

Charles Lloyd

If you have just established a major banking empire, together with subsidiaries in steel and iron production, it would come as something of a blow, when your son and heir announces that he wants to be a poet.

A poet ? exclaims the father. In Birmingham ? We haven't had a poet in Birmingham since John Freeth wrote ditties for the customers in his local pub.

But that's what I want to be, father. My soul is stirring.

It's to Charles Lloyd's credit that he didn't simply force his nearest and dearest behind a desk, and give him some accounts to render. Perhaps the father could see that his son was not cut out for that Quaker money-making lifestyle. And being a Quaker, he couldn't send him to university instead. That route was barred to all dissenters.

You'll need a private tutor, then.

Charles Lloyd junior was just 21 years old in 1796. Born in Birmingham and privately educated, he had a talent for versifying, but how much of one, he was not yet sure. He had already travelled to North Wales and the north of England, writing the kind of responses to nature that were becoming all the rage.

In another era, Charles Lloyd might well have risen to the top. But other and greater poetic souls were also stirring. The age of Keats and Shelley, Wordsworth and Southey was about to dawn.

Anyway, first of all Charles needed a mentor. As luck (both good and ill) would have it, the ideal candidate had just arrived in town. The poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge was in Birmingham, trying to sign up subscribers for his forthcoming journal, *The Watchman*. He was staying with Thomas Hawkes down at Moseley Wake Green.

So down to the Hawkes residence they went, father and son, to strike a deal. Coleridge would be paid £80 a year for three hours' instruction each day, and Charles Lloyd would lodge with his master like a formal apprentice to poesy.

Financially, this this was a life-saver for Coleridge. Newly married, with a first child on the way, he was in serious need of a steady income, or at least enough to underwrite his own poetic endeavours. The Lloyd cash might prevent him having to make an agonizing choice between becoming a preacher and opening a school.

But there was a snag. Charles Lloyd junior was not the most stable of individuals, and neither was his tutor. Lloyd had, according to their mutual friend, Charles Lamb, "an exquisiteness of feeling which must border on derangement". Nor was Coleridge cut out to be a dependable teacher. His

own poetry was too quirky and personal to act as a model, and steadiness was not in his nature. In all likelihood the two men would drive each mad, if not physically, at least metaphorically. Squeeze them together into Coleridge's small cottage in Somerset, and you can begin to feel the tension rise.

You can also add drugs to this bonfire of vanities. Laudanum, opium and cannabis were their chosen narcotics, copiously taken to quell anxiety and to stimulate the imagination.

Even by the end of the year the relationship between the two poets was on the verge of collapse. But, true to their nature, they conducted the messy divorce in print. In November 1797 Coleridge published (under a pseudonym) a series of witty parodies of rotten romantic poetry, which Lloyd took to be aimed at him:

Pensive at eve on the hard world I mused,
And my poor heart was sad, so at the moon
I gazed, and sighed and sighed...

In the meantime, Charles Lloyd was trying his hand at a novel. Edmund Oliver, published the following year, told the tale of drug-dependent writer, too sensitive for his own good. Coleridge took that to refer to him. The friendship, as well as the mentoring arrangement, were officially over.

Both men suffered in the months that followed. Coleridge hit the laudanum hard, and it was in one drug-induced dream that he created Kubla Khan, that flight of romantic fancy interrupted by the "Person from Porlock".

As for his former pupil, Charles Lamb was close to the truth in his assessment of Lloyd's talent and his vulnerability. But he did not entirely come off the rails. In 1799 Lloyd married a fellow Birmingham Quaker by the name of Sarah Pemberton, and their happy married life produced no less than nine children.

Yet even here there was a bizarre twist. In order to secure Sarah's hand in marriage, Charles Lloyd had to elope with her. Unable or unwilling to stand under the window himself, Lloyd eloped by proxy, getting his friend Robert Southey, to do the eloping for him.

Sarah probably provided her husband with the stability utterly absent in his relationship with Coleridge. In 1811, however, Lloyd checked into a private asylum, only to escape several years later, and turn up at the house of Thomas de Quincey, claiming to be the devil.

His intermittent career as a poet - in later years mostly devoted to translations - was punctuated by bouts of depression. Lloyd died near Versailles in 1839, followed shortly afterwards by Sarah. As the lives of romantic poets went, Lloyd's was longer than most, but no more happy as a result.