UNIT 4: CHARLES LAMB: "DREAM CHILDREN" I

UNIT STRUCTURE

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4.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to:

- discuss the life and works of the English essayist Charles Lamb
- explain the content of the essay "Dream Children"
- discover how memory and imagination are interestingly played with

4.2 INTRODUCTION

This unit deals with Charles Lamb's essay "Dream Children" which dwells on the nostalgic reflections of life and wide-ranging experience through an engaging and interesting play of both memory (whole or fragmented) and figments of imagination. Through the colouredlenses of imagination, Lamb as a writer **interweaves past memoriesand moments into his narration** and takes the liberty of imagining things that would have been through his conjuring narrator. After reading the text of "Dream Children", the learner will discover **how the real and the imaginaryelements weave in and out of the narration** and almost tricks any reader with the element of 'make-belief.' A significant aspect of the essay is the fertile, uninformed

and unrestricted imagination of little children who can stretch their limits of imagination endlessly, the tradition of oral narratives and anyother form of story-telling has always been popular with them. The style of writing which is unique to Lamb alone takes the reader as a confidante, in which the reader is invited to peek into the life and also to relate to the narrator's experiences of his childhood days and his formative years. Here, it is necessary to reveal that the narrator and his experiences of life are based on Lamb's own life and experiences which is why the essay can be considered as a reflective one (even though it is not written in the first person narrative). The learner will gain a better idea of this fact after reading the unit in details. This is why Lamb's thought-provoking reflections on the commonality of life and experience that we all share renders his literary works with brilliance and with a wide reception through the ages.

4.3 CHARLES LAMB: THE ESSAYIST

The following subsection provides the learner with a brief idea on the life and works of the essayist, Charles Lamb. The personal life of Lamb is very essential in not only understanding the personality of the writer but also in consideringhow it had formed the base of his literary works. Lamb was a writer whom we can situate in the late 18th and early 19th century.

4.3.1 His Life and Works

Charles Lamb (1775-1834) is better remembered as an essayist of the romantic period. He was born in London as the youngest son of Elizabeth Field and John Lamb, who by profession was a clerk and their family resided in the Inner Temple of London. As a young boy, he shared a loving relation with his sister Mary who was eleven years elder to him and whom he looked after even in his later years. Besides Mary, Lamb had four siblings who passed away during infancy. Thus, it was 'Mary' with whom he shared a very close relation and who along with their siblings featured as interesting characters

in his reflective works. Though, Lamb's formal education was brief and ended at the age of fifteen due to his family problems, he had managed to find a job as a clerk at South Sea House, London. Later, he joined the East India Company where he worked for twenty-three years. He had also penned both his bitter and humorous work experiences, in his reflective essays.

Several things had changed very early in his life when his sister's mental health began to deteriorate. And in what followed as a tragic event in his life, Mary in a sudden fit of rage had stabbed her mother with a knife also wounded her father. This is why she had to be sent to the Islington Asylum, Fisher House for a brief period. Lamb was just fifteen years old and was devastated at this point of his life, with thesudden tragic turn of events. This phase of his life was strenuous for him as he had to struggle for sustenance and at the same time, deal with his sister's pervasive illness and sudden fits of rage and madness. These experiences had considerably changed his life and also determined his literary development as a writer.

His preoccupation with the hard realities of his own personal life came to be well reflected in his literary works. Lamb was not the kind of person to abandon his elder sister and he even chose to devote his entire life looking after his sister which is why he remained a bachelor for life. But, here it needs to be mentioned that apart from her sudden bouts of mental illness, Mary spent a normal life with her brother and even interacted with their neighbours and friends. Both Mary and Lamb had gatherings on Wednesdays at their place in the lively company of Coleridge, Wordsworth, Southey, Hunt and Hazlitt. Further, both of them also collaborated on their literary works which were very well-received at the time.

