Module-3 : Reading Victorian Prose

Unit-1 ❑ Charles Dickens's *David Copperfield*

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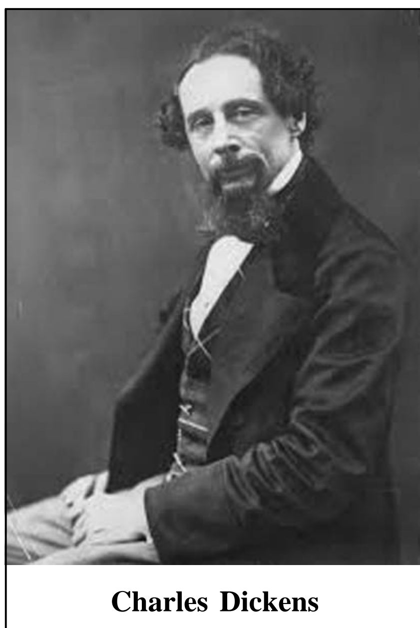
3.1.0. Introduction

In this module you will be introduced to the most important genre of Victorian literature—the novel. The eighteenth century, as you have seen in previous Study Materials was the time of the emergence of the English novel and it was in the Victorian period that it reached its peak of maturity and versatility. This Unit of the module on novels rightfully begins with the master of early Victorian fiction, namely Charles Dickens. Dickens was a novelist by profession and a social reformer at heart,

hence his novels almost always portray the socio-economic problems of Early Victorian England in a rapid stage of transition from an agrarian to an industrial country, of the sad plight of orphans and social maladies which were undoubtedly the offshoot of overpopulation. His novels were also rich in autobiographical material and it is in *David Copperfield* that this can be found at its best.

3.1.1. Tracing the Literary Career of Charles Dickens (1812 – 1870)

Born to John and Elizabeth Dickens on 7 February 1812, Charles Dickens was widely hailed as the literary colossus of his age. He achieved early recognition with *Sketches by Boz*, a collection of 56 short pieces concerning London life, with illustrations by George Cruikshank, published in 1836. Following the resounding success of *Sketches*, Dickens was approached by Chapman and Hall to provide stories to match a series of sporting cartoons by Robert Seymour. This resulted in the genesis of *The Pickwick Papers* (1836-7), which would establish Dickens's reputation as a great comic genius. Buoyed up by the popularity of *Pickwick*, Dickens experimented with drama, authoring a farce, *The Strange Gentleman*, and a libretto, *The Village Coquettes*, which were performed in September and December of 1836 at the St. James's Theatre.



Charles Dickens

Dickens's next literary triumph came with *Oliver Twist* (1837-9). A realistic portrayal of the unkind treatment of orphans in mid-nineteenth century, the novel marked Dickens's foray into social fiction. While still working on *Oliver Twist*, he began *Nicholas Nickleby* (1838-9), a product of his growing reformist enthusiasm, where the notorious 'Yorkshire Schools,' institutions for the disposal of unwanted children, were critiqued. His next two fictional endeavours appeared in his weekly magazine, *Master Humphrey's Clock*: *The Old Curiosity Shop* (1840-1), the story of Little Nell and her maternal grandfather, and *Barnaby Rudge* (1841), a historical narrative set during the anti-Catholic Gordon Riots of 1780. In 1842 Dickens visited the United States, later describing his impressions in the travelogue *American Notes* (1842). His

American experiences also found expression in *Martin Chuzzlewit* (1843-4), a novel featuring two of his notable villains, Seth Pecksniff and Jonas Chuzzlewit. In 1843 Dickens also wrote the first of his universally acclaimed Christmas books, *A Christmas Carol*.

For the next three years he toured the Continent with his family. While he was hardly inactive during this period (among other things he wrote the novella *The Cricket on the Hearth* (1845), the travelogue *Pictures of Italy* (1846), and edited the *Daily News*), he did not write another major novel until *Dombey and Son* (1846-8). Considered as Dickens's first artistically consummate work, *Dombey and Son* addresses the effects of the railways on the English world as one of its many themes. *Dombey and Son* was followed by *David Copperfield* (1849-50). In the same year that he completed *David Copperfield* Dickens started a new magazine, *Household Words*, later assimilated into *All the Year Round*, which acted as his principal literary vehicles. His next novel was *Bleak House* (1852-53), best-known for its unique double narrative and satirical delineation of the legal system. Dickens's tenth novel was *Hard Times* (1854), a 'Condition-of-England' tale, while his eleventh novel *Little Dorrit* (1855-7), a critique of the institution of debtor's prison, met with mixed critical response.

The year 1857 saw the staging of the play *The Frozen Deep*, based on the unfortunate 1845 Franklin expedition, written by Dickens in collaboration with his protégée, Wilkie Collins. Major works soon followed, including *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859), a historical saga set around the French Revolution, and *Great Expectations* (1860-1), a rags-to-riches story detailing the transformation of a blacksmith's boy into a sophisticated gentleman. Dickens's penultimate novel *Our Mutual Friend* (1864-5) pursues the themes of money and predation, offering one of his darkest visions of Victorian London. In what would become his swansong *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, Dickens wanted to narrate a thriller along the lines of Collins's sensation potboilers. But on 9 June 1870 he died, thus leaving the novel unfinished. Dickens is buried in Westminster Abbey, London.

