

## 'Dream Children : A Reverie' as an Essay

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**Dream Children : A Reverie** , popularly known for convenience as **Dream Children** is an essay by Charles Lamb. An essay , says A.C. Benson in his **Art of the Essayist**, is a thing which some one does himself; and the point of the essay is not the subject, for any subject will suffice, but the charm of the essayist's personality. To say in different words, the charm of the essay depends upon the charm of the mind that has conceived and recorded the impression. The essay need not concern itself with anything definite; it need not have an intellectual or a philosophical or a religious or a humorous motif; but equally none of these subjects are ruled out. The only thing necessary is that the thing or the thought should be vividly apprehended, enjoyed, felt to be beautiful, and expressed with a sudden gusto." If these be the criteria of a good essay, *Dream Children* is unparalleled.

Essay ( *F essai* 'attempt' ) is a composition usually in prose ( Pope's Moral Essays in verse are an exception) which may be of only a few hundred words (like Bacon's Essays) or of book length (like Locke's Concerning Human Understanding), and which discusses formally or informally a topic or a variety of topics. It is one of the most flexible and adaptable of literary forms, and differs from a "treatise" or "dissertation" as it is not a systematic and complete exposition and as it is addressed to a general reader rather than to a specialized audience. The essay discusses its subject in non-technical fashion, and often with a liberal use of such devices as anecdote, striking illustration, and humour to augment its appeal. It should, in this connection, be taken into account that a personal essay or literary essay is not like a **formal essay** or **article** which is impersonal : the author writes as an authority or at least as highly knowledgeable , and expounds the subject in an orderly way. In the **informal** or **familiar** or **personal** essay the author assumes a tone of intimacy with his audience, tends to deal with everyday things rather than with public affairs or specializes topics, and writes in a relaxed , self-revelatory, and sometimes whimsical fashion. **Essais** by Montaigne published in 1580 is the pioneering work in this field though Theophrastus and Plutarch, both Greeks, and Cicero and Seneca, both Romans, wrote essays.

Charles Lamb's **Essays of Elia** which includes **Dream Children** are , to speak in a word, really charming. They reveal Lamb the man, yet they are not historical. The autobiographical elements enhance the charm of the essays, and the imaginative fervour that aids the essayist enriches the appeal. While reading the essays of Lamb, we are not

sure as to whether we are reading letters, or short stories or diaries or tales. Specifically they do not belong to any category, but they combine the traits of all.

**Dream Children**, as the essayist himself says, is *a reverie*. It comes from the pen of a man whose desire for a family failed owing to strange circumstances. Insanity was the familial affection of the Lambs, and Charles himself had to spend about six months in a mad house. While he had to remain in charge of his insane sister, Mary, who had killed their mother with a knife and was about to kill their father, his love affair with Ann Simmons whom he had met during one of his visits to Hertfordshire where his grandmother Mrs Field kept the house of the Plumers ended up in the girl marrying a pawnbroker named Bertram.

**Dream Children** is a wish-fulfilment in an unreal world. It is a dream that never came true. But it narrates the haunting dream of the essayist to have two children, a boy and a girl, who would cuddle up to him to listen to his tales about their great grandmother and their uncle. The character of Mrs Field, the grandmother in the story, has a real basis. The name is real and real also is the fact that she kept a house in a distant place. While the name of the place is given as Norfolk, actually it was Hertfordshire. Lamb enriches the tale about his grandmother with an elaborate and fanciful description of the house she kept, and as the tale was fanciful, it inflamed the fancy of the listeners, John and Alice. Lamb selects the names for his dream children intelligently. Alice reminds one of Alice in Wonderland, a dream world, and John bears relation with his brother John. Lamb liberally intermixes facts with fancy. Thus when he speaks of John as a child, he makes the character so fanciful with all his lustiness that the tale warms up the children, but soon he gets him dead to make the children fall 'a-crying'. When he tells the children about Mrs Field, their great grandmother saying how tall, upright and graceful she was, how in her youth she was esteemed the best dancer, the children's fun soars up, only to be subdued a moment later when he tells them how she fell a victim to the cruel disease, cancer. While the nearly homophonic words – dancer and cancer – arouse our laughter, the hearts of the children ache, and the hearts of the readers too. As Lamb speaks how she saw the apparitions of two infants gliding up and down the great staircase near where she slept, John felt frightened but posed to be courageous. The narrative effect gains momentum as Lamb now and then describes the reactions of the children. Lamb slips into a dreamy world when he tells the children how he enjoyed strolling about in the garden with all its trees, vines, orangery and the fish pond. Lamb's dream transports himself into an idyllic world, the Romantics loved to traverse. The house of the Plumers in Hertfordshire which Mrs Field kept and which Lamb visited had all that Lamb speaks of, but what was not there is the charm that the

essayist felt within his heart. The marble statues were there, but it is Lamb who makes them turn alive or himself turn statuesque. The fishpond in which 'the dace darted to and fro at the bottom of the garden, with here and there a great sulky pike hanging midway down the water in a silent state' might have had earthly existence, but the wonder that he felt and described to John and Alice was only an aerial signal that is only Lamb's. Fact and fancy, pathos and humour are imperceptibly blended so neatly that the reader would like to avoid words while describing his impression and prefer silence.

Lamb closes the essay marvellously, describing how he wakes up from the reverie, how the children grew fainter to his view, receding and receding, and finally shocking him to the truth that they are not the children of Ann Simmons and him, but of Ann and Bartrum. We can feel the sadness that fills Lamb's heart when the children are made to utter that they call **Bartrum** their father, and they must wait upon the tedious shores of Lethe before they can have an existence and a name. Lamb gives a twist to the spelling of the name **Bartram** for obvious reasons; but in spite of all fairness, he cannot conceal the pining of his heart. The essay ends like Keats' **Ode to A Nightingale** where the poet turns back from the dream land by the waking effect of the word 'forlorn'. The essay closes like the sunset when the variegated colours of the twilight gradually merge and mingle into the darkness of the night.

If an essay aims at giving pleasure to the reader, in an informal manner of chatting, brushing a fanciful coat over the real world of facts, **Dream Children** is a marvellous specimen of the genre. The essay is essentially a soliloquy, which, as A. C. Benson says, is the essence of the essay. Its appeal has lasted 225 years, but that is a fraction of the time it will continue to appeal to the reading public with feeling hearts.

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