Lamb's eagerness in sharing his reflections on life through his personal essays in a friendly conversational manner with an easy familiarity,endeared him to his readers and made him a popular essayist of his time and established him among the contemporary writers of his time. He along with his sister had adopted an orphan

child 'Emma Isola' in 1823 who later married his friend Edward Moxon in 1833. Lamb had to retire from the East India Company in the year1824 owing to his own deteriorating health. Mary frequently began to suffer her bouts of illness, they moved to Edmonton to have easy access to Mary's attendant nurse in 1833. This was a period of loneliness for Lamb who also suffered the loss of his friend Coleridge and Lamb breathed his last just a year after his demise, in 1834.

Though, Charles Lamb is better known as an essayist than an author, he had the unique gift of a writer to produce literary masterpieces that had carved out a significant place for him in the world of literature. Lamb's early literary efforts can be traced to his first 'four sonnets' which was published in Coleridge's *Poem's on Various Subjects* (1796) followed by his other famous works such as *Blank Verse*(1798) published with Charles Lloyd, *Tales of Rosamund Gray and Old Blind Margaret*(1798), *John Woodvil* (1802) a poetical drama, *Tales From Shakespeare* (1807), *The Adventures of Ulysses* (1808), *On the Tragedies of Shakespeare (1811)*,*Witches and Other Night Fears* (1821), *The Pawnbroker's Daughter* (1825) among others. The most significant writings of Lamb were the publication of two of his best received works *Essays of Elia* (1823) and his *Last Essays of Elia*(1833).

Lamb and his sister Mary had collaborated in the *Tales from Shakespeare* (1807),a work of prose based on the plays of Shakespeare which was well received by readers. The next work on which they had collaborated was *Mrs. Leichester's School* (1809) which contained stories and poems for children. Further, Lamb's excellent editing of the *Specimens of the English Dramatic Poets Who Lived about the Time of Shakespeare* (1808) had stirred a renewed interest in Shakespeare during that period. He had also published a collection of two volumes on his literary work titled *The Works of Charles Lamb* (1818) quite early in his literary career.

The learner would be interested to know that Lamb wrote under the **pseudonym of'Elia'**. Some of the important essays of

Lamb are: “Dream Children”, “Praise of Chimney Sweepers”, “The Two Races of Men”, “My First Play”, “Confessions of a Drunkard”, “Bachelor’s Complaint of the Behavior of the Married People”, “Old China”, “A Complaint of the Decay of Beggars in the Metropolis” to name just a few. In most of his critiques and writings, Lamb had also portrayed reflections on life in London, in particular and also pressing social concerns, in general serving the function of a social critic through his critiques and writings. Although London the imperial capital was his home, yet somehow he could never turn a blind eye to the darker underbelly of the city with its thriving issues of poverty and child labour, social inequality and injustice, underworld and crime. Lamb called for an active social involvement in first ‘helping’ thepoor and the distressed, in order to truly ‘improve’ their conditions. Therefore, Lamb was a very sensitive writer who was engaged in not only writing his life into his works or simply in the intellectual exercise of literary criticism but also engaged in constructive social criticism in bringing changes in the contemporary social system.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 1: Why did Lamb discontinue his formal education at the age of fifteen?

Q 2: What was Lamb’s profession besides being a writer?

Q 3: Whom did Lamb first meet at Christ’s Hospital?

Q 4: Make a list of some of the major works of Charles Lamb.

Q 5: What pseudonym did Lamb assume as a writer?

Q 6: Name some of the essays of Charles Lamb.