Dickens's works have been both celebrated and criticised by scholars and readers. They have received praise for their striking realism, humorous note, moral vision, prose style, unforgettable characters, and socio-cultural commentary. On the other hand, the charge-sheet framed against Dickens's works complains of loose episodic storylines, intellectual weakness, lack of psychological profundity, and sentimental extravaganza.

3.1.2. Introducing *David Copperfield*

Dickens's eighth 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), was serially published in monthly instalments by Bradbury and Evans from May 1849 to November 1850, with accompanying illustrations by Hablot Knight Browne. A one-volume edition of the novel followed in 1850 with the abbreviated title, *The Personal History of David Copperfield*, and a brief Preface dated October 1850.

Usually considered as the dividing point in Dickens's 40-year career, *David Copperfield* evinces a centrality in tone, combining the exuberance and irony of the early fiction with the serious, probing intensity of the later novels. The novel holds a special place in the Dickensian canon for a number of reasons: it provides ample drama, comedy, suspense, satire and sentiment; it presents over 50 well-delineated characters; it weaves the three main plotlines (David's own trials and tribulations, the James Steerforth – Emily affair, and Uriah Heep's schemes against the Wickfields) with several subplots (concerning the Micawbers, the Strongs, Betsey Trotwood, and the Tommy Traddles – Sophy Crewler romance); and it reveals at almost every turn Dickens's command of an eloquent style of writing.

David Copperfield has won the approbation of influential authors. The American Henry James eavesdropped as a child to hear the first instalment read aloud to his mother. The Russian Fyodor Dostoevsky was mesmerised by an early translation he pored over during his Siberian exile. The German, Franz Kafka used the novel as a source of inspiration for *Amerika* (1927). And the English Virginia Woolf, who had little admiration for Dickens, acknowledged the novel's perennial charm for literary enthusiasts.

A first-person narrative charting the life of the eponymous protagonist from childhood to maturity, *David Copperfield* is often deemed as a classic example of the bildungsroman in English. The standard formula of the genre, which is conventionally traced to Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister* (1795-96), is as follows: a child orphaned or alienated to a degree from his father, growing up in a provincial or parochial milieu, making his way eventually to the metropolis, seeking an education both in and out of school, learning from his love relationship(s), sensitive beyond most of his peers but rather slow to discover his talents, finding after struggle a vocation and a philosophic attitude towards his varied experience. If read carefully, *David Copperfield* could be seen as adhering more or less closely to this formula; and although the novel opens with David's proclamation that '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' (Chapter 1), his progress from innocence to experience, like that of a bildungsroman protagonist, successfully resolves the issue and establishes him as the indisputable 'hero' of his 64-chapter autobiography.

One of the chief concerns of the novel is the disciplining of David's undisciplined heart. The chronological process of his maturity from naive childhood to reflective adulthood thematises the process of his learning to navigate his emotions in the right direction. He undergoes no radical change of heart, as so many of Dickens's heroes do; rather, his heart becomes strengthened through his many experiences. He succeeds to curb the 'mistaken impulse[s] of an undisciplined heart' (Chapter 48) and cultivates what his aunt Betsey, the novel's spokesperson for Victorian values, calls 'strength of character' (Chapter 19), one of the most positive attributes an individual can possess. In short, the evolution of his selfhood becomes possible because David acquires the skill of balancing his unsteady heart.

What is a 'Bildungsroman'?

***Bildungsroman* is a novel of formation, novel of education,or coming-of-age story. It is a literary genre that focuses on the psychological and moral growth of the protagonist from youth to adulthood (coming of age), in which character change is extremely important. It is a special kind of novel that focuses on the psychological and moral growth of its main character from his or her youth to adulthood. A *Bildungsroman* is a story of the growing up of a sensitive person who looks for answers to his questions through different experiences. Generally, such a novel starts with a loss or a tragedy that disturbs the main character emotionally. He or she leaves on a journey to fill that vacuum.**

During the journey, the protagonist gains maturity gradually and with difficulty. Usually, the plot depicts a conflict between the protagonist and the values of society. Finally, he or she accepts those values and they are accepted by the society, ending the dissatisfaction. Such a type of novel is also known as a coming-of-age novel.

There are numerous examples of *Bildungsroman* or coming-of-age novels in English literature—-*The History of Tom Jones, a Foundling* by Henry Fielding. This is among the famous Bildungsroman examples written in a comic mode. James Joyce's novel, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. This is a coming-of-age story of a character, Stephen Dedalus.

The novel has been narrated in a peculiarly complicated mode. The reader has not only Dickens the novelist to attend to, but the adult narrator, David (himself also a novelist), and his remembered self, young David the protagonist. The young David, having limited knowledge, offers a raw, unphilosophical perspective on his experiences; the adult David, having full knowledge, offers, at the same time, a systematic interpretation of those same experiences behind young David's back as it were; and Dickens simultaneously suggests a critique of that systematic interpretation offered by adult David, behind *his* back. When these three narrative voices are taken into consideration, the complexities of the method of storytelling can be seen not as mere artistic virtuosity, but as a major contribution to the whole meaning of the novel.

