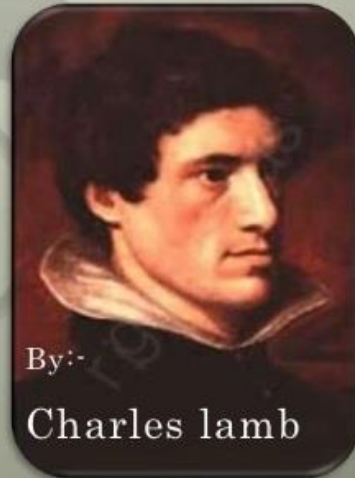


Dream-Children; A Reverie  
Charles Lamb

# Dream children: A Reverie



- **Charles Lamb was born in London, 10 February 1775 was an English essayist, best known for his *Essays of Elia* and for the children's book.**
- **Lamb was the son of Elizabeth Field and John Lamb. He was the youngest child, with a sister Mary, a brother John, and 4 other siblings.**

**In 1819, at age 44, Lamb, who, because of family commitments, had never married, fell in love with an actress and proposed marriage. She refused him, and he died a bachelor.**

- **In the first years of the 19th century Lamb began his literary cooperation with his sister Mary. Together they wrote at least three books.**

## Summary of Dream Children

- **The children of James Elia, John and Alice, asked Lamb to tell them about their great grandmother- Mrs. Field.**
- **The house belonged to a rich nobleman. Grandmother Field was the keeper of the house and she looked after the house with great care as though it was her own.**
- **The children had come to know the story from the ballad of 'The Children in the wood' in the house.**
- **The story was carved in wood upon the chimney piece.**

- But a foolish rich person later pulled down the wooden chimney and put a chimney of marble.
- Alice was very unhappy that the rich man had pulled down the chimney piece with the story. She looked upbraiding and her anger was like her mother's.

- When the house came to decay later, after the death of Mrs. Field the nobleman carried away the ornaments of the house and used them in his new house.

- The ornaments of the old house looked very awkward in the new house.
- Things looked beautiful only if they are in harmony with the surroundings.

- John enjoyed the comparison and smiled as if he also felt it would be very awkward indeed.
- Grandmother was also very religious.
- Alice here spread her hands as if she was not interested in the praise of a quality of the grandmother.
- Children find it difficult to learn lessons by heart.

Grandmother Field did not fear the spirits of the two infants which haunted the house at night. So she slept alone.

But Elia used to sleep with his maid as he was not so religious.

When the grandmother died many people in the neighborhood attended her funeral.

She was also a good dancer when she was young. Here, Alice moved her feet unconsciously as she too was interested in dancing.

- Grandmother was tall and upright but later she was bowed down by a disease called cancer.
- In the garden, there were fruits like nectarines, peaches, oranges and others.

- Elia never plucked them but rather enjoyed looking at them.
- Here John deposited a bunch of grapes upon the plate again. He was showing that he too was not tempted by fruits.

- From all the grandchildren, Grandmother Field loved John the most.
- John was lively and spirited, fond of riding, hunting and outdoor activities.

- He used to take James Elia upon his back out for outings as James Elia was lame footed.
- But James was sorry for it. John died later and James missed him much.

- The children began to cry at the sad turn of events.
- They asked him to continue the story of Uncle John but to tell them about their dead mother.
- The father began to tell them how he had courted their mother, Alice for seven years.

- He was at times hopeful of winning her and at times in despair.
- He explained to them what coyness, difficulty and denial mean in an unmarried lady.
- When the father looked at Alice she looked at that time very much like her mother. Thereafter, the children began to grow fainter.

- They began to go away further and further till the father could hardly see them.
- From a great distance they seemed to say that they were not children of Alice nor of him, they were not children at all, they were only what might have been.

- When he woke up he found himself in an armed chair.
- He had fallen asleep and he had been dreaming. James Elia had vanished.
- On the chair was only Charles Lamb.

### **Introduction:**

Lamb is not an objective essayist. He is known as **the prince of personal essays** which are coloured by his own thoughts, recollection dreams, likes, dislikes, joy and sorrow. In short his essays are **full of autobiographical** elements.