4.4 READING “DREAM CHILDREN”

Imagine little children sitting around a storyteller cupping their curious faces in their hands, enraptured and carried away into their own world of imagination and gaping with their mouths wide open and frequently nagging their storyteller to make it longer. This is indeed a common picture that we

can all associate with little children and which takes us back to our own childhood days when mostly an elderly person, say a grandmother or a grandfather would be surrounded by little children, being keen on narrating a new tale, a fable with a moral in the tale and such long-winding stories to keep little ones engrossed. The present essay begins in a similar manner in which the narrator is surrounded by his own children eager to listen to his real stories. It is through their father's nostalgic descriptions that they imagine their long dead great grandmother, their great uncle and dear mother. But the narration also has a dramatic revelation at the end which brings in an interesting twist in our reading. The text of the essay will provide the learner with an idea on Lamb's conversational and personal form of narration.



ACTIVITY 4.1

Childhood memories are a priceless treasure which we all carry in our hearts and memories for life. At a tender age, children tend to be inquisitive or curious about the world and tend to learn how things work through trial and error.While some children are as innocent as little angels, some are also as mischievous as little imps, always being up to some naughty tricks.

Which are some of your best memories as a child and how were you as a child?

How long has it been since you opened your old photo albums and travelled down memory lane? May be you could pause for a while and reach for the old pictures of yours to re-live those experiences and to travel through time into the heart of those rectangular postcard-sized photographs.

4.4.1 Explanation of the Text

The essay highlights the aspect on how children love to spend their pastime listening to stories and particularly imagine stories about their family elders when they were children like them. Children are

easily absorbed into storytelling and tend to imagine or picture them simultaneously with such narration owing to the fertility of their imagination and their natural ability to conjure people whom they may have never known and things that seem unusual. Similarly, the two children Alice and John conjure the likely images of their great granddame or great uncle whom they have only heard of and never seen or met in real life. The narrator describes how his little children gather around himone fine evening to listen to the story of their great grandmother Field.

Thus, begins the real story of the old lady (the narrator's grandmother and the children'sgreat granddame) who lived in a great house in Norfolk which was a hundred times bigger than the one in which the narrator's father had lived. In that part of the country certain tragic incidents were generally associated and believed. The narrator and his siblings had learned of these when they were little children from a ballad (i.e., a story travelled by word of mouth) known as the 'ballad of the children in the wood.' This entire 'ballad of the children'and their 'cruel uncle' together with the story of Robin Redbreasts could be seen fairly carved out in wood, upon the chimney-piece of the great hall but this was until a foolish rich person had pulled it down and constructed a marble chimney-piece in its place.

Here, we are first introduced to the narrator's girl child Alice who resembled her mother and happened to wear one of her dear mother's tender expressions. And the narrator continues the story of their great-grandmother Field. Although the old lady was only the caretaker of the great house, yet it was as good as her own. She was completely entrusted with the responsibility of living and looking after the house by the real owner, a gentleman who preferred to live in a more fashionable mansion that he had purchased in an adjoining county. Therefore, she was as good as being its owner, residing in it as if it were her own residence.

Great grandmother Field was a good and a pious old woman whom everyone respected and held in high regard. She kept up the

dignity of the great house with her presence while she was alive. But afterwards the old house started to fall apart and was nearly pulled down. Gradually, the décor had to be taken off and shifted to the owner's house in the county. And the narrator recalls how the old décor (perhaps antique decor) looked completely mismatched in the owner's new mansion. This could be likened to one's carrying away theold tombs at the Abbey and placing them in lady C's gaudily decorated drawing room! At this thought the narrator's son,John passes a smile, perhaps, imagining how mismatched that would seem. And then the narrator moves to narrate how on great-grandmother Field's funeral day, almost all the poor of the county together with some of the gentry of the neighbourhood covering many miles were present at the funeral in her loving memory. The old lady had been a good, religious woman all her life and was respected by all who knew her.Thus, the old great grandmother was laid to rest who left a complete void in everyone's heart and whose presence no more filled the great mansion.

