

# Summary and Analysis of "Dream-Children; A Reverie"

## 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. 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.