UNIT 5: CHARLES LAMB: "DREAM CHILDREN" II

UNIT STRUCTURE

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5.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

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

- discuss the characters as revealed in the essay
- highlight the relevant themes pertaining to the text of the essay
- analyse the style and language employed by Lamb
- further explore the works of Charles Lamb

5.2 INTRODUCTION

In the previous unit, the learner gained a detailed idea on the life and works as well as the text of the essay "Dream Children" which is a reflective essay. The present unit takes up interesting aspects on the major themes that emerge from the text together while also highlighting the important characters. Along with the critical reception of the work, the unit discusses the style and language employed in the text of the essay which defines the works of the interesting, popular and reader-friendly essayist Charles Lamb. Let us discuss these significant aspects in the following subsections of the unit.

5.3 MAJOR THEMES

The following are the important themes available in the essay.

Death and Sense of Loss: The essay highlights the theme of death and personal sense of loss particularly of a near and dear one and of many other things gone by in time. The narrator contrasts the stark differences, he feels in relation to the nature of life and death in which he imagines his loved ones in their living moments, as well as, their last moments when life fades away from their being. This is one reason that he recalls his old childhood memories and perhaps thinks aloud all by himself, as if he were narrating them in someone's presence. He remembers the decaying old house his grandmother had lived in and compares how it was once a great mansion with widespread gardens that had appealed to his childhood fancy until it began to crumble after the old lady's demise.

He also recalls the presence of his grandmother Field and brother John in that house which was once their home when they all came together during the holidays. The sudden death of grandmother due to cancer and that of John perhaps owing to severe ailments leaves the narrator bereaving for a long time. Perhaps, the narrator who managed to register their death could somehow, never fill the void they had left in his life, which is why, he missed their presence every day of his life and particularly, when he was all by himself.

They were so loving and generous towards him that their sudden absence amounted to extreme grief and sadness. The narrator himself was unaware that he was actually capable of such strong emotions. Their painful and untimely deaths had a great effect on his emotional well-being. He describes how even their lively and vibrant spirits had to eventually surrender to 'death'. Also, he harbours a sense of loss and unrequited love of his once beloved Alice who perhaps, marries and bears children to another man. His failure in love might have been due to various reasons such as a lost opportunity or mismatched circumstances, leaving a sense of emptiness in his heart that never really healed with time. Death is an inevitable part of life and also the dying of 'memory.' The themes of both death and loss and

of coming to terms with their gravity, highlights a commonality of experience in all human beings.

Dream Children and Imagination: The title of the essay becomes relevant only when one reaches towards the last part of the text which contains a surprise twist. At the end, the narrator's children who are initially present as the keen listeners of his old memories are revealed as a reverie or mere figments of imagination. Perhaps, it is his long lost love and unfulfilled desire of fatherhood which finds an expression in the form of his reverie or mere imagination. It is as if he literally finds himself dreaming or imagining them into life, dreaming of who would have been his wonderful children (whom he would have named Alice and John) and his own beloved wife Alice.

In the essay, the description of the two children enraptured by their father's narration is very life-like as this is how children are with their shifting and short spans of attention, quick response, stirred emotions and excited imaginations. At one level, we realise that Lamb through this reflective essay draws from his real life incidents and at another level, mediating through the narrator, he plays with the idea of reality, fiction and imagination which is woven in and out of the text. Thus, we find that Lamb's essay with its ironical twist in the end is also a piece of fantasy which contains elements of the truth and make-belief, real and unreal, dreams and consciousness.



LET US KNOW

The learner will be interested to not that Lamb was a very spiritual man who regularly read the psalms and the New Testament for hours regularly. Although he did not believe in organised religion, 'spirituality' was a source of strength to him. While suffering the most difficult phase of his family tragedy, he did not lose faith. His letters to Barton and Coleridge also reveal his deep faith in the word of God. He had also penned religious poems such as "On the Lord's Prayer", "A Vision of Repentance", "Charity", "The Young Catechist", "David" among others.

5.4 IMPORTANT CHARACTERS

The following are the important characters of the essay.

