

DAVID COPPERFIELD

Charles Dickens

A critical paper by

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At the risk of using up much of my allotted time, I will recite the full original title of tonight's novel: *The Personal History, Adventures, Experience, & Observation of David Copperfield the Younger, of Blunderstone Rookery (which he never meant to be published on any account)*. One wonders why David, who is both the hero and narrator of this rags-to-riches bildungsroman, added that parenthetical coda, so clearly insincere. His very first sentence "Whether I shall turn out to be the hero of my own life, or whether that station will be held by anybody else, these pages must show", hardly reflects an intention to keep the pages locked in a desk drawer. And does he really wonder whether he, writing his own autobiography, will make someone else the hero? Come on, David.

As an aside, the village of Blundeston (Dickens spells it slightly differently) where David grew up actually exists, and his early home, the Rookery, as well as the nearby church and the Plow Inn, are all actual buildings that still stand.

The author behind the narrator, Charles Dickens, is also writing an autobiography of a sort. Scholars believe that David Copperfield's childhood, career, friendships, and love life were highly influenced by Dickens' experiences, especially his time working in a [factory](#) as a child. David's involvement with the law profession and later his career as a reporter and writer mirror the experiences of Dickens. Many of David's acquaintances are based on people Dickens actually knew. David's first wife, [Dora Spenlow](#), is believed to be based upon Maria Beadnell, whom Dickens loved in his early youth. David's friend since boyhood and his second wife [Agnes Wickfield](#), the real [heroine](#) of the novel, is based on Dickens' sisters-in-law Mary and [Georgina Hogarth](#); both of whom were very close to Dickens. This novel was very close to the author's heart. He says in his preface "Of all my books, I like this the best".

After the opening sentence, which I jokingly criticized above, we are off to a rip-snorting start. I personally think that Chapter 1 is the most enjoyable, certainly the funniest, chapter in the book. Aunt Betsy visits the happy little household in which

his young widowed mother Clara, who lives alone with her faithful servant Peggotty, is about to give birth. She descends like a whirlwind, terrorizing and wreaking havoc, beats the meek doctor with her bonnet for having the effrontery to deliver a boy, “put it on bent, walked out, and never came back”.

The earliest life of young Davey is quite idyllic, in the loving company of his mother and their loyal housekeeper Peggotty. No rooks in the rookery, no doves in the cote, no dog in the kennel, just the three of them and a few chickens. Here’s an intriguing oddity: The two women are both named Clara! This is not obvious since the servant is seldom called anything but Peggotty.

When Davey was maybe nine, catastrophe strikes in the person of Edward Murdstone, the cold cruel man who seduces his foolish mother into marriage, and moves in with his equally hateful sister. Another interjection: the narrator seldom tells us his age at various stages of his early life. Even when he mentions his birthday (the day he learns of his mother’s death), we are not told which birthday it is, though later clues suggest it is his tenth.

To say the least, things go downhill from there. His life (and his mother’s) are made a misery, and he is soon packed off to a thoroughly Dickensian school: not much learning but plenty of caning. It isn’t long before he is summoned home to attend his mother’s funeral. Now alone, at the mercy of a step-father who thinks even this awful school is too good for him, he is sent to London to work in a factory, long hours washing and labeling bottles. Here he lodges with and befriends Wilkins Micawber, a man of the most elaborate fluency but no capacity for earning a living, his emotions swinging rapidly between jovial good humor and deep despair, ever struggling to stay a half step ahead of his creditors. Although he never succeeds at supporting his own family, he is generous and industrious in serving others. He and his wife are famously modeled on Dicken’s own parents, who spent time in debtor’s prison and sent young Charles to work long hours in a factory much as David is doing.

Before continuing David’s narrative I’ll mention one other important plot line. There are so many characters and subplots in this book that I haven’t time for most of them. I will mention the visits Davey made to the Peggotty family on the Yarmouth shore. In contrast to the harsh realities of his life, here he finds warmth, kindness, generosity, mutual regard. These are poor fishermen, uneducated, “lower class”. It has been said that Dickens does not portray upper-class English people as well as the lower- or middle-class people among his characters. His portrayal of this humble family is affectionate and vivid. Some of his most

affecting prose is lavished here. Roaming the shore with Em'ly, the little girl who has soon become his dear friend, David says "The days sported by us, as if time had not grown up by himself yet, but were a child too, and always at play." The contrast between the two worlds David experiences is extreme and is important to Dickens both to give the novel emotional balance and to make a social point about the worth of the working class.

