

# Nineteenth-Century Literature Criticism

**NCLC**

**161**

Volume 161

# Nineteenth-Century Literature Criticism

Criticism of the  
Works of Novelists, Philosophers, and Other  
Creative Writers Who Died between 1800  
and 1899, from the First Published Critical  
Appraisals to Current Evaluations



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## Nineteenth-Century Literature Criticism, Vol. 161

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# Preface

Since its inception in 1981, *Nineteenth-Century Literature Criticism* (NCLC) has been a valuable resource for students and librarians seeking critical commentary on writers of this transitional period in world history. Designated an “Outstanding Reference Source” by the American Library Association with the publication of its first volume, NCLC has since been purchased by over 6,000 school, public, and university libraries. The series has covered more than 450 authors representing 33 nationalities and over 17,000 titles. No other reference source has surveyed the critical reaction to nineteenth-century authors and literature as thoroughly as NCLC.

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An NCLC entry consists of the following elements:

- The **Author Heading** cites the name under which the author most commonly wrote, followed by birth and death dates. Also located here are any name variations under which an author wrote, including transliterated forms for authors whose native languages use nonroman alphabets. If the author wrote consistently under a pseudonym, the pseudonym will be listed in the author heading and the author’s actual name given in parenthesis on the first line of the biographical and critical information. Uncertain birth or death dates are indicated by question marks. Single-work entries are preceded by a heading that consists of the most common form of the title in English translation (if applicable) and the original date of composition.
- The **Introduction** contains background information that introduces the reader to the author, work, or topic that is the subject of the entry.
- A **Portrait of the Author** is included when available.
- The list of **Principal Works** is ordered chronologically by date of first publication and lists the most important works by the author. The genre and publication date of each work is given. In the case of foreign authors whose works have been translated into English, the list will focus primarily on twentieth-century translations, selecting

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- A complete **Bibliographical Citation** of the original essay or book precedes each piece of criticism.
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# *The Personal History of David Copperfield*

Charles Dickens

The following entry presents criticism of Dickens's novel *The Personal History of David Copperfield* (1850). For discussion of Dickens's complete career, see *NCLC*, Volume 3; for discussion of the novel *Bleak House*, see *NCLC*, Volume 8; for discussion of the novel *Great Expectations*, see *NCLC*, Volume 26; for discussion of the novel *Oliver Twist*, see *NCLC*, Volume 37; for discussion of the novel *Hard Times for These Times*, see *NCLC*, Volume 50; for discussion of the novel *A Tale of Two Cities*, see *NCLC*, Volume 86; for discussion of the novel *Our Mutual Friend* see *NCLC*, Volume 105; for discussion of the novel *Little Dorrit*, see *NCLC*, Volume 113.

## INTRODUCTION

The eighth novel published by Charles Dickens, and one of his most enduringly popular, *The Personal History of David Copperfield* (1850) is regarded, in part, as its renowned Victorian author's fictional autobiography. Viewed as a moving study of maturation and recollection, *David Copperfield* is usually categorized as a *Bildungsroman* centered on the personal development of its titular protagonist. It features a sustained, first-person narrative by Copperfield as he relates his imaginative recollection of the past, from his idyllic youth, struggles in early childhood, schooling, maturation, tragic first marriage, budding career as a novelist, and eventual union with the serene Agnes Wickfield. In addition to its narrative core based upon Dickens's personal childhood experiences, the work is said to share certain thematic affinities with his earlier novel *Oliver Twist* (1838) and to prefigure the author's renowned *Great Expectations* (1861), both of which likewise trace the lives of sympathetic boy heroes.

## BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Dickens was the son of John Dickens, a minor government official who persistently lived beyond his financial means and was eventually sent to debtor's prison. As a boy, Dickens was forced to work in Warren's Blacking Factory, pasting labels on bottles of boot-black for meager wages until his father was released. Humiliated and demoralized by this labor, Dickens remained deeply



troubled by it over the course of his life, and additionally so by his mother's suggestion that he continue at the factory even after his father's debts were repaid. Following his employment as a law clerk in his late teens, Dickens worked as a journalist and began to compose a series of short stories and sketches that were published in various London periodicals, and later collected to form his first book, *Sketches by Boz* (1836). The appearance of his first novel, *Posthumous Papers of the Pickwick Club* (1837), established a popular and critical recognition of Dickens that would grow over the ensuing decades to a degree rarely equaled in English letters. Dickens's *David Copperfield*, was, like all of his novels, published in a series of monthly installments, and first appeared between May 1849 and November 1850. Usually regarded as Dickens's most autobiographical work, *David Copperfield* was his earliest novel narrated entirely in the first person. As popular as his previous publications, it is viewed as a transitional

work in Dickens's oeuvre, completed prior to his so-called "dark period" of the 1850s and 1860s, during which he produced pessimistic social critiques, such as those of *Bleak House* (1853), *Hard Times for These Times* (1854), and *Our Mutual Friend* (1865).

## PLOT AND MAJOR CHARACTERS

Critics have pointed to numerous parallels between the early portions of *David Copperfield* and events in Dickens's own life. Like his creator, the young Copperfield is forced as a child to work gluing labels to bottles, and later finds employment as a law clerk. He also eventually becomes a novelist, and in so doing lays out the course of his past life in reminiscing the events of *David Copperfield*. The novel opens with Copperfield's thought: "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." Looking back to his childhood, he recalls the death of his father, and his early happiness with his mother, Clara, and nurse Peggotty. The remarriage of Clara to the cruel Mr. Murdstone, however, torments the young Copperfield. After being beaten by Murdstone, Copperfield bites his foster father on the hand and is sent away to school as punishment. Meanwhile, Peggotty accompanies Copperfield to Yarmouth and introduces him to her brother, Mr. Peggotty, along with the man's adopted children, Ham and Little Em'ly. Once at Mr. Creakle's school, Copperfield meets the downtrodden Tom Traddles and the wealthy, self-absorbed James Steerforth. Befriending both, an adulatory Copperfield fails to realize that the charismatic Steerforth seeks nothing more than to use this naive boy for his own purposes, and thinks nothing of betraying him. The death of Copperfield's mother prompts the youth's return home to one of the most degrading experiences of his early years: at the age of ten, he begins to work at Murdstone and Grinby's dreary warehouse, washing and affixing labels to wine bottles. Through the ordeal, and throughout the novel, Copperfield maintains the qualities that define his character, proving himself to be generous, loyal, diligent, trusting, and above all, earnest. In London, he secures lodging with the magnanimous but perpetually insolvent Mr. Micawber. Eventually hounded by his creditors, Micawber forsakes the city, and Copperfield goes in search of his aunt, Miss Betsey Trotwood. Miss Betsey secures Copperfield lodging with Mr. Wickfield and a position at the school of Mr. Strong. Over time, Copperfield and Wickfield's daughter Agnes become as close as brother and sister. Meanwhile, Dickens introduces the villainous Uriah Heep, Wickfield's clerk. After a visit to Yarmouth, in which James Steerforth reappears and becomes acquainted with Peggotty and his family, Copperfield returns to London and begins work in the law

office of Spewlow and Jorkins. Soon, he meets Mr. Spewlow's daughter Dora and is love-struck. Trouble brews in Yarmouth, where Little Em'ly has broken her engagement with Ham, choosing Steerforth instead in the vain hope of bettering her social station. Back in London, the death of Mr. Spewlow, who found Copperfield a poor match for his daughter, allows Copperfield and Dora to marry. Their union is felicitous for a time, despite Dora's complete inability to run a household. Uriah Heep, meanwhile, causes tension between Mr. Strong and his wife Annie, claiming an affair, but the couple is soon reconciled, and the lie disproved. Events are less fortuitous for Little Em'ly. Steerforth has forsaken her, and she too disappears. Copperfield and Mr. Peggotty begin a search and eventually find her. The Micawbers discover that Uriah Heep has been cheating his business partner Mr. Wickfield, and Heep is sent to prison. Afterwards, the Micawbers, along with Mr. Peggotty and Little Em'ly, depart for Australia to make a new start. Back in Yarmouth, Steerforth reappears. Sailing in a torrential storm, he is shipwrecked. Not knowing who the sailor is, Ham rushes to rescue him, but both perish. Thereafter, Copperfield's young wife Dora grows ill and dies as well. Devastated, Copperfield discovers the comfort of Agnes, and the two eventually marry. Copperfield at last finds true happiness with his new wife and family and with his growing literary prospects as a young novelist.