At this point the narrator stops to observe little Alice spread her hands but continues his description of great-grandmother Field who was once a tall, upright and a graceful person and in her youth regarded as the best dancer until a "cruel disease" (cancer) took a toll on her health and had her bowed down into suffering and pain. At this point of the narration, Alice shakes her right foot but desists when her father happens to notice it. He then goes on to describe how even the pain from cancer did not succeed in breaking her good spirits or leaving her weak, probably owing to her goodness and her faith in the Lord. May be it was great grandmother Field's faith which stood as her fountain or source of strength in her difficult times of suffering. She would even sleep all alone in a chamber of the great lonely house, even though she often saw spectral forms of two infants at the midnight hour. These forms happened to glide up and down the great staircase which was close to the place where she slept. Perhaps, the house was haunted but it never scared her

and he remembers her saying “those innocents would do me (her) no harm.” But, the narrator also recalls how frightened he would be as a young boy (while visiting his grandmother) even as his maid slept beside him. While reflecting on this the narrator feels that perhaps he was so scared and fearful as he was not ‘half as good’ as his grandmother Field. Yet, he confesses that he never saw the spirits of the two infants himself.

At the mention of spirits or the ghostly forms, little John tries to summon his courage by trying not to twitch his eyebrows out of fear. You may pause to notice the chang ing expressions of children throughout the narration. Well, this is how engrossed children become in stories and how the element of make-belief works on them. This is how stories almost come to life rendering the immediate reality to the background which is the kind of power that story-telling has. It not only stirs the imagination of children but also grown-ups. The narrator goes on to describe how good the old lady was to all her grandchildren and how they were all warmly received at the great house during their holidays.

He reminisces or recalls how he would particularly spend several hours all by himself, gazing at the old busts of the Twelve Caesars (the busts of the twelve Emperors of Rome which were decorative items) and so much so, that they would almost seem to come alive and at times he felt that he would be transformed into a marble statue instead. He would tire out, roaming about the mansion which housed vast unoccupied rooms with worn out hangings on the walls, fluttering embroidery or tapestry, carved oaken panels. Sometimes, he would also find himself in the spacious old-fashioned,ornamental gardens which carried only his presence unless he ran into the gardener. The gardens were filled with hanging nectarines and peaches on boughs bending and touching the garden walls and these being forbidden fruits, kept him away from plucking them, except occasionally when he would be tempted.

The description of the gardens almost comes alive and awakens our senses and suddenly we are able to see him strolling in pleasure around the old sad-looking yew and fir trees and the fresh green grass. This part of the narration also awakens or stirs our 'senses' through whichwe can visualise the beauty of the gardens, smell the "fine garden smells" and perceive the taste of the tempting fruits. The narrator would almost be basking in the orangery (a conservatory of orange trees) till he almost fancied himself ripening along with the oranges and limes in that warm sunshine which he calls a "grateful warmth."

And similar to the common leanings of children, he would be captivated in the pleasure of those busy yet idle "diversion" of watching such fish-activity. Sometimes, it was even more engrossing to him than the temptation of pouring flavours and stimulating senses that came from the ripening peaches, nectarines and oranges in the gardens of leisure. At this moment, John slyly while sitting "deposited back upon" a plate of grapes (which he was to share with his sister) is noticed by Alice. But,again at that moment their desire to relish the plate of grapes (after having listened to and imagined the garden of fruits) is withheld for the time being. Thus their father, the narrator of this story assumes a more heightened tone of narration to draw back their complete attention, and tells them of how their great grandmother Field loved all her grandchildren but had a particular soft-corner or fondness in her heart for their uncle (the narrator's elder brother) John L. This was probably because he was a spirited young boyand much different by nature than the rest of her grandchildren. He describes James as a "king" who unlike the rest of his siblings who moved about the lonely corners of the great house, would prefer to get hold of and mount the best horse in the stable, even though he was no bigger in frame than the rest of them. Thus, their uncle John would trot (on horseback) half the countryside in the morning, joining the hunters when they were outdoors although he was not without a great love for the old house and its gardens.