3.1.3. *David Copperfield*: An Autobiographical Novel?

In the Preface to the 1867 edition, Dickens candidly declares that *David Copperfield* is his favourite novel, adding that, of all the characters he has created, David is dearest to him. That the nominal hero's initials (DC) are a reversal of his own (CD) further bears testimony to Dickens's preference for David. The novel may have had such significance to Dickens because it was largely autobiographical, and some of the important events of his life were only thinly disguised in it. The oblique revelations about Dickens's personal history in the novel rendered it extra special to him and contribute to its credibility as an autobiographical narrative.

The account of David's menial labour at Murdstone and Grinby's wine bottle-washing factory in a rat-infested warehouse uncannily resembles Dickens's traumatic experiences at Warren's blacking factory recorded in the autobiographical fragment he entrusted to his friend, John Forster. Uppermost in both accounts is Dickens's painful sense of being abandoned, of having no one to care for his well-being. He emphasises how a 12-year-old is unjustly deprived of his childhood, almost forced to take on the responsibilities of the adult world long before he is ready. The agony of recalling those grim days, so long a much-guarded secret until revealed to Forster, is evident in David's words:

> The two things clearest in my mind were, that a remoteness had come upon the old Blunderstone life – which seemed to lie in the haze of an immeasurable distance; and that a curtain had for ever fallen on my life at Murdstone and Grinby's. No one has ever raised that curtain since. I have lifted it for a moment, even in this narrative, with a reluctant hand, and dropped it gladly.

> The remembrance of that life is fraught with so much pain to me, with so much mental suffering and want of hope, that I have never had the courage even to examine how long I was doomed to lead it. Whether it lasted for a year, or more, or less, I do not know. I only know that it was, and ceased to be; and that I have written, and there I leave it. (Chapter 14)

Many other particulars from Dickens's past found their way into the novel. For instance, Wilkins Micawber, a comic character memorable for his eternal optimism and oratorical flourish in hyperbolic language, is modelled on Dickens's father, John Dickens, whose insolvency led to the untold miseries of Dickens's childhood and dogged his adult life until John's death. Micawber's imprisonment for debt mirrors John's, and like Micawber, his father was an affable, generous individual whom Dickens regarded with affection as well as annoyance. In fact, Micawber's classic observation on economics, 'annual income twenty pounds, annual expenditure nineteen [pounds] nineteen [shillings] and six [pence], result happiness. Annual income twenty pounds, annual expenditure twenty pounds ought and six, result misery' (Chapter 12), may have been a piece of advice given to the young Dickens by his own father.

While David's impulsive infatuation with Dora draws on Dickens's courtship of Maria Beadnell, the idea of David and Dora's incompatibility as a couple seems to derive from Dickens's strained relationship with his wife, Catherine Hogarth. David speaks of 'the old unhappy loss or want of something' (Chapter 44) that had some place in his heart, though not to embitter it:

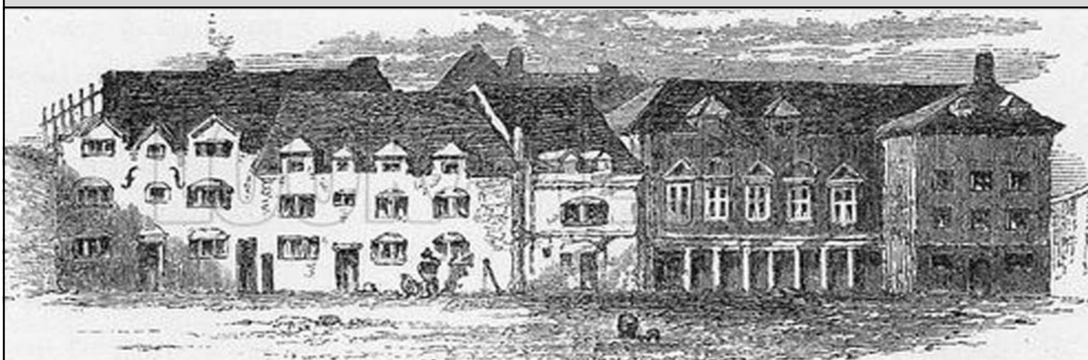
> I did feel sometimes, for a little while, that I could have wished my wife had been my counsellor; had had more character and purpose, to sustain me and improve me by; had been endowed with power to fill up the void which somewhere seemed to be about me; but I felt as if this were an unearthly consummation of my happiness, that never had been meant to be, and never could have been. (Chapter 44)

The intermingling of fact and fiction is also perceptible in the marked similarity between Dickens's and David's careers. David's vocations – from proctor in Doctors' Commons to shorthand reporter to professional novelist – follow those of his creator. Moreover, crucial to both David and Dickens is the nurturing power of literature. The novels of Smollett, Fielding, Goldsmith, Cervantes, Defoe, and Le Sage, according to David, 'kept alive my fancy, and my hope of something beyond that place and time' (Chapter 4), just as they sustained Dickens in the blacking

factory. And just as Dickens entertained the boys at Warren's by narrating the stories he had read, David wins over Steerforth and other boarding-mates by telling them nightly stories in the dormitory of Salem House School, stories based on the ones he had read in his father's well-stocked library. Dickens and David are, in some senses and at some times, interchangeable.

