

RESEARCH ARTICLE



**A FREUDIAN VIEW OF CHARLES LAMB’S “DREAM CHILDREN: A REVERIE”**

**PUJA CHAKRABERTY**



**PUJA CHAKRABERTY**

Article Info:

Article Received: 27/12/2013

Revised on:23/1/2014

Accepted for Publication:25/01/2014

**ABSTRACT**

The present paper discusses Charles Lamb’s “Dream Children: A Reverie” in the light of Sigmund Freud’s Psychoanalysis. Lamb’s life even though it may appear to have glistened on the surface reeked of intense pain and suffering. Lamb led an active public life though his inward thoughts were a very private matter altogether. He was the best of friends and only those close to him knew of his dilemma. A detailed description of Lamb’s personal life together with a concise history of psychoanalysis has been laid out so as to determine the psychology behind Lamb’s “reverie”. The unconscious is given a favourable position in the human mind, which is seen as a justifiable outlet of all the suppressed and the forgotten. Ultimately, all psychological vistas and propositions are shown to facilitate the emergence of the so-called “Dream Children”.

Key Words: reverie, psychoanalysis, dilemma, determine, unconscious, vistas.

@ COPYRIGHT KY PUBLICATIONS

**INTRODUCTION**

Charles Lamb led a very traumatic and isolated life. Yet, he never publicized, clamoured or wailed about it. Rather, he suppressed his emotions so as to live for others who depended upon him, mainly his sister Mary. Only now and then, would he turn to his readers for moral support and acknowledgement. This he did particularly in the essay, “Dream Children: A Reverie”. In this essay, he outpoured his emotions and feelings, which lay hidden at the core of his soul and in this way, was able to shift some of his burden of guilt; which apparently had been plaguing him for a long time. Lamb suffered from a possible guilt complex, which had its origin in his love for a woman he once loved; but never married. All the promises had gone in vain, for they never fructified. This was felt by Lamb and it kept clinging

to his soul, until, “Dream Children” happened and he realized the worth and eminence of the unconscious; which quietly stores every memory, urge and impulse; which is invisible yet incessantly in action. In Lamb’s days, people hardly knew the phenomenal terms-preconscious, semi-conscious or unconscious, as psychology was a newborn baby that struggled to establish itself as a science. Nevertheless, people did acknowledge dreams as being rooted in and channelled from divine or demonic spheres. Conjectures were ripe and so were many theories. But they hardly supported the concatenation and fell short of their ideals. They lacked rationalization and substance. The great psychologist Sigmund Freud, who is hailed as the father of modern psychology claimed that the unconscious is the key to what one really thinks and

feels whereas the dream provide a sort of catharsis. The preceding paper endeavours to analyse Charles Lamb's "Dream Children- A Reverie" from this amazing prospect of the unconscious.

Text. Lamb had a very solitary and painful life. One can only trace a fragment of his life's happiness to his childhood days as is apparent in the poem, "The Old Familiar Faces" as well as the highly emotive essay, "Dream Children-A Reverie". Concerning the latter, he begins the essay by stating that children love to listen stories of a great uncle or a "grand dame" and continues to account the story of his grandmother, Mrs. Field to his precious little children; namely Alice and John. Mrs. Field used to live in a rich and luxurious mansion in the county. She was a housekeeper. She was highly esteemed and loved by all who remembered her as a very good and religious woman. The owner of the house lived in a more fashionable house elsewhere, leaving Mrs. Field as the sole guardian of the house. Even though she worked in the house, Mrs. Field managed to keep it like one of her own. The house was old but distinguished from every corner. Lamb used to spend his holidays there as a child and was each time overwhelmed by its beauty and majesty. Mrs. Field often spoke of seeing the apparitions of two small children (a boy and a girl), running up and down the steps of the house at midnight, of which Lamb had no luck of witnessing (probably an innuendo to *The Babies In The Wood*). He remembers how he used to stroll in the big house with its worn-out curtains and flinging tapestry. He would constantly gaze at the busts of the "twelve Caesars" imagining them to come alive or simply freeze like one of the statuettes. This was one of his most favourite idle occupations. Then again there was a nearby lush garden, which posed of swanky surroundings, with its nectarines, peaches and oranges. Lamb often visited the old and ever-faithful yew and fir trees, whenever in the garden. He would pick up berries and fir apples, which could only be good to look at, but barely served any purpose. The edible fruits, which were "forbidden" to have, would never be plucked by him; except "now and then" or always. In this way, Lamb the child, had his own way. Everybody in the house including Mrs. Field knew this and probably blinked at it. Whenever in

the garden, Lamb felt like an owner of it, except the time when the gardener passed by. Lying down in the "orangery" for hours, soaking up the warm rays of the sun, he himself felt ripening with the sweetest oranges.

