





DREAM CHILDREN: A REVERIE


CHARLES LAMB

ON HUMOUR AND PATHOS AS USED BY CHARLES LAMB

- ▶ “Some things are of that nature as to make One’s fancy chuckle while his heart doth ache” Wrote Bunyan. The nature of things mostly appeared to Charles Lamb in this way. Lamb does not frolic out of lightness of heart, but to escape from gloom that might otherwise crush. He laughed to save himself from weeping.
- ▶ In fact, Lamb’s personal life was of disappointments and frustrations. But instead of complaining, he looked at the tragedies of life, its miseries and worries as a humorist.
- ▶ Thus his essays become an admixture of humour and pathos. Examples of his keen sense of humour and pathetic touches are scattered in all of his essays. Let’s focus our discussion on Dream Children: A Reverie.
- ▶ In Lamb’s writing wit, humour and fun are interwoven and it is humour which is most notable for its extreme sensitiveness to the true proportion of things.
- ▶ Lamb often brings out the two sides of a fact and causes laughter at our own previous misconceptions.
- ▶ Therefore it borders on the painful realization. Thus his humour is very nearly allied to pathos.
- ▶ They are different facets of the same gem. In his essay Dream Children: A Reverie Lamb talks of personal sorrows and joys.

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- He gives expressions to his unfulfilled longings and desires. He readily enters into the world of fantasy and pops up stories in front of his dream children.
 - He relates his childhood days, of Mrs. Field, his grandmother and John Lamb, his brother. He describes how much fun he had at the great house and orchard in Norfolk.
 - Of his relations he gives us full and living pictures – his brother John is James Elia of My Relations, but here is John L-, so handsome and spirited youth, and a ‘king’. John was brave, handsome and won admiration from everybody.
 - Charles’ grandmother Mrs. Field is the other living picture. She was a good natured and religious– minded lady of respectable personality.
 - Narrator’s sweet heart Alice Winterton is the other shadowed reality.
 - The Dream Children, Alice and John are mere bubbles of fancy. Thus Lamb’s nostalgic memory transports us back to those good old days of great grandmother Field.
 - But even in those romantic nostalgia the hard realities of life does not miss our eyes. Death, separation and suffering inject us deep-rooted pathos in our heart. Whereas Mrs. Field died of cancer, John Lamb died in early age.
 - Ann Simmons has been a tale of unrequited love story of Charles Lamb. Notably the children are millions of ages distant of oblivion and Charles is not a married man but a bachelor having a reverie.
 - In his actual life Lamb courted Ann Simmons but could not marry her, he wanted to have children but could not have any.

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- Thus he strikes a very pathetic note towards the end of his essay when he puts the following word into the mouths of his imaginary children, “we are not of Alice, nor of thee, nor are we children at all ... We are nothing, less than nothing, dreams. We are only what might have been”.
 - Alice is here no other girl but Ann Simmons, the girl Lamb wanted to marry, but failed to marry her. In fact, the subtitle of the essay – ‘A Reverie’ which literally means a daydream or a fantasy – prepares us for the pathos of the return to reality although the essay begins on a deceptively realistic note.
 - Although Dream Children begins on a merry note, the dark side of life soon forces itself upon Lamb’s attention and the comic attitude gives way to melancholy at the end of the essay.
 - Throughout the essay Lamb presents his children in such a way that we never guess that they are merely figments of his imagination – their movements, their reactions, their expressions are all realistic.
 - It is only at the end of the essay that we realize that the entire episode with his children is a daydream. We are awakened by a painful realization of the facts.
 - Lamb’s humour was no surface play, but the flower plucked from the nettle of peril and awe. In fact, Lamb’s humour and pathos take different shapes in different essays.
 - Sometimes it is due to his own unfulfilled desires, sometimes it is due to the illfortunes of his relatives and friends and on some other occasions it is due to his frustration in love etc.
 - If his Poor Relations begin humorously of a male and female poor relation, he later gives us a few pathetic examples of poor relations that had to suffer on account of poverty.

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- Again in his *The Praise of Chimney Sweepers* Lamb sways between humour and pathos while describing the chimney sweepers.
 - Similarly the essay *Dream Children* is a beautiful projection of Lamb's feelings and desire to have a wife and children of his own. It is humorous that in his dream he is married and has two children of his own while he had a disheartening frustration in love.
 - Thus Lamb has painted both the lights and shades of life in full circle. His is the criticism of life in pathos and humours.
 - Features Narration Enlivened by Depiction of the Children As is illustrated in sentences (5) and (6), the author's narration of the great-grandmother and his brother is enlivened by a certain depiction concerning the children. Incidentally, while preparing his ultimate solemn effect, Lamb has inspired us with a new, intensified vision of the wistful beauty of children—their imitativeness, their facile and generous emotions, their anxiety to be correct, their ingenuous haste to escape from grief into joy.
 - This vision gives us an impression that they seem real, thus makes the revelation in the end touching and pathetic.
 - Unexpected Ending *Dream Children* begins quite simply, in a calm, narrative manner, representing Lamb as sitting by his fireside on a winter night telling stories to his own dear children, and delighting in their society, until he suddenly comes to his old, solitary, bachelor self, and finds that they were but dream-children.

- In the end of the essay, we read: That I became in doubt which of them stood there before me, or whose that bright hair was; and while I stood gazing, both the children gradually grew fainter to my view, receding, and still receding till nothing at last but two mournful features were seen in the uttermost distance, which, without speech, strangely impressed upon me the effects of speech; “We are not of Alice, nor of thee, nor are we children at all. The children of Alice called Bartrum father. 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 a name.”
- Reflecting upon the essay, we will surely be obsessed by the beauty of old houses and gardens and aged virtuous characters, the beauty of children, the beauty of companionships, the softening beauty of dreams in an arm- chair—all these are brought together and mingled with the grief and regret which were the origin of the mood.
- Rhetorical Devices Lamb introduces some rhetorical devices to make his essay vivid and profound, such as: And how the nectarines and peaches hung upon the walls, without my ever offering to pluck them, because they were forbidden fruit, unless now and then (metaphor) Till I could almost fancy myself ripening too along with the oranges and the limes in that grateful warmth (empathy) The nature of things mostly appeared to Charles Lamb in this way.
- Lamb did not frolic out of lightness of heart, but to escape from gloom that might otherwise crush. He laughed to save himself from weeping.
- In fact, Lamb’s personal life was of disappointments and frustrations.
- But instead of complaining, he looked at the tragedies of life, its miseries and worries as a humorist. Thus his essays become an admixture of humour and pathos.
- Dream Children records the pathetic joys in the author’s unfortunate domestic life.