## MAJOR THEMES

The conventional thematic interpretation of *David Copperfield* considers the novel an example of the Victorian *Bildungsroman*, which traces the arc of Copperfield's emotional maturation, worldly education, and eventual conformity to the positive moral values of his society. In a complementary view, the work can be seen as a *Künstlerroman*, with a parallel thematic orientation more principally focused on Copperfield's development as an artist. A standard, twentieth-century thematic understanding of *David Copperfield* was first articulated by Gwendolyn B. Needham in 1954, and identifies Copperfield's efforts to discipline his "undisciplined heart," or more specifically to balance his trusting, affective nature by cultivating emotional control and obtaining both maturity and wisdom of the world. Commentators also view *David Copperfield* as a novel chiefly concerned with memory. Exemplified by Copperfield's narrative recollection and reconstruction of his life, this theme highlights a tension between his innocent, childhood observations and mature, reflective understanding of past events. Issues of family and social class also figure prominently in the novel. In an effort to locate partial surrogates for his lost father and mother in his transition from neglected child to loving husband, Copper-



field looks to Peggotty, the Micawbers, his Aunt Betsey, Dora, and finally Agnes, with whom he can establish his idyllic vision of domestic bliss. The question of social class in the novel involves not only Copperfield's search for personal identity, but also the stories of James Steerforth, Little Em'ly, and Uriah Heep, whose actions question the relationship between an individual's moral worth and his or her place within the Victorian social hierarchy. *David Copperfield* is also thought to be informed by elements of spiritual allegory focused on the idealized figure of Agnes, whose perfection Copperfield learns to accept and cherish as a kind of secular transcendence of his past mistakes.

### CRITICAL RECEPTION

Dickens once referred to *David Copperfield* as his "favourite child"; Victorian audiences tended to concur, making the novel one of his most well-received works. In the view of contemporary critics, the high level of esteem accorded the novel in its own day was justified, and the work continues to elicit considerable interest from modern scholars. For many such commentators, the close relationship between Dickens's own childhood and the narrative foundation of *David Copperfield* has encouraged the interpretation of autobiographical reflections within its pages, although most have been quick to acknowledge the work as characteristically imaginative, Dickensian fiction. As such, it features a host of comic, eccentric, and grotesque characters from the amusing Mr. Micawber (said to be based upon Dickens's own father) to the venomous Uriah Heep. Scholars have speculated as to the function of these and other ancillary characters in the novel, concluding that, while they bear little significance to the main plot of Copperfield's growth, they provide the necessary humor, pathos, and schematic conflict to make the novel come alive. Other characters of vital importance to a critical understanding of the story include James Steerforth, the focus of Copperfield's youthful hero-worship who is nevertheless seen as a foil to the narrator's gentle, trusting, and respectful nature. Copperfield's eventual wife, Agnes Wickfield, while frequently admired by nineteenth-century readers as the embodiment of Victorian domestic ideals of womanhood, has more generally troubled contemporary critics. Characterized as a lifeless saint or impossibly good, Agnes has been assessed by some modern commentators as a principal example of Dickens's infamously flat, unrealistic characters. Other critics have emphasized Agnes's symbolic function by observing that she represents exactly the qualities missing from the emotionally unruly Copperfield. In addition to the role of character in the novel, numerous critics have studied the narrative strategies employed by Dickens in *David Copperfield*. Recognizing

multiple levels of narrative discourse, such as those of Copperfield's childhood perception, the narrative commentary of the adult Copperfield, and Dickens's own authorial presence, critics have suggested the brilliant narrative complexity of the work, locating within it focused elements of satire, irony, social critique, and psychological suppression. Modern commentators have also begun to question the work's seemingly tidy closure strategies, which would appear to reiterate the norms of Victorian social economy. Ironies of appearance and value, deceptive narrative dissonance, and even hints of repressed sexuality thus predominate in many postmodern interpretations of Dickens's seemingly sentimental tale of maturation and middle-class success.