What was 'The Debtors' Prison?'

The Marshalsea Prison was a debtors' prison which is mentioned frequently in the works of Charles Dickens. It was located on the south bank of the River Thames in the London borough of Southwark, near London Bridge. In Victorian England, people could be jailed indefinitely for nonpayment of debt. They would be held in a debtor's prison until the debt was paid. Although their family members were not forced to go to jail, it was commonplace for the wives and children of failed business men and other debtors to accompany them to the jail. Very often they had nowhere else to go, since the main bread winner of the family was imprisoned. Very often, these family members were free to take up work outside of the jail during the day, returning only at night. The income that they earned helped pay off the debt of their jailed loved one, and keep him alive, for otherwise they would have had no way to buy food.



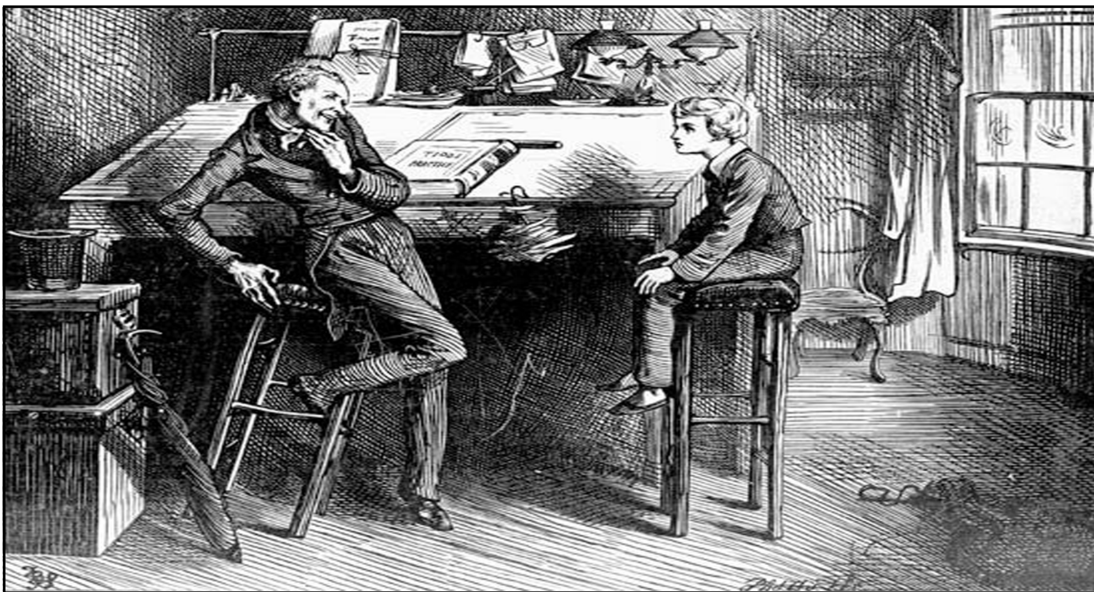
The Marshalsea Prison

Most of the inmates were herded into small rooms with dozens of other prisoners, imprisoned, often for several years even for small amounts of debt, which increased for non-payment of the prison's service fees. Charles Dickens' father was imprisoned in this prison for a debt of 40 pounds and 10 shillings when the novelist was twelve years old. As a result of his father's imprisonment, Dickens was forced to leave school and work in the factory to support himself. The experience deeply affected Dickens, and the imprisonment of debtors in the Marshalsea prison is a frequent theme in his novels.

3.1.4. Characters of the Novel

3.1.4.1. Murdstone and Heep: Agents of Evil in *David Copperfield*

Edward Murdstone (**note: the surname is a compound of two words: murder and stone**) is the main antagonist of the novel's first half. His entry into the Copperfield household as David's step-father has killing effects on David and his passive mother, Clara. Murdstone champions the principles of firmness endorsed by the evangelical Protestants of the time. Similar to Mr. Brocklehurst in Charlotte



David with Urial Heep, An Illustration by Frederick Barnard from Chapman and Hall 'Household Edition' of the serialised novel in 1870's.

Bronte's 1847 *Jane Eyre*, a bildungsroman like *David Copperfield*, Murdstone prides himself on his autocratic disciplining of the young, which amounts to nothing more than inflicting mental torment and physical cruelty. Like Jane, David is punished for daring to retaliate against his oppressor in self-defence: he is locked away in his room for biting Murdstone's hand. Murdstone sends David away to Salam House, owned by his equally dictatorial friend, Mr. Creakle, and later, after his mother's demise (possibly due to Murdstone's tyranny) to London to work at Murdstone and Grinby's. When David flees to Dover to seek refuge with Betsey, Murdstone offers to take back him unconditionally from Betsey but is refused and rebuked by her. Near the end of the novel, David learns from an old acquaintance that Murdstone married a rich young woman but 'reduced her to a state of imbecility' (Chapter 59). Modern

readings opine that although David vehemently resists everything that his evil step-father stands for, he unconsciously adopts some of Murdstone's hard philosophy when he attempts to mould the mind of his child-wife, Dora ('I had endeavoured to adapt Dora to myself,' states David in Chapter 48), who is much like his mother. The result, Dora's premature death, recalls his mother's similar decline and death.