Great Grandmother Field :

She was a lady who was much loved and respected by everyone. She looked after the great home which was owned by a wealthy owner who preferred living in a more new and fashionable mansion in the countryside. This literally made her the mistress of the place in a way, as she took great care of the house all by herself. Sometimes, she would be haunted by spirits like the two infants but her strong faith always kept her in good stead. She had a great knowledge of the psaltery and the testaments and was a very religious person. The narrator describes her as so “good and religious” that nothing really affected her even in her loneliness.

In her heydays, she was held in great esteem as a dancer and was tall, upright and graceful in appearance. But with age and being affected with cancer, her frame undergoes considerable changes. She held a great fondness for her grandchildren who visited her during their holidays and in her heart had a special soft corner for her grandson John who was charming as ever. She was an active old lady who was in charge of the grand mansion and the sprawling gardens and also the mischievous, visiting grandchildren who wandered all about the place. The old lady showed certain resilience towards life in which her good spirits were never lost even to pain or suffering. After her demise, the entire place had turned decrepit without anyone to care for the house and its surroundings. She lived in the fond memory of her grandson (the narrator) who reminisces her incredible goodness of heart and strength in her faith.

John L. :

John in the narrator’s words is described as a young man who was the elder brother of the narrator. He was a handsome and a spirited person who was always active around the place when the siblings were at their grandmother’s house during their holidays. He would not be found moving around, exploring the solitary corners of the place, although it is not to say that the house and the surrounding gardens did not interest him. But his

inclinations were very different from that of his siblings as he was older than them. And instead of moving about the gardens or the corners of the mansion, he preferred to ride across the countryside in the mornings and to join hunters on their spree.

Here, it must be noted that the young boy who exuded such a brave and adventurous persona also had a soft side to him, as he cared for everyone. He was very patient and attentive to his younger sibling, (the narrator) and carried him on his back when he was lame-footed, being kind and considerate to him at all times. John was very tolerant by nature, no matter how much his little brother bugged him. Perhaps, owing to his charm and promising youth, his grandmother nurtured a special fondness for him. The narrator misses John's absence every day, wishing he was alive and not gone away forever. The most tragic point in the essay is the description of the change in John's earlier youthful frame and being, that within an hour of his untimely demise appeared totally withered and old on the deathbed. We also learn that John was perhaps more emotional than his younger sibling as the narrator mentions how John would have cried more than him, had he died in his place. This brings a certain sense of nostalgia through the narration in which a lively and free-spirited young boy's life is cut short by death.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 1. How was the old lady in her younger days? What had caused such drastic changes in her being?

Q 2. How did John L. treat the narrator as an elder brother?

Q 3. Explain why the narrator's personal loss affects his emotional well-being.

5.5 STYLE AND LANGUAGE

The personal essay is a contribution of Charles Lamb whom we know as a romantic essayist. Lamb who is better known for his personal essays incorporated in them his personal experiences, reflections,

memories, fantasies and character sketches. His style of writing varies in each essay through which he keeps the reader both engrossed and guessing, with the interplay of truth and reality, memory and imagination, engagement and anticipation. His personal essays bore his characteristic 'bitter sweet' style which involved old reminiscences or memories with elements of 'wit' and 'pathos'; and sometimes even the combination of both as in the essay "Dream Children".

He employed an ironic treatment of everyday subjects which were full of witty observations and were the best embodiment of his personal experiences. The nostalgic or even melancholic tone often pervades through his more personal essays in which he recalls his childhood years, his old memories of his dear ones, and interesting anecdotes of his life. His portrayal of the old memories, some funny, some happy, some sad and some unforgettable does lend a considerable charm to his works which are unique of its own. Moreover, the wide usage of archaic words, Latinisms, quotations and allusions in his works are rooted in his intense love for ancient writers. There is a certain 'quaint' or an old-fashioned charm that one cannot miss out in his essays.

