant pre-occupation with himself and his use of the personal pronoun "I" is by some described as his egotism. It is just that Lamb relates what he knows best. The past, like the present, offers him an inexhaustible store house from which he freely draws for his material.
- From the personal and autobiographical portions of the essays, it is possible to reconstruct the inner life and no little of the outer life of Lamb.
- Among the essays in which Lamb reveals himself more conspicuously are:
  - 1) Oxford in the vacation, (2) Christ's Hospital Five and Thirty years Ago 3) New Year's Eve, (4) A Chapter on Ears (5) All Fool's Day (6) Imperfect Sympathies (7) My Relations (8) Grace Before Meat (9) Dream Children (10) In Praise of Chimney - Sweepers (11) Modern Gallantry (12) A Dissertation upon Roast Pig & (13) The Superannuated Man
- Hamilton Thompson's says that "His gentle expostulations only deepened the mystery. Apart from personal gratification however, his method of employing autobiography is strictly in keeping with the canons of Art. 'The Essays of Elia is primarily a work of imagination. Autobiographical detail is not its purpose, but is merely incident to it, and the writer is at liberty to keep to the strict truth or draw upon his imagination as he will.'"

## SUMMARY


- Children love to listen to stories of their elders as children, the essay begins, because they get to imagine those elders that they themselves cannot meet.
- Elia's children gather around him to hear stories about their great-grandmother Field, who lived in a mansion that she cared for on behalf of a rich family who lived in a different mansion. Young Alice scoffs at Elia's recollection of that rich person removing a detailed wood carving depicting the story of the Children in the Wood to put up an ugly marble thing instead.
- At Field's funeral, Elia recounts, everyone praised her goodness and religious faith: she could recite Psalms and some of the New Testament from memory.
- She was a great dancer until she was stricken by cancer, but even in the grip of that disease, she didn't lose any of her good spirits.
- She was convinced that two ghosts of infants lived in her house, but she didn't consider them harmful, so it didn't bother her much. But the young Elia was terrified of them, and always needed help getting to sleep, even though he never saw them.
- The young Elia used to wander the grounds of that mansion admiring all of the marble busts and wondering when he may himself turn into one. He spent his days picking the various fruit from around the grounds of the estate. Elia breaks from his recollection to notice his children John and Alice splitting a plate of grapes.
- Elia continues that Field loved all of her grandchildren, but especially Elia's elder brother John L., a handsome and great-spirited young man who rode horses from a young age. John used to carry Elia around on his back when the younger brother became lame-footed.

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- When John fell ill, Elia felt he wasn't able to care for his brother as well as when John had cared for him, and when John died, Elia was reserved in emotion but consumed by a great sorrow.
  - At this point in the telling, Elia's children start to cry, asking not to hear about their uncle, but to hear about their dead mother instead.
  - So Elia begins by telling them of the seven years he spent courting their mother Alice, with all of its difficulties and rejection.
  - But when he goes to look at his daughter Alice, she has disappeared. A disembodied voice tells Elia that they are not Alice's children, that the real father of Alice's children is a man named Bartrum, and they are just dreams. With that, Elia wakes up in his arm-chair, with Bridget by his side, and John L. gone forever

## ANALYSIS

- "Dream Children" is a formally unique essay, channeling the logic and flow of a dream in a series of long sentences of strung together phrases and no paragraph breaks to be found.
- Lamb deftly uses these stylistic conceits to pull the reader into a reverie, creating a sense of tumbling through this dream world with its series of dovetailing tangents. In fact, the essay could prove confusing and hard to navigate until the reader gets to the end when, with a savvy twist, Lamb explains the formal oddness of the yarn he has been spinning all along.
- We're ripped out of this odd dream state into the most familiar state Lamb can be found in—sitting next to his sister.
- To some extent, this piece blurs genre lines between essay and fiction. Commonly, we understand essays to be works of non-fiction, but in this one Lamb uses his typical interior-facing autobiographical approach to make room for a fictional narrative inside of a dream. The fact that his children exist is a fiction, as is the idea that he married Alice, as may be the existence and deaths of Field and John L. We know that the real life Charles had a brother John Lamb, but in choosing the rare occasion to write of his real life brother inside of this vivid dream, Lamb seems to be choosing to write about a fantasized version of his real life.



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- In his book *Metaphors of Self: The Meaning of Autobiography*, the literary theorist James Olney says that the most fruitful approach a writer can take in an autobiography is not to follow a formal or historical one but to, "see it in relation to the vital impulse to order that has always caused man to create and that, in the end, determines both the nature and the form of what he creates."
  - This explanation of autobiography rings true generally of Charles Lamb's work, but doubly so with "Dream Children." Here, Lamb models his essay on a dream, bringing the fantasy that fuels his creative energies to the fore, blurring the lines between that fantasy of his past life and that life to which he dedicates his writing practice.