Undeniably one of Dickens's greatest villains, Uriah Heep has become synonymous with hypocritical opportunism. Dickens's description of Uriah's repulsive appearance marks him as a negative character: his cropped red hair, lashless red eyes, high shoulders, 'long lank skeleton hand' (Chapter 15), and snakelike writhing align him with the devil. Uriah pretends to be subservient, self-deprecating — 'ever so 'umble' is his catch phrase – while all the time contriving to take over the alcoholic Mr. Wickfield's business and defraud his clients. He is eventually defeated but not prosecuted. He is later imprisoned for an attempted fraud on the Bank of England. Interestingly, Uriah serves as a doppelganger to David. His ruthlessly ambitious rise from articled clerk to partner in Wickfield's firm, his aspiration for the hand of his employer's daughter Agnes, his dedication in studying law from William Tidd's *Practice* – all have their equivalents in David's rise from proctor to novelist, marriage to Dora, and his perseverance with Thomas Gurney's handbook on the art of shorthand. David's determined refusal to acknowledge Uriah as his dark double is countered by Uriah's equal determination to remind him of it through the alteration of his form of address from 'Master' to 'Mister' Copperfield and back again. Uriah's repeated insinuations that David is no better than he is are fuelled by his strong antipathy towards David's claims to moral superiority. Once Micawber exposes his treachery, Uriah drops his veneer of false humility and vents his repressed anger: 'Copperfield, I have always hated you. You've always been an upstart, and you've always been against me' (Chapter 52). Dickens based Uriah's manners and physical attributes on Hans Christian Anderson, the renowned Danish author of fairy tales, and Uriah's machinations on Thomas Powell, an employee of Dickens's friend, Thomas Chapman.

3.1.4.2. 'Angel in the House' and 'Fallen Woman': Agnes and Emily

The patriarchal culture of Victorian England promulgated a dyadic model of femininity that pigeonholed women into two mutually exclusive categories, namely the angel in the house and the fallen woman. While the first referred to a self-sacrificing, asexual wife/ mother acquiescently engrossed in the nitty-gritty of her

domesticity, the second was a blanket term applied to a variety of women: prostitute, adulteress, seduced/ raped woman, or any woman engaged in socially unauthorised sexual activity. The angel in the house, perceived as the ethical stewardess of the family and state, was positioned at the centre of the Victorian social universe, whereas the fallen woman, seen as libidinous and therefore morally culpable, was conveniently pushed to its periphery.

Dickens perpetuates the stereotype of the angel in the house through his portrayal of Agnes Wickfield. When David first meets her, he associates her with the pious aura of 'a stained glass window in a church':

> Although her face was quite bright and happy, there was a tranquillity about it, and about her – a quiet, good, calm spirit, — that I never have forgotten; that I never shall forget.... I cannot call to mind where or when, in my childhood, I had seen a stained glass window in a church. Nor do I recollect its subject. But I know that when I saw her turn round, in the grave light of the old staircase, and wait for us, above, I thought of that window; and I associated something of its tranquil brightness with Agnes Wickfield ever afterwards (Chapter 15).

The association continues till the end of the novel, when David and his 'quiet, good, calm spirit' ultimately marry and rear children. In the meantime, Agnes cares for her widowed father, Mr Wickfield; rebuffs the attentions of Heep; counsels David against Steerforth; tends Dora on her deathbed, both physically and emotionally; and sustains David by mail as he grieves in Switzerland after Dora's passing away. Through it all David remains, in the words of Betsey, 'blind, blind, blind' (Chapter 60), considering Agnes only as a sister in whom he can confide. When he finally admits his love for her, she confesses, 'I have loved you all my life!' (Chapter 62). Although Dickens knew from her first appearance in the novel that Agnes was the true heroine of the story, most critics have blasted her for her angelic perfection. They find her wooden and far less attractive than David's child-wife, Dora. Agnes is more of a virtuous conscience than a flesh-and-blood character; she brings discipline and responsibility into David's life, but she seems to lack the human qualities of folly and fickleness that makes the playful Dora so appealing. One possible reason why Agnes comes off as unconvincing is because we have only David's version of her story. David, from his privileged position as male narrator and husband, constructs Agnes as an icon of domestic sainthood that guarantees his role as paternal protector and provider for his family.

