

“Dream Children : A Reverie”: The Blending of the Personal and the Universal

Charles Lamb is the prince among the personal essayists in English. The charm of his essays is the charm of egoism- the charm of his unique personality. A follower of Montaigne, Lamb always takes his readers into confidence and tells them all about himself- his likes, dislikes, whims, experiences and prejudices etc. His essays are thus a series of soliloquies giving us a clue to his personality. Lamb gives so much of himself that a careful reading of his essays enables us to reconstruct quite faithfully the salient features of both his internal and external life.

But Lamb’s essays are not merely personal, but also universal like any lyric par excellence like Shelley’s or Keats’. They are an exquisite fusion of the personal and the universal. The feelings and thoughts in them are not merely of Lamb himself, but of the universal humanity at large. Thomson says rightly of him “His subject was humanity but in himself he saw its microcosm.” This has been possible because of their imaginative quality, their freedom from moral obsessions, their inimitable blending of humour and pathos and unique style. Lamb used the very commonest materials of life and transfigured them with a fairy-like delicacy and romantic glow. His finest essays are nearest of all to true poetry. His prose eloquence passes frequently into poetry and has a high amount of creative imagination, the privilege and possession only of poetry. Lamb has no aim save the reader’s pleasure and his own, no mission to teach, nor any philosophy to formulate.

Lamb’s finest autobiographical essay is “The Dream Children: A Reverie”. It recounts the reminiscences of his imaginary children Alice and John, his grandmother Mrs Field, his brother John Lamb and his might- have -been wife Alice Winterton whose real name was Ann Simons. Lamb indulges here in a kind of day dreaming, or wish fulfilment. The essay reveals his inner nature – his yearnings and longings.

Lamb’s own grandmother Mary Field lived in a great house in Norfolk where she was the housekeeper. She has been characterized most humanly as a tall, upright and graceful lady and expert dancer. Kind, affectionate, pious and fond of all her grandchildren specially of John she would want all of them to stay with her in variations. Lamb wandered about alone in the halls of the old lonely house and their adjoining gardens.

John was a handsome and spirited youth and an excellent rider. Instead of moping around in silent solitary corners, he used to ride a spirited horse over the countryside in the morning and join the hunters if they were out. He was specially kind to Lamb and carry him on his back for many a mile around. But by an irony of fate he became lame and died a painful and premature death causing a great loss, a void to Lamb.

Lamb then tells his dream children about their deceased mother Alice Winterton whom he courted for long seven years. He was surprised to note a wonderful likeness between his daughter Alice and her mother, in their eyes and bright hair. When he stood gazing in amazement, both the children gradually grew fainter and fainter to him to become two mournful shadows to his view. He could now realize that they were no real children, but creations of his dream. They were merely what might have been. They were only two mournful features in the uttermost distance which strangely impressed upon him the effects of speech: "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." Immediately on waking, Lamb found himself quietly seated with his invalid sister Bridget unchanged beside him. But his brother John had gone for ever. The conclusion reads like a lyric and rings a chord in every reader's heart like the state of Keats left 'forlorn' as the nightingale fading "past near the meadows, o'er the still stream/ Up the hill-side to be buried deep in the next valley glades." The appeal of the essay is irresistible, undeniable and universal. The humour and pathos of the narration too has its unique charm and appeal for every reader.