Somehow, he had a spirit that could not be contained within the homestead or its boundaries- and so he had grown up to the “man’s estate” brave and handsome, much admired by everyone, particularly by great grandmother Field. He would even carry the narrator, his younger brotherupon his back when he was just a little boy and lame-footed. John was much older than him in age and very considerate or concerned about him. Even when John was in pain and was impatient, carrying his brother’s weight around, he never gave up on him. But,the same spirited man on his death bed, just an hour after his demise appeared as if he had passed away for a great while. With this he brings into his narration the strangeness of life and death. And although, the narrator hadinitially coped up with the loss of his brother John, later on he was constantly haunted with his memories and although he did not break into tears (as John would have had, in his place), he greatly missed John’s presence every day of his life. And only then does he realise how much he loved John in his heart who had indeed left a void in his heart.

Sometimes, death can be as strange as life itself which makes one realise the worth of someone, long after he or she is no more. Just as the saying goes “absence maketh the heart grow fonder”” so it is often with us. The narrator almost relives that experience while narrating his feelings that had once moved him, making him miss his elder brother’s absence, his kindness as well as his tolerance, wishing he would come alive in person once again, to quarrel with (as siblings do) rather than be all without him. The narrator here compares his uneasiness without him withpoor John’s uneasiness when the doctor had taken off his limb in the past.

With the thought of loss, the children are emotionally moved to tears which they had perhaps, experienced on losing their mother or perhaps never having seen her at all. May be they had only known her as ‘a loss’ or ‘an absence’. Both of them look up and pray to their father not to continue about their uncle John and instead to tell them stories about their pretty mother. So, the narrator switches the subject

to their dear mother who lived in their imagination. He begins telling them how for seven long years, sometimes in consistent hope and despair, he had courted their fair beautiful mother, his beloved Alice W. He tries his best to describe their mother to them, to explain her coyness and the sense of denial in young maidens (although he doubts how much of it the children would understand).

Suddenly, when he turns to little Alice who was “the soul of the first Alice” and was almost made in her image, he feels as if his wife Alice was looking at him through their daughter’s eyes. This juxtaposition of faces or similarity in both mother and daughter was so powerful that he turns confused of which Alice (with that bright golden hair) was in front of him. And while the narrator is stuck in a moment that he does not understand both the children turninto spectral figures with a receding presence, fading and almost vanishing until only two “mournful features” could be seen at a distance only producing effects of speech by revealing that they were neither his (or Alice’s) children nor were they children at all. The voices reveal that Alice’s real children called a certain man known as‘Bartrum’ their father and not him and that they were nothing but mere figments of imagination.

At this point, you willrealise that the narrator’s entire storytelling to his own children is only a daydream or a reverie and rather a creation of his sub-conscious mind. Only when the imaginary voices reveal that they would have to wait for “lethe millions of ages” before really coming into being and finding a name, the narrator is shaken awake from his daydream to find himself seated in his bachelor arm-chair where he had fallen asleep, with his faithful Bridget (probablya pet companion) by his side.Thus, the essay “Dream Children” rather ends in the form of a reverie taking us through dreamscapes that appear just as real and true to life. Many a times our conscious minds with their hopes, struggles, memories, repressions find a way through the channel of dreams, just as we find the narrator living his unfulfilled dreams through his day dream or reverie. We all

carry hopes and desires in our bosom which either make themselves felt through sudden appearance, in the form of dreams, day-dreams, reveries, hallucinations or even nightmares.The narrator in the essay lives his unfulfilled dreams, unrequited love and joys of fatherhood through his reverie.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 7: Why are children easily absorbed into storytelling?

Q 8: Why was great grandmother Field as good as the owner of the house?

Q 9: Briefly describe the ornamental gardens in which the narrator strolled in pleasure.

Q 10: What does the storytelling reveal at the end?