The figure of the fallen woman is epitomised by Emily, Daniel Peggotty's niece. Emily's fall is foreshadowed early in the novel. While playing with David at Yarmouth beach, she risks danger by walking out on an old jetty, 'springing forward to her destruction (as it appeared to me), with a look that I have never forgotten, directed far out to sea' (Chapter 3). David's remembrance of this childhood incident and Emily's actual 'destruction' later in life compels him to contemplate whether it would have been for the best if Emily had drowned that day. Furthermore, as a child, Emily wishes to become a lady. This ambition to rise above her working-class status plays an instrumental role in her fall. As she grows up, she does not relinquish her wish until the upper-class Steerforth comes along with the offer of realising her cherished dream. He seduces her, eloping to Italy with her on the eve of her marriage to Ham Peggotty. But Steerforth perceives Emily as nothing more than a mere distraction at his disposal and becomes bored of her quite quickly. It is also unlikely that he had any intentions of marrying Emily in the first place, since marriage with her would have meant a significant step down the social ladder. It should be noted that Emily's tainted fate seems to be entwined with that of her friend, Martha Endell. After she is dishonoured – the reasons for her fall are not explained – and ostracised by her townsfolk, Martha runs off to London using money given to her by Emily. There she becomes a prostitute, contemplates suicide out of postlapsarian guilt, but redeems herself by bringing about Daniel's reunion with Emily. Towards the end of the narrative, Emily and Martha immigrate to Australia with Daniel in search of a better life. However, once in the colony, their lives turn out differently. Martha achieves domestic happiness after marrying a bushman, whereas Emily finds peace in the burly bosom of Daniel and doing good to others. Here fiction seems commensurate with historical fact, for, like Emily and Martha, several of the inmates of Urania Cottage, the refuge for the rehabilitation of fallen women that the philanthropic Dickens managed under the patronage of the heiress Angela Burdett-Coutts, found husbands and led productive lives in the colonies.

'Angel in the House' and 'Fallen Woman': What do they mean and Signify?

Coventry Patmore's popular, long narrative poem 'The Angel in the House' was published in parts between 1854 and 1862. Inspired by his wife, Emily, the poem charts their traditional courtship and marriage. Today, it is known for the way in which it idealised women as devoted, docile wives and mothers;

paragons of domesticity, virtue and humility. Hence, the phrase 'angel in the house' came to signify the utmost purity—moral and sexual for women in Victorian England, something which again was a theoretical construct rather than an actuality.

On the other end of this bipolar spectrum was the construct of the 'Fallen Woman'. In the Victorian novel, gender-based social norms dictated appropriate behaviour. Female wrongdoing was not only judged according to the law, but also according to the idealized conception of womanhood. It was this implicit cultural measure, and how far the woman contravened the feminine norms of society, that defined her criminal act rather than the act itself or the injury her act inflicted. When a woman deviated from the Victorian construction of the ideal woman, she was stigmatized and labelled. The fallen woman was viewed as a moral menace, a contagion.

3.1.5. Themes in the Novel

3.1.5.1. Failure of Marriage in *David Copperfield*

David Copperfield is often read as Dickens's interrogation of the institution of marriage, an institution dearly held and deeply revered by the Victorians. That the novel came after *Dombey and Son* – itself a novel that centers around the failed marriage of Edith and Paul Dombey and that takes as its focal point Edith's desertion of her husband – is, of course, very important. One could argue that *David Copperfield* takes over *Dombey and Son*'s theme, the spectacle of a marriage's failure, and makes it part of both the main plot and subplots. However, whereas the failure of loveless conjugal relation is seen in *Dombey and Son* as a highly melodramatic occurrence, *David Copperfield* portrays the end of marriage as something less than an event, certainly not melodramatic. In it dissolution of marriage is common and commonplace, an occurrence to be expected – almost a part of the usual order of things.

Despairing depictions of marriage permeate the novel. From the deterioration of David-Dora relationship to the improvidence of Wilkins and Emma Micawber to the threat of adultery survived by Annie and Dr. Strong to Murdstone's iron-fisted control of his two wives to the alienation of Betsey from her blackmailer husband, *David Copperfield* is concerned in a multiplicity of ways with the miseries caused

by marriage. Appearing in the year that saw the formation of a Royal Commission to study the state of marriage and divorce law – a commission formed in large part because so many people were managing to obtain divorces despite the fact that they were illegal, Dickens's novel participates in the general turmoil which resulted in the passage of the Matrimonial Causes Act which began to legalise divorce seven years later.

3.1.5.2. Role of Memory in *David Copperfield*

David Copperfield is a quintessential narrative of retrospective memory, a coming-of-age fiction recollecting from the perspective of a later time the gradual formation of David's identity through his many experiences. As David remarks: "this narrative is my written memory" (Chapter 58). The novel is replete with myriad references to memory and its operations; the entire plot is built upon reminiscences drawn up from what David calls "the sea of my remembrance" (Chapter 53).

There are passages which assert the pictographic vividness of memory, the way certain scenes from the past are relived in all their concrete immediacy:

> Can I say of her face – altered as I have reason to remember it, perished as I know it is – that it is gone, when here it comes before me at this instant, as distinct as any face that I may choose to look on in the crowded street? (Chapter 2)

Superimposition of past and present via the associative link of some specific sensation in the present is a hallmark of David's autobiography. In his hypersensitive mind, a smell or a sound in the present can trigger a moment from the past preserved in the formaldehyde of his extraordinary memory:

> The feeling with which I used to watch the tramps, as they came into the town on those wet evenings, at dusk, . . . came freshly back to me; fraught, as then, with the smell of damp earth, and wet leaves and briar, and the sensation of the very airs that blew upon me in my own toilsome journey (Chapter 60).

David's memories are always linked to one another. They hang together to form a unified whole, the integrated continuum of his bygone life as it has led by stages up to his present condition:

> I now approach an event in my life, so indelible, so awful, so bound by an infinite variety of ties to all that has preceded it, in these pages, that, from

> the beginning of my narrative, I have seen it growing larger and larger as I advanced, like a great tower in a plain, and throwing its forecast shadow even on the incidents of my childish days (Chapter 55).