Lamb also recalls the memory of his dear elder brother John (actually James Lamb) who was a particular favourite of his grandmother, Mrs. Field. He was tall, stout and well built for a boy his age; and would often be looked upon by his siblings as a king. He was ever handsome as he was courageous and was especially loved by his grandmother for his high spirits. He used to ride a horse every morning and relinquished in the beauty of the whole county. He too loved the house, where Mrs. Field used to live, but his spirits were too high and ambitious to be chained down to merely a corner of the house. He sometimes joined the hunters, while riding. John would often carry Lamb as a boy (Charles was never lame-footed as a child, even though he writes so), and loved him dearly. But Charles remembers that he himself wasn't as kind and helpful to him (John), when he became lame-footed. Initially, he took his (John's) death very bravely. Only later did he realize the void and deep chasm it had created in his heart. He longed for him, his kindness, the quarrels that he (Charles) had with him (John or James Lamb). But it was all gone now, never to come back again. He never knew until then, how much he loved his brother John. These were the truest and fondest memories he had of his childhood with all its bittersweet revelations.

Lamb belonged to a fairly large family, where most of his siblings suffered a premature death, leaving him and his elder sister Mary. His father's income was the sole source of survival for the whole family. Growing up in malicious poverty, Lamb however managed to receive some good education at Christ's Hospital, after which he found employment in the British East India Company. It must be noted that Lamb once suffered from dementia and had to be admitted in a madhouse for a period of time. In a letter to Coleridge, he writes in his characteristic humour:

“The six weeks that finished last year and began this, you very humble servant spent very agreeably in a madhouse at Hoxton. I am got somewhat rational, and don't bite anyone. But mad I was; and many a vagary my imagination played with me, enough to make a volume.”

His elder sister Mary suffered from bipolar disorder and throughout her life swerved between the poles of sanity and insanity. She killed her own mother in a fit of madness. Lamb took it upon him to nurse and care his ailing sister and did so for the rest of his life. He renounced all his personal happiness and comfort; in order to help the person he loved the most. Mary remained his sole priority throughout his life. In those days, Lamb loved a woman (Alice Winterton) and courted her for seven years. Lamb was unable to marry her, as life would have it. He chose Mary, for whom he felt a greater obligation.

“wedded to the future of my sister and my poor old father.”

This as a result shattered all his hopes and desires, as he doused all flames of fancy with bouts of alcohol. He remained a bachelor all his life. Mary's illness was so acute that she required to be taken into asylums for getting treated. During this time, Charles remained constantly by her side, never taking his eyes off her for a moment. At a much later stage in life, Charles and Mary fostered an orphan girl (Emma Isola) and raised her like one of their own. Again, Mary's illness took a nasty turn. There were times, when even Lamb had no other option but to surrender to the will of fate. Things had come to such a pass that in a letter to Wordsworth, writing about his sister's health, Lamb said that he regarded Mary as half-dead, owing to her frequent fits of insanity and visits to the asylum; and would now grow anxious, if he didn't get to hear of her latest illness pretty soon. He got Emma married to his publisher friend, Edward Moxon. Then again, his closest friend Coleridge's death left him devastated. During his frequent walks, he once fell and incurred face injuries; finally he died of an infection. This was the totally unnerving life of a miserable and solitary man, who was the best personal essayist ever and also the author of an extensive body of literature

including poems, plays, stories and critical writings. His 'Essays Of Elia' bear testimony to his splendid observatory skills, wit and time-tested humour. Unlike other Romantics who were charmed by scenic and peaceful rural countryside, Lamb found peace and solace in the rambunctious life of London.

Freud's Theory of Psychoanalysis:

In this theory, Freud divided the human psyche into three levels-conscious level, subconscious level and unconscious level. The other two levels influence the conscious level. That accounts for dreams and verbal slips. Freud's theory of psychoanalysis gives particular emphasis upon the unconscious and its relative importance to human mind and behaviour. The unconscious is the most dynamic part of the mind as most of one's unfulfilled desires, fantasies and temptations; even the most splendid- to the most horrid- to the most melancholic incidence find a prominent place in it. Freud also mentioned a number of fears or anxieties manifest in the human soul-one that is related with everyday reality, two where one is anxious of hurting one's own conscience, in terms of moral justice and three, in which one knows one would do something, for which he would be severely punished. In combating these anxieties, Freud also laid out a number of defence mechanisms such as repression, regression, introjection, projection, opposite reaction, etc. Most importantly, Freud postulated three entities- id, ego and the superego. The id, he explained is an unruly child, which is responsible for all drives and impulses without caring the least about their consequences. The ego is the pacifier and controller of id. It ensures morality and justice. The superego, the most powerful part, balances both id and ego. The superego decides what is right and what is wrong; and dominates over both its actions. It is the final and the biggest authority. Besides this, Freud mentioned four principle psychosexual stages namely, oral, anal, paraphaelic and sexual. Freud dropped a bombshell by declaring that sexual urge was a primary force of human life. This was called libido. He said that many of the peculiarities of mind and behaviour could be interpreted in terms of this libido. He also invented a number of psychological terms like "Oedipus Complex" and "Electra

Complex". It should however be remembered that his theory was solely based on clinical cases and case studies and had nothing to do with an extensive scientific research. Thus the theory is flawed and inconclusive. Moreover, most Freudian critics no longer accept the old rigour.