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### PRINCIPAL WORKS

- Sketches by Boz, Illustrative of Every-Day Life and Every-Day People* [as Boz] (sketches and short stories) 1836
- \**Posthumous Papers of the Pickwick Club* [as Boz] (novel) 1837
- \**Oliver Twist* (novel) 1838
- \**The Life and Adventures of Nicholas Nickleby* (novel) 1839
- \**Barnaby Rudge* (novel) 1841
- \**The Old Curiosity Shop* (novel) 1841
- American Notes for General Circulation* (travel essay) 1842
- A Christmas Carol in Prose* (short story) 1843
- The Chimes* (short story) 1844
- \**The Life and Adventures of Martin Chuzzlewit* (novel) 1844
- The Cricket on the Hearth* (short story) 1845
- Pictures from Italy* (travel essay) 1846
- \**Dealings with the Firm of Dombey and Son* (novel) 1848
- The Haunted Man, and The Ghost's Bargain* (short stories) 1848
- \**The Personal History of David Copperfield* (novel) 1850
- \**Bleak House* (novel) 1853
- \**Hard Times for These Times* (novel) 1854
- \**Little Dorrit* (novel) 1857
- \**A Tale of Two Cities* (novel) 1859
- \**Great Expectations* (novel) 1861
- The Uncommercial Traveller* (sketches and short stories) 1861
- \**Our Mutual Friend* (novel) 1865
- No Thoroughfare* [with Wilkie Collins] (play) 1867

*The Mystery of Edwin Drood* (unfinished novel) 1870

\*All of Dickens's novels were originally published serially in magazines, usually over periods of one to two years.

## CRITICISM

**Gwendolyn B. Needham** (essay date September 1954)

SOURCE: Needham, Gwendolyn B. "The Undisciplined Heart of David Copperfield." *Nineteenth-Century Fiction* 9, no. 2 (September 1954): 81-107.

[In the following essay, Needham discusses David Copperfield as a complex study of maturation, suggesting that the innate goodness of Dickens's protagonist reaches full thematic development only when Copperfield learns the virtue of emotional discipline.]

Author, critic, and public have distinguished *The Personal History and Experience of David Copperfield the Younger* by proclaiming it their favorite of all Dickens's works. Much has been written to explain this unusual triple accord, much on the novel's merits and defects. Among many valuable discussions it is surprising that the contribution of the theme of the undisciplined heart to the novel's power has not been more thoroughly appreciated. Study of the part played by theme reveals its importance: it emphasizes and illumines the character of David, showing that his function is far greater than that of narrator; it works within the novel's frame of retrospection to shape the structure; it gives deeper significance to and closer integration of minor episodes with the novel's larger unity; thus it contributes largely to the novel's total effect and pervading tone.

The theme of the undisciplined heart, implicit from the beginning, Dickens does not state explicitly until about three-fourths through the story. In the emotion-charged climax of the Strong episode, the young wife summarizes her history in three memorable phrases which ring forever in David's mind and heart: "The first mistaken impulse of an undisciplined heart." "There can be no disparity in marriage like unsuitability of mind and purpose." "My love was founded on a rock." The highly dramatic presentation is characteristic, but few have noted the significance of Dickens's long and careful preparation for it. Study of the Strong episode in relation to the whole novel demonstrates that from its inception the episode's *raison d'être* is statement and illustration of the theme, and that for maximum effect Dickens planned the episode's development to coincide

at the right moment with the emotional development of his hero. The extended dramatized statement of theme, involving five separately placed chapters, thus helps shape the order and treatment of material in the middle half of the novel.<sup>2</sup> How thereafter the theme's further development affects the arrangement of material is easily perceptible. Only with the entire story in mind, however, can one clearly perceive its implicit presence in the first part and then appreciate the full contribution the theme makes to the novel.