In its handling of the process of memory, the novel resembles William Wordsworth's poetic excursions into the past, especially his *Prelude*, coincidentally published the same year as *David Copperfield*. Both autobiographical works champion the edifying effect of memory. Yet for all its resemblances to Wordsworth's poetry, particularly in Chapter 58, where David experiences a Wordsworthian awakening, the novel often seems closer to another personal exploration published in 1850, Alfred Tennyson's *In Memoriam*. Like Tennyson's poem, Dickens's novel, at times, gives expression to the oppressive effect of remembrance, the potentially debilitating effect of memory. In other words, the novel paradoxically dramatises the force of memory as both edifying and oppressive.

3.5.1.3. Efficacy of the Storm Scene in *David Copperfield*

The storm scene in Chapter 55, titled 'Tempest', of the novel is one the best-remembered scenes in the whole of Dickens. Here the drama is centred around (i) David's hazardous journey to Yarmouth in a storm-laden weather to deliver Emily's last letter to Ham, and (ii) his witnessing of a shipwreck off the coast of Yarmouth in which Steerforth (stranded aboard the ship) and Ham (selflessly attempting to rescue him) are both drowned in the storm-tossed sea. The first conjures up an apocalyptic vision, as if the whole world is falling apart under the elemental power of the storm, whereas the second is a tragic set piece reminiscent of William Turner's oil painting of the steamer in distress.

Often seen as the emotional climax of the novel, the storm scene draws us towards the conclusion with a sense of relief and resolution. After Chapter 55 the tone of the narrative changes from high drama to serene reflection as David discusses his maturity. He travels abroad and eventually settles in Switzerland. He mourns the deaths of Dora, Steerforth, and Ham and begins to ruminate upon his sorrows. Alone, he becomes, for the first time, the sole subject of his autobiography, and we learn about the growth of his character. The storm scene seems to have been a climax in another sense as well: Dickens never again attempted anything similar on the same scale. Storm episodes crop up in his later novels but usually briefly. The nearest Dickens came to recreating the sinister mood of *David Copperfield* was in *Great Expectations*. Though the storm does not materialize in the *David Copperfield* manner, but on the night of Abel Magwitch's return from Australia, the weather is

wild and stormy and 'gloomy accounts [had] come in from the coast of shipwreck and death' (Chapter 39). This atmospheric turbulence reawakens memories of Pip's childhood on the desolate marshes and prepares us for the re-entry of Magwitch, a figure from that past.

Integral to the storm scene is the powerful description of how the tempest effects the 'tremendous sea' (Chapter 55), a sea raised to a terrible power by the furious wind; this sea, as many incidents show, has ominous associations for David – he hears of Daniel's drowned relations on his very first visit to Yarmouth. However, unlike David, Steerforth is fond of the sea. He finds in it a reflection of his restlessness, a chance to free some of his pent-up energy. While David prudently applies himself to his profession, falls in love and marries, Steerforth becomes an adventure-seeking seafarer, burning up his 'fervent energy' in the 'rough seas' (Chapter 28). Against David's purposeful life, Steerforth's is seen as a rebellious quest for self-destruction. His death in the sea is in keeping with his constitutional recklessness: hanging from the mast of his sinking ship, he waves his red cap at those on the beach as a last gesture of mockery and disregard towards life. He is Dickens's version of the Byronic cavalier, who lightened the dreary moments of David's boyhood, and David can never quite overcome his admiration for Steerforth's dare-devil charisma despite knowing that Steerforth had seduced and ruined Emily. Even his last remembrance of Steerforth is qualified by his love and affection: 'I saw him lying with his head upon his arm, as I had often seen him lie at school' (Chapter 55). Throughout, Steerforth has offered David an image of unbridled freedom which perhaps corresponds with his own concealed desire for adventure and excitement. David comes to reject this desire as he matures, but Steerforth's personal magnetism never fails to pull him back towards his boyhood and always reasserts their first relationship of hero and hero worshipper.

Learner Please Note!

Like the storm scene in *David Copperfield*, there are other important Storm scenes in the gamut of English Literature and the most important occurs in William Shakespeare's *King Lear.* The storm in Lear works inventively on a number of levels: the elemental storm, the social storm which shakes the divided kingdom, the inner storm that drives Lear mad; all are interconnected and reinforce one another to achieve the sense of overall darkness and despair. The extreme weather works as a symbol as it matches the extreme anger, hurt and disappointment that Lear feels.

3.1.5.4. Use of Prison Motif in *David Copperfield*

Though not very prominent in other Dickens novels, the prison motif is central to *David Copperfield*. To begin with, there are instances of actual imprisonment in the narrative: Micawber is incarcerated in debtor's prison after failing to meet his creditors' demands; Dora visits the page who had pilfered her watch and been imprisoned, and faints when she finds herself 'inside the iron bars' (Chapter 48); and David accepts an invitation to visit Creakle's model prison where he finds Littimer, Steerforth obsequious manservant, and Heep among the model prisoners (although David leaves the prison convinced that the two have not changed from their former scheming selves and have fooled Creakle into believing their repentance).