Returning to David's travails, when Mr. Micawber leaves London to escape his creditors, David in despair decides to seek refuge with his only living relative, the redoubtable Miss Betsey who so enlivened Chapter 1. He's still only 10. He walks all the way from London to Dover, arrives at her home starving and in rags, and she adopts him. Thus ends part one of our tale, the downward spiral.

In discussing these early chapters, I have focused on the plot, the bones of the novel. More important are the style, the language, details, emotions, the flesh and blood. One critic I encountered said, "The first half of *David Copperfield*, concerning the struggles of the young boy against repressive step-parents and draconian schoolmasters, is one of the greatest, most affecting novels ever written." It is indeed marvelous. The tale is told from a child's perspective, frank and honest, innocent and without guile. We are made to feel, not just *for* him, but *as* he felt. The narrator's memory is prodigious. As he seeks to recreate his early years, he is swept back in time, and sweeps us with him, reliving each scene, every detail sharp and telling. His use of the present tense at moments of strongest emotion ("I see him now, standing before me, ...") is very effective. The reader has no time to consider how well the story is told but is carried along on a tide of anxiety and hope, flowing naturally and seemingly inevitably.

The second half of the novel, as the boy grows into a famous writer involved in the intrigues of his friends and lovers, is a good and affecting Dickens novel. It perhaps does not reach the literary and emotional heights of the earlier chapters, as we will discuss.

Miss Betsey sends David to a school run by a Doctor Strong. David moves in with his aunt's attorney Mr. Wickfield and his daughter, Agnes, while he attends school. Agnes and David become best friends. Among Wickfield's boarders is his employee Uriah Heep. Uriah serves a foil to David and contrasts David's qualities of innocence and compassion with his own corruption. Though Uriah is raised in a cruel environment similar to David's, Uriah's upbringing causes him to become bitter and vengeful rather than honest and hopeful. Dickens's physical description of Uriah marks Uriah as a demonic character. He refers to Uriah's movements as

snakelike and gives Uriah red eyes, and of course the famous clammy handshake. Uriah and David not only have opposing characteristics but also operate at cross-purposes. For example, whereas Uriah wishes to marry Agnes only in order to hurt David, David's marriages are both motivated by love.

A note about precocity. Agnes is the same age as David, who is still only ten, yet she is apparently in full charge of her father's household. Heep is only about 15, we're told, but already has significant responsibilities in the law firm, and is rather young by modern standards to be branded the incorrigible villain Dickens seems to make him. I guess kids grew up faster back then.

A few years pass. Then, on his way to Yarmouth to visit the Peggottys, David encounters James Steerforth, a much-admired schoolmate from long ago. David had never seen past his friend's great outward charm to the cold predatory heart within. He takes Steerforth with him, and the Peggottys all fall for him, especially no-longer-little Em'ly. In the course of time, this leads to the seduction and ruination of Emily, who runs off with him to the despair of her fiancée Ham Peggotty. The whole drawn-out, melodramatic subplot of the search for the eloped and abandoned Emily was a bit much, I thought.

I will now very briefly summarize the rest of David Copperfield's life. He completes his education, and enters upon a career as a proctor, a kind of lawyer. Much fun at the expense of the arrogance, stupidity, and venality of his fellow professionals. He promptly falls in love with his boss's daughter, Dora. In his new life in London, David rediscovers Tommy Traddles, an old schoolmate, and Mr. Micawber. Then Miss Betsey comes to town to inform him she is ruined, cheated as it turns out by Uriah Heep who is now a partner of her attorney Wickfield. She now moves in along with Mr. Dick, an amiable halfwit whom she supports. David, who must now support them and hopes to marry Dora, takes on an extra job as reporter. He discovers his gift for writing, and goes on to become a successful novelist.

David does marry Dora, and many, both in and outside the novel, wonder at his infatuation with her. Dora is a frail, helpless creature, pretty and affectionate but willful, and unable to boil an egg. I would explain the attraction by citing the old adage "We marry our mothers". Dora is very much a second Clara Copperfield.

Well, Micawber discloses the evil shenanigans of Uriah Heep, and everyone gets their money back. Then Dora conveniently dies, and after several years of cogitation, David finally realizes that his true mate is Agnes Wickfield, something

we've all known for half the book. They wed and, thereafter all their troubles are little ones.

OK, I'm being a bit flippant. But I do feel that in the second part of the novel, as the boy becomes a young man, starts making choices and moves up the rungs, we begin to see Dickens pulling strings. Everything seems to work out so handily with the good characters in the novel, who come together easily to oppose the evil characters.