Written about a dream world, the essay Dream Children by Charles Lamb belongs to his famous work **Essays of Elia** (1823) published in London magazines. Referring to himself by the pseudonym Elia, Lamb has penned down the essays as personal accounts of his life devoid of any didactic or moral lessons. Enriched with humour, pathos and regret for the time long gone, Lamb's essays leave an everlasting impression on the minds and hearts of the readers.

### **Dream Children:**

Charles Lamb begins his essay Dream Children by describing to his young children Alice and John the tales of his childhood when he used to live with his great-grandmother, Mrs Field. In a nostalgic tone, Lamb narrates to the children the humorous details of his time spent in his great grandmother's house; the love between the two brothers, Charles and John, their frequent wanderings and mischief in the grand house and their memories of the Orchid trees and the fish pond.

The tone of the essay shifts from humorous to tragic when Lamb describes the death of his beloved brother and great-grandmother whom he loses at an early age of his life. The essayist's unfulfilled longings and desires are also evident in his work when he narrates to the children the events and incidents from his past life.

The essay highlights the themes of loss and regret in Lamb's life. The essayist reflects nostalgically on his childhood and regrets the loss of his dear ones.

He also feels depressed on the loss of his unrequited love Alice and regrets not marrying her. Moreover, Lamb regrets that the happy and joyous days of his childhood are gone in a blink of an eye.

During his adulthood, Lamb takes his loneliness to the heart desperately yearning for the return of the old happier days of his life. The essay reaches its climax when the readers become aware of the reality that the children listening to Lamb's stories are nothing but a figment of his imagination and a dream of a sleeping man.

This essay, revolving around the happy childhood days and the lonely adult age, brings to mind the transient nature of life where nothing remains forever in an individual's life.

### **Summing up:**

Dream Children by Charles Lamb highlights the pain and regret of losing loved ones in life persuading the essayist to indulge in a dream world fantasy in order to reflect upon the sweet

memories of the days gone Enriched with pathos, the essay describes the importance of childhood and the dear ones in the life of an individual without whom the world appears to be a dark alley suffocating the individual at every turn.

“We are not of Alice, nor of thee, nor are we children at all. The children of Alice call 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.”

**Dream Children is an autobiographical essay:** "Dream Children : A Reverie" is also an autobiographical essay which help us to get an idea about his early life. Through it we know about some of his relatives whom he loved and lost and about his love affair with a young woman. In this essay Lamb tells something about his **grandmother Mrs. Mary Field** who was good and religious most, handsome and best dancer in her youth. Lamb also places **his brother John Lamb or James Elia** on high place although he does not deserve it as he was mean and selfish.

In this essay Lamb also has spoken about his youthful love with a young beauty. **Ann Simmons** whom he has called here Alice W-N. To mystify the reader he tells that he has married with her but actually she married a pawn broker whose name was Bartrum.

#### **Questions & Answers:**

1. Why is the essay entitled “Dream Children”?

Ans: Charles Lamb entitled the essay “Dream Children” because he never married and naturally never became the father of any children. The children he speaks of in the essay were actually the creations of his imagination or fancy.

2. Who was Field? How does Lamb present her before his dream children?

Ans: Field, pseudonym for the actual person, was Lamb’s grandmother. Lamb presents her as an ideal grandmother in an imaginary and inflated way before his “dream children”—she was extremely pious, fearless and compassionate person besides being the best dancer of the area in her youth.

3. Why is the essay entitled “A Reverie”?

Ans: The essay is subtitled as a ‘reverie’ because Lamb never married and so he never had children. In the essay he created an imaginary picture of a happy conjugal life—a picture which finally dissolves into nothing as he comes back to reality.

4. How does Lamb present his brother John L—?

Ans: Lamb’s elder brother, John L—in his youth was a handsome, high-spirited, strong and fearless person. He loved Lamb very much. But subsequently in his old age he became lame-footed and spent the rest of his life in utter hopelessness, irritation and pain.

5. Whom does Lamb refer to as “faithful Bridget” by side?

Ans: Lamb had a sister, Mary Lamb, who did not marry since she had attacks of insanity. She has been referred to here as “faithful Bridget” because she never married and was Lamb’s only companion in his life. At the sudden breakdown of his reverie, he finds her seated by his side.