The prison motif is also palpable in the representations of David's two wives and Jane Murdstone, the spinster sister of his step-father. Jane arrives at the Copperfield household with 'a very jail of a bag which hung upon her arm by a heavy chain' (Chapter 4); she even makes 'a jail-delivery of her pocket handkerchief' (Chapter 4). Her most vicious act as penal authority, however, is taking over the keys to the house and keeping them in her bag, 'her own little jail,' (Chapter 4) so as to function as sole confiner and deliverer. Even when she appears later in the novel as Dora's friend, the bracelets of her arm reminds David of 'the fetters over a jail-door' (Chapter 26). Interestingly, the prison image is deployed in case of Dora too, but it has no menacing overtone: Dora's death is expressed in terms of her spirit escaping from the prison of her body: 'The spirit fluttered for a moment on the threshold of its little prison, and, unconscious of captivity, took wing.' (Chapter 48). References to prison and keys also occur in relation to Agnes. In Chapter 35, Agnes is associated with a 'quaint little basket of keys hanging at [her] side', and she tells David, in Chapter 60, that she has connected him in her remembrance with 'the basket-trifle, full of keys'. This last reference comes immediately after she makes the following remark regarding her teaching (she runs a small school for girls): 'I must be a prisoner for a little while' (Chapter 60).

3.1.6. Adaptations of *David Copperfield*

After *Oliver Twist*, *David Copperfield* has inspired more dramatic adaptations than any other work by Dickens. During the 1850s alone there were at least 25 productions. The first of these, *Born with a Caul*, a three-act rendition by George Almar which premiered at the Strand Theatre, introduced key alterations in the narrative; for example, Almar saved Steerforth from drowning – he emerges in the

flesh after being presumed dead, declares that he and Emily are actually married, and vows to emigrate to Australia with the Peggotty clan. Other early adaptations were more faithful to the original text. Later in the nineteenth century, Andrew Halliday's four-act *Little Em'ly* (1869) – first staged on either side of the Atlantic within weeks of one another at the Olympic Theatre (London) and Niblo's Garden (New York City) – provided a template for many subsequent stage reworkings. Repositioning the fallen Emily as the lead over the novel's hero, Halliday's play and its spin-offs – *Lost Em'ly*, *Poor Lost Em'ly*, *Little Em'ly's Trials* – replaced nearly all other theatrical versions of the novel in the last three decades of the Victorian period. In the twentieth century, Micawber proved a more engaging focus. He was the central character in Louis Napoleon Parker's 1914 stage adaptation, in which Sir Herbert Beerbohm Tree played both Micawber and Daniel Peggotty.

Although *David Copperfield* has been filmed on several occasions, the two most eminent celluloid versions were made in 1935 and 1969. The first was directed by George Cukor and produced by David O. Selznick. A number of characters and incidents from the novel were omitted in this cinematic adaptation – notably David's time at Salem House School, although Steerforth, whom he met at the school, was retained for the film as head boy at the school David attended after Betsey gained custody of him. The 1969 version was a British American international co-production directed by Delbert Mann for 20th Century Fox. Starring Robin Phillip in the title role, the film was very unusual — instead of being a linear story, David's bildungsroman is told in flashbacks from the point in his life when he leaves London and all his friends for three years.

3.1.7. Summing Up

- Dickens was a novelist by profession and a social reformer at heart
- The novel *David Copperfield* may have had such significance to Dickens because it was largely autobiographical, and some of the important events of his life were only thinly disguised in it.
- *David Copperfield* is a quintessential narrative of retrospective memory, a coming-of-age fiction recollecting from the perspective of a later time the gradual formation of David's identity through his many experiences.
- Edward Murdstone is the main antagonist of the novel's first half. His entry into the Copperfield household as David's step-father has killing effects on David and his passive mother, Clara.

- Undeniably one of Dickens's greatest villains, Uriah Heep has become synonymous with hypocritical opportunism
- *David Copperfield* is often read as Dickens's interrogation of the institution of marriage, an institution dearly held and deeply revered by the Victorians.

3.1.8. Comprehension Exercises:

- **Long Questions-20 Marks**

1. Dickens's life is the backbone for David's story. Illustrate.
2. David is the least interesting character in the novel. Do you think this was Dickens's choice, to make David simply a background on which to display the more interesting characters? Why or why not?
3. How does Dickens's treatment of the fallen woman in *David Copperfield* compare with that of other novelists of the time?
4. '*David Copperfield* is about marriages laden with angst and lacking in trust, marriages between people who apparently could not be more incompatible.' Comment.

- **Mid-length Questions-12 Marks**

1. 'The sea is a powerful force in the lives of the characters in *David Copperfield*, and it is almost always connected with death.' Elucidate.
2. How does the novel portray parent-child relationship? Discuss with suitable examples.
3. 'Born "a child of close observation," David is an adult of incredible memory.' Explain.
4. Write an essay on the narrative complexity of the novel.

- **Short Questions-6 Marks**

1. Uriah acts as a negative mirror to David. Do you agree? Give reasons for your answer.
2. What comic exaggerations characterize the Micawber family?
3. Compare and contrast the characters of Dora and Agnes.
4. What type of education is advocated by Mr. Murdstone, and what effect does this have on David?

3.1.9. Suggested Reading

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