And the use of coincidence! This becomes so pervasive it really challenges our suspension of disbelief. I'll mention two kinds. First, the minor character who steps briefly on the stage, disappears, and then some time later miraculously reappears. Creakle, the ignorant, vicious schoolmaster so cruel to his innocent charges, returns as a benign indulgent jailer, so kind to his guilty charges. Two of David's schoolmates, Steerforth and Tommy Traddles, are miraculously reencountered much later after being seemingly forgotten, as are Micawber, Heep, Mr. Chillip the doctor, and doubtless others. Even the poor teacher Mr. Mell, is rediscovered at the very end. Either England was a much smaller place back then, or the frugal author simply will not waste a character.

The second kind of coincidence is the farfetched fateful encounter. Of all the coasts of all the lands in this ever-lovin' blue-eyed world, Steerforth picks the Falmouth flats on which to be shipwrecked. Where he is the last survivor, clinging to the mast. Where Ham Peggotty, the very man whose sweetheart he has seduced, happens to be standing on the shore and sets out to rescue him. Where, never recognizing each other, both men drown. Another example, in a late chapter: the incredible set of coincidences that brings together three of the novel's villains: Creakle, now a jailer as aforesaid, and his two prize inmates, numbers 27 and 28, Uriah Heep and Littimer, Steerforth's amanuensis. The evil trio exchange pious platitudes and mutual admiration – it's a funny scene, and is intended to satirize the true condition of Victorian prisons.

At several points in *David Copperfield*, Dickens has tried to throw light on the evils then prevailing in British society. It was a time when power was concentrated only in the hands of a few capitalists and prestige arose from wealth. The condition of the prisons and workhouses was miserable. But worst of all was the condition of the children. As Dickens dramatizes here and elsewhere, schools were often miserable places run only for money, and small children were used as a tool for illegal work and exploited in the workhouses from dawn to dusk for a few coins.

The truly remarkable aspect of *David Copperfield* though is that, perhaps more than in any other work, it is bursting with intriguing personalities. Indeed, it's been observed that David Copperfield is the least interesting character in his own novel. Dickens' characters are frequently eccentric. They are often based on a single heavily emphasized characteristic, making them a bit one-dimensional, almost caricatures. They change very little or not at all in the course of the narrative. Is it in spite of this, or because of this, that they are so memorable? For example, Mr. Micawber is one of the great comic characters in all of Dickens. He remains his improvident, amiable self all through the novel. On the other hand, it seems to me that Aunt Betsey, my personal favorite, does change somewhat in the latter parts of the tale, becoming softer, kinder and more reasonable. This is good for David, but I mourn the loss of that wild demented domineering force of nature whom we meet at the start. Still, all in all, the creation and handling of so many memorable characters in a single, more or less cohesive novel is a huge accomplishment.

Finally, let's acknowledge that, as often remarked, the novel *David Copperfield* is partly a fairy tale. Many of my remarks this evening have pointed in this direction. And, at the end, how conveniently the good characters who have fallen on hard times are dispatched to Australia, where they all thrive! I had always pictured the Down Under of this era as a dread penal colony populated by hardened criminals. Instead, we find the streets were paved with gold. I wish you all may live as happily ever after as did David and Agnes, and all their friends and relations.

COPPERFIELD

Questions for discussion

1. Perhaps one of Dickens' gifts is to keep the drama just short of melodrama. Does he always succeed?
2. Dickens' characters are frequently eccentric. They are often based on a single heavily emphasized characteristic, making them a bit one-dimensional, almost caricatures. They change very little or not at all in the course of the narrative. Do you agree? Is it in spite of this, or because of this, that they are so memorable?
3. Does Dickens overuse dramatic contrast and coincidence? Specifically, discuss the novel's re-introduction of characters who were seemingly forgotten. Does the re-introduction of characters help measure David's growth as an individual?

4. Critics have noted that David Copperfield is less a character who makes things happen, and more one who witnesses things happening, more compliant than assertive. Do you agree or disagree? How might this notion relate to David's profession as a writer? Does David's "colorlessness" make him a convincing representation of a writer, in general? Of Charles Dickens, in particular?

5. Wilkins Micawber is often regarded as one of the great comic characters in English literature. By what standards is he comic? Have our views of what constitutes humor changed since Dickens' time?

6. Compare the exploitation of the young naive Clara Copperfield by Edward Murdstone with the seduction of Em'ly by Steerforth. How has human nature, our opinions of such behavior, and the legal system in England or America changed since 1850?

7. Which of the following are realistic human beings:

David's love interests, Em'ly, Agnes, Dora?

Uriah Heep?

Aunt Betsey?

Any character you are particularly fond of?