6. What, according to you, is the most striking feature of the essay and why?

Ans: The chief characteristic feature of the essay is the author’s mingling of pathos and humour. Lamb begins the essay in somewhat deceptive fashion, describing the incidents, full of humour. But gradually he reduces the tone towards the end describing the tragedies of his personal life.

7. How does Lamb present the autobiographical elements in the essay?

Or, Why is the essay called a personal essay? /Or, What type of essay is Dream Children?



Ans: Dream Children is a personal essay. Lamb presents the characters and incidents from his own life—the sketches of his grandmother, Field, his brother—John Lamb, his sister—Mary Lamb, his tragic love-affairs with Ann Simmons. But Lamb is always playing with facts and fictions and transforms the real into the literary.

8. How does Lamb show his knowledge of child psychology?

Ans: It is surprising that without ever having children Lamb had acute sense of how children react to the happenings in the world of the adults. By deceptively referring to the meticulous reactions of his dream children, he succeeds in catching the reader immediately. The aesthetic impact of the essay becomes more effective for this reason.

9. “...till the old marble heads would seem to be live again...to be turned into marble with them”—Where does the expression occur? Explain the context.

Ans: Lamb told his “dream children” that in his boyhood he would enjoy rambling in and around the great country house in Norfolk. He would gaze at the twelve marble busts of Caesars in such an intensely meditative way that it seemed to him after some time that those were coming back to life again, or that he would be himself transformed into marble with them.

10. Where does the expression “busy-idle diversion” occur? What does the author mean by this?

Ans: Lamb told his “dream children” that in his boyhood he would enjoy rambling in and around the great country house in Norfolk more than the sweet fruits of the orchard. He would remain busy with this though he had no work to do.

11. “When he died though he had not been...died great while ago”.

Who is referred to as ‘he’? Why is he spoken of?

Ans: Lamb loved his brother John L— very much. But very shortly after his death it seemed to him that death had created such an immeasurable vacuum in his life that it made impossible for him to comprehend the significance of the difference between life and death.

12. “...such a distance there is betwixt life and death”—Explain the significance of the line in light of the context.

Ans: the immediate absence of his brother John Lamb created by his death forced Lamb to feel the gulf the difference between life and death. He understood that death created a permanent absence as the dead cannot be restored to life. Again, death is unknowable and Lamb was forced to reflect on his brother’s absence in this way.

13. “...the soul of first Alice looked out at her eyes with such reality of re-presentment that I came in doubt”—Who was Alice? What does the word ‘re-presentment’ mean here?

Ans: In the course of his day-dreaming when Lamb looked at his dream-daughter, her physical resemblance reminded him of his dream-girl Alice W—n, a fictitious name for Ann Simmons who did reciprocate his love.

14. “But John L—(or James Elia) was gone forever”—Who was James Elia? Why does the author say this?

Ans: At the end of his day-dreaming Lamb coming back to reality finds his sister (Bridget) Mary Lamb by his side; but he realises and remembers that his brother James Elia or John Lamb had died and would no more be with them. So he laments his loss thus.

15. “Here Alice put out one of her dear mother’s looks, too tender to be called upbraiding”—What does the word ‘braiding’ mean here? What makes Alice react thus?

Ans: While describing the great country house in Norfolk, lamb tells his “dream children” that the chimney piece of the great hall was decorated by the curving of the story of Robin Redbreasts. At the information that a foolish person pulled it down, Alice’s countenance

changed, which suggested that it should not have been done. The word 'braiding' here means castigation or censure.

16. How does Lamb record Alice's reactions to his story-telling?

Ans: While listening to Lamb's personal tale, Alice reacts first by spreading her hands when Lamb says how good, religious and graceful person Field had been. Alice reacts to it either in great astonishment or putting up some pious gesture. She also cries out When Lamb talks about his elder brother's pain and death.

17. How does Lamb record John's reactions to his story-telling?

Ans: At the information of the great house being stripped off its ornaments John smiled, which suggested the foolishness of the work. He was trying to look brave and impress upon his father that he would not have been afraid of the ghosts like his father. At the end of the story, when Lamb was talking of his elder brother's pain and death, John, like Alice, began to cry.