4.5 LET US SUM UP

After having read through the text of the essay “Dream Children”, the learner will be able to appreciate the nuances of storytelling which can both capture and even trick the mind almost like magic. The introduction to the unit provides a glimpse into the life and works of Charles Lamb. It provides a detailed explanation of the text which will provide the learner with a detailed idea on the content of the essay and further explore the other aspects with regard to its analysis as elaborated in the next unit.



4.6 FURTHER READING

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2) Barnett, George Leonard. (1964). *Charles Lamb: The Evolution of Elia*. Indiana UP.

3) Benson, A. C. “The Art of the Essayist” in C.H. Lockitt (ed) (1949). *The Art of the Essayist.* Harlow: Longman.

4) Courtney, Winifred F. (1982). *Young Charles Lamb: 1775-1802*. New York: New York UP.

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6) Lucas, E. V. (1905). *Life of Charles Lamb*. London: Macmillan.

7) Park, Roy. (ed). (1980). *Lamb as Critic*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

8) Reiman, Donald H. (1964). "Thematic Unity in Lamb's Familiar Essays." *JEGP* 64: 470-78.

9) Tillotson, Geoffrey. "The Historical Importance of Certain Essays of Elia.'" in *Some British Romantics*. ed. (1966). James V. Logan, John E. Jordan, and Northrop Frye. Ohio State UP. pp. 89-116.

4.7 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Ans to Q No 1: Lamb's formal education was brief and ended at the age of fifteen due to his family problems.

Ans to Q No 2: He had managed to find a job as a clerk at South Sea House, London. Later he joined for the East India House where he worked for twenty three years.

Ans to Q No 3: It was at Christ's Hospital in Newgate Street that he had first met Coleridge, known also as one of the greatest harbingers of Romanticism in literature and this meeting had evolved into a lifelong friendship

Ans to Q No 4: Some of the major works of Lamb are as follows: *Poem's on Various Subjects* (1796), *Blank Verse* (1798) published with Charles Lloyd, *Tales of Rosamund Gray and Old Blind Margaret* (1798), *John Woodvil* (1802) a poetical drama, *Tales From Shakespeare* (1807), *The Adventures of Ulysses* (1808), *On the Tragedies of Shakespeare (1811)*,*Witches and Other Night Fears* (1821), *The Pawnbroker's Daughter* (1825) among others. The most significant writings of Lamb can be witnessed when his well-received *Essays of Elia* (1823) and his *Last Essays of Elia*(1833) were published.

Ans to Q No 5: Lamb wrote under the pseudonym of 'Elia'.

Ans to Q No 6: Some of the essays of Lamb are “Old China”, “Praise of Chimney Sweepers”, “Dream Children”, “The Two Races of Men”, “My First Play”, “Confessions of a Drunkard”, “Bachelor’s Complaint of the Behavior of the Married People” etc.

Ans to Q No 7: Children are easily absorbed into storytelling and tend to imagine them simultaneously with such narration owing to their fertile imagination and their ability to conceive of people or things that they may have never seen or thought about.

Ans to Q No 8: Although, the great grandmother Field was only the caretaker of the great house, it was as good as her own. She was completely entrusted with the responsibility of living and looking after the house by the real owner, a gentleman who preferred to live in a more fashionable mansion that he had purchased in an adjoining county. Therefore, she was as good as being its owner, residing in it as if it were her own residence

Ans to Q No 9: The ornamental gardens were filled with hanging nectarines and peaches on boughs bending and touching the garden walls and the narrator would stroll in pleasure around the old sad-looking yew, fir trees and the fresh green grass.

Ans to Q No 10: The end of the storytelling reveals that he narrator’s entire storytelling to his own children was a mere daydream or a reverie and rather a creation of his sub-conscious mind.



4.8 MODEL QUESTIONS

Q1. Explain the life and works of Charles Lamb.

Q2. Give a description of the old mansion and its surrounding gardens in your own words.

Q3. Describe the narrator’s childhood leanings or activities in his grandmother’s place.