Lamb's essays in the *London Magazine* compiled later as *Essays of Elia* and *The Last Essays* of *Elia* were inspired in form and style by his 17th and 18th century mentors such as Bacon, Browne, Walton, Fuller, Addison and Steele but he had experimented and evolved a style which was unique to him. Lamb's first meeting with S.T. Coleridge (known also as one of the greatest harbingers of Romanticism in literature) at the Christ's Hospital in Newgate Street had evolved into a lifelong friendship. In 1797, during a visit to Coleridge at Nether Storay, Lamb received the opportunity of forming a friendship with Wordsworth and his sister Dorothy and his interaction with them as a writer was influential in his literary development.

His satirical essays on the social-evils and city-life in London; his own subjective experiences at the core of every essay; his intensely personal reactions to various aspects and issues of life have also been criticised by many scholars. Yet, it can undoubtedly be said that these are the same factors that has also endeared him to a wide and popular readership down

the ages. Lamb has a way with words, which in encompassing his reflections, life and experiences also reveal or spark something in our own.

5.6 CRITICAL RECEPTION

The Oxford History of English Literature notes that William Hazlitt, a dear friend and contemporary of Lamb had attributed Lamb's success as a writer to his non conformation to the 'Spirit of the Age' in which he lived. While in one of his early essay Lamb had critiqued the idealisation of nature and the countryside, in his later works he was also quick to critique the evils of the London city and the changes that the machine age had brought in its wake. The literary output of Lamb had also encompassed much of the contemporary social criticism regarding child labour, poverty and apathy towards London's outcast i.e., the beggars, mendicants, vagabonds, orphans and the poor people.

Lamb shared a great rapport with the readers of his time mostly through a series of essays in the *London Magazine*. It was these essays which were collected and published in 1900 as *Essays of Elia* and *The Last Essays of Elia*. The learner will find that Lamb's literary works are full of wisdom and reflective insights on life and experiences of both the inner and the outer world. They reflect his exemplary role as a humanitarian and also as good human being. In fond remembrance of Lamb and in admiration of his religious piety and moral nature, his close friend William Wordsworth had also penned an epitaph-poem titled "Written after The Death of Charles Lamb"(1835) after his demise. Also, E.V. Lucas who was Lamb's biographer referred to Lamb as "the most lovable figure in English literature" in his *The Life of Charles Lamb* (1905).



5.7 LET US SUM UP

After having read through the text of the essay "Dream Children", and having going through the discussions in the unit, the learner will be more familiar with the major themes reflected in the essay. The learner will discover how the essay reveals itself as a reverie and the interesting play

of memory and imagination. Further, it will enable the learner to analyse Lamb's style of writing and use of language together with the critical reception and the significance of his works, particularly with regard to the form of 'personal essay' which has almost become synonymous with the literary style and practice of the remarkable essayist Charles Lamb.



5.8 FURTHER READING

1) Abrams, M. H. (1993). *A Glossary of Literary Terms*. Bangalore: Prism Books.
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.

5.9 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Ans to Q No 1: In her heydays, she was held in great esteem as a dancer and was tall, upright and graceful in appearance. But with age and with cancer, her frame underwent considerable changes.

Ans to Q No 2: John who as a young boy exuded such a brave and adventurous persona also had a soft side to him, as he genuinely cared for everyone. He was especially very patient and attentive to his younger sibling, the narrator by carrying him on his back when he was lame-footed and being kind and considerate to him at all times. John was very tolerant by nature no matter how much his little brother bugged him.

Ans to Q No 3: They were so loving and generous towards him that their sudden absence amounted to extreme grief and sadness. The narrator himself was unaware that he was actually capable of such strong emotions. Their painful and untimely deaths had a great effect on his emotional well-being.



5.10 MODEL QUESTIONS

Q1. Make a detailed character sketch of a. great grandmother Field and b. John L.

Q2. Analyse the main themes pertaining to the text of the essay “Dream Children”

Q3. Discuss the style and language employed by Charles Lamb.

Q4. What is the striking revelation or twist at the end of the narration in the essay “Dream Children”?

Q5. Give a detailed summary of the essay “Dream Children” in your own words.

Q6. Give a detailed explanation with reference to context: “Such a distance there is betwixt life and death.”

Q7. Explain the revelation at the end of the essay “Dream Children” with reference to the context: “We are nothing; less than nothing, and dreams. We are only what might have been.”