Although David declares his concern is with his personal life, not his writings, since "They express themselves, and I leave them to themselves" (p. 727; p. 889), his own story, ironically enough, has not always been left to express itself. Because Dickens included some authentic autobiographical data, many studies of the novel focus attention on Dickens's character rather than on David's, whose importance to the novel is accordingly minimized and the theme of his undisciplined heart neglected. George Gissing declares David is "decidedly not the hero of his own story";<sup>3</sup> Stephen Leacock dismisses him as "merely the looking-glass in which we see the other characters, the voice through which they speak. He himself has no more character than a spiritualist medium."<sup>4</sup> Ernest Baker believes David "emerges a real man" but leaves only "a pleasant but not very memorable impression." He comes near the truth when he says the story relates "how the boy's character was tried, his mind shaped, and his imagination fed, by all the different things that befell him,"<sup>5</sup> but with Dickens in mind rather than David, Baker unfortunately misses the significant last step—and *his heart disciplined*. Percy Lubbock rightly points out that "the far stretch of the past" makes the shape of the book; that the lesser dramas instead of controlling the novel "sink into the level of retrospect"; that the story is a "clear case for narration in person"; but mistakenly concludes, "Nothing was lost, because the sole need is for the reader to see what David sees; it matters little how his mind works, or what the effect of it all may be upon himself. . . . [He] offers a pair of eyes and a memory, nothing further is demanded of him."<sup>6</sup> Lubbock accounts for the overall form, but not for the novel's power. He fails to consider the importance of feeling and consequently underestimates the importance of David's character and overlooks the fact that within the frame of retrospection, the theme helps shape the selection and arrangement of material.

Those who regard David as only a pair of eyes and ears forget that what they see and hear is colored and heightened by David's feeling. As G. K. Chesterton observes, the novel's characters are romantically felt; "they are not exaggerated as personalities are exaggerated by an artist; they are exaggerated as personalities are exaggerated by their own friends and enemies. The strong souls are seen through the glorious haze of the emotions that

strong souls really create.”<sup>7</sup> It is David who provides this “glorious haze.” We do not see his person so distinctly because we are so often within him and both feel his vibrant personality and feel through it. David’s capacity for feeling, his sensitivity to the emotional tone of personal relationships, as well as his remarkable powers of observation, make his story live. Just as David’s feeling pervades, colors, and gives significance to the story, so the story in turn reveals David’s character and traces his emotional growth. Dickens has David as older narrator continually comment on his feeling *then* and *now*, thus skilfully indicating the varying intensity, importance, and permanence of the experiences in his emotional development while at the same time rendering their account more vivid, poignant, or humorous. The reader may recall numerous examples besides the following:

As I recall our being opposed thus, face to face, I seem again to hear my heart beat fast and high. . . . God help me, I might have been improved for my whole life, I might have been made another creature perhaps, for life, by a kind word at that season (pp. 48-49). I admired and loved him, and his approval was return enough. It was so precious to me, that I look back on these trifles now with an aching heart (p. 98). I now approach a period of my life which I can never lose the remembrance of while I remember anything, and the recollection of which has often, without my invocation, come before me like a ghost, and haunted happier times (p. 159). There is no doubt whatever that I was a lackadaisical young spooney; but there was a purity of heart in all this still, that prevents my having quite a contemptuous recollection of it, let me laugh as I may (p. 414). 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. For years after it occurred I dreamed of it often.

(p. 826)

Study in their context shows how fully and variously Dickens used such comments. They complete the characterization of the hero by revealing the kind of man the boy David has become. They clarify the characterization of other personages by enabling us to feel their personalities as David does and also perceive those qualities which his later judgment discerns. They serve to guide, summarize, or forecast the action and to connect various narrative links. But above all, these comments help to prepare and arouse the reader emotionally.

All the events and people in David’s written memory are bathed in his emotions—saturated, steeped in feeling as David was steeped in Dora. This fact impresses us forcibly when we hold this novel of retrospection in our own retrospect. We can see that just as “the knots

and networks of action” sink into the level of retrospect, the feeling proportionately rises and pervades the whole with its radiating light and warmth. And it is the feeling evoked by the “wonderful show” that goes straight to our heart and remains. Dickens’s basic belief that “real love and truth are stronger in the end than any evil and misfortune in the world” is the foundation for the novel’s prevailing tone—a melodic blend of bright humor, tender sorrow, and firm hope. A paraphrase of Dickens’s words can best describe the novel’s lasting effect: “Of all [the novels] that Time has in his grip, there is none that in one retrospection I can smile at half so much, and think of half so tenderly” (p. 514). Perhaps the chief artistic virtue, shining above other merits and overshadowing the defects, of that long retrospection, *David Copperfield*, is that it evokes so perfectly the emotion natural to retrospection—the mingled tears and laughter which most men feel as they review their past.

When we realize the preëminence of feeling, the importance in the novel of hero and theme becomes manifest; David is feeling’s main source, the theme its guiding channel. David appropriately has traits typical of the man of sensibility—innocence, simplicity, gullibility, benevolence, tenderness. If tears be an index of sensibility, David supplies an overflow; they accompany almost every emotion—joy, grief, shame, rapture, indignation, pity—and serve to relieve and refresh, soothe and exalt. Spiritually akin to Goldsmith and Sterne in his tender humanity,<sup>8</sup> Dickens, had he written in the eighteenth century, might well have called David’s story, “The History of a Man of Feeling.” He does not represent his hero as perfect, for the model of his history is Fielding’s *Tom Jones*. A domestic occurrence records the literary fact. At the time when Dickens’s mind was “running like a high sea” on plans for *Copperfield*, his sixth son was born (January 16, 1849), and Dickens wrote John Forster that he had changed the child’s name from the intended “Oliver Goldsmith” to “Henry Fielding,” as “a kind of homage to the style of work he was now bent on beginning.”

The example of Fielding probably influenced also Dickens’s choice of theme. Fielding, concerned with his hero’s way in the world, directly warns that Tom’s innate goodness is not enough; he must learn prudence:

Let this, my young readers, be your constant maxim, that no man can be good enough to enable him to neglect the rules of prudence; nor will Virtue herself look beautiful unless she be bedecked with the outward ornaments of decency and decorum. And this precept, my worthy disciples, if you read with due attention, you will, I hope, find sufficiently enforced by examples in the following pages.

(p. 96)

Dickens’s theme of the undisciplined heart encompasses this truth and goes further; natural goodness plus pru-

dence may win affectionate respect, but one must learn a higher wisdom of the heart if he would achieve inner strength and peace. The good heart must have no "alloy of self," must love humanity as well as persons. It must be self-reliant and possess constancy and fortitude in order to be strengthened, not conquered or merely softened, by adversity and sorrow. The good heart must learn the nature of "real truth and love" in order to overcome "evil and misfortune in this world." This is the discipline which David and every good man must achieve.

By use of David as narrator Dickens cannot make, as Fielding does, an early specific statement of his theme. He must present his details and enforcing examples implicitly until David's emotional development reaches the point where David himself can perceive his mistaken impulses and can realize his heart's need for discipline. To use this method effectively, Dickens must sufficiently characterize and soundly motivate his narrator-hero so that David's revelation to the reader of his character and of the developing theme and the fact of his own continued blindness are both rendered convincing. A brief survey of the story up to the explicit statement will show how well Dickens accomplished this task.

When we analyze David's character (and do not unconsciously deprive him, as is too often done, of those traits in which he most resembles his author-father), we find that although easily classifiable as a man of feeling, he emerges a real individual, lovable as boy, youth, and man. He is sensitively alive to the