#### The Interpretation Of Dreams

Freud expounded his theory further and elaborated it in his book, "The Interpretation Of Dreams". In this book, he claimed that dreams are a significant part of the unconscious. Some of our drives, impulses and desires get collected in the unconscious and find expression and release in our dreams. Freud provided a number of cases. Among them a few may be mentioned. On one occasion, a small girl constantly urged and pleaded her father to take her to a certain place, to which the father assured her he would, but never did, until one night she had a dream that she actually visited the place with her beloved father and had also come back. In this way, Freud claims that the little girl gave way to her desire (through her dream) and fulfilled her wish. In another telling example, Freud mentions a dead child clutching the hands of his father and sobbing bitterly, until he announces to his father, "Father can't you see that I am burning". The father hurriedly leaps out of his bed only to find that a part of the bed along with the poor child's hand had caught fire from the candles. Freud suggests, that even this dream represents "wish fulfilment"; which is that of the father willing to see his child living rather than dead. In this sense, dreams provide a natural catharsis for all pent-up desires and emotions. The whole dimension of the unconscious is so ripe and potent, not to mention varied and diverse that it needs to be carefully scrutinized so as to comprehend the superior and magnificent creature called the "human".

In the essay "Dream Children: A Reverie", one comes across a number of psychoanalytic factors such as anxiety, repression, psychosexual tension and finally the "reverie"; which is a vent to all clinging disturbances and apprehensions. Anxiety can be marked upon by the inner fear i.e., guilty by one's own conscience. Charles Lamb ardently loved

a woman, with whom he had designs to build a future together; and share a life of matrimonial bliss and harmony. He himself confessed to have courted his paramour for seven long years, sometimes in "hope" and sometimes in "despair"; but never giving up. He probably never imagined, that he would have to forsake the one thing every man considers a blessing to have; which is the love and consolation of a near one. In his own words:

"I loved a love once, fairest among women  
Closed are her doors on me, I must not see her  
All, all are gone, the old familiar faces."  
(The Old Familiar Faces)

He most conveniently and appropriately submerged everything. But nonetheless, remained forever guilty to his conscience. The psychosexual tension never for a moment deserted him. It kept on fuming. What followed hitherto was the dream. He dreamt he had two children, a boy and a girl from a beloved wife who had deceased and he was telling them stories. Alice's shaking a leg on hearing of Mrs. Field (her great grandmother) being a good dancer; John's swift replacement of the grapes he had removed from the plate in accordance with propriety. Lamb acutely observed all this like a proud and doting father. However, everything came to a standstill as his precious little children drifted away from him, as if reproaching him that all his love for their mother was fraudulent; that he never married (Alice); and that the children of Alice called Bartrum their father not Lamb. They were only what could have been realized in the near future; and would probably have to rest in the ever-flowing tides of oblivion for a thousand years until they come into their real existence. They were his "dream children", if not real ones, whom he deeply nursed and cherished in his mind and heart; also probably the unconscious.

#### CONCLUSION

The unconscious is a well of mysteries- hidden joys, anxieties and sorrows. Its extent and magnitude remain beyond the determination of an ordinary mortal. It is like one can run but one can't hide. The more one resists the more it shall persist. In 'Macbeth', one of the greatest tragedies of

Shakespeare, where the hero is the villain, the psychology is of a more intense nature. Macbeth and his wife Lady Macbeth wickedly plot the murder of the good king Duncan. Even after he carries out the action with much dexterity and subtlety, he plainly knows that he shall forever remain culpable to his conscience. Consider:

“Glamis hath murdered sleep; and therefore Cawdor  
Shall sleep no more-Macbeth shall sleep no more.”  
(Macbeth)

Lady Macbeth’s sleepwalking with a taper in her hand and constant rubbing of her hands is only an extension of that guilt and a sort of ill omen of what is more to come. In this case, one may say that the unconscious neither forgives nor forgets.

#### REFERENCES

- Freud, Sigmund. *The Interpretation Of Dreams* (1900). Tr. A.A. Brill. New York: Macmillan, 1913.
- Lucas, E.V. (Ed.) *The Works of Charles And Mary Lamb*. London: Methuen and Co., 1905.
- Morpurgo, J.E. (Ed.) *Charles Lamb: Selected Writings*. New York: Routledge, 2003.
- Ward, Thomas Humphry. *The English Poets*. Selections with Critical Introductions by Various Writers and a General Introduction by Matthew Arnold. Vol. 4. New York & London: Macmillan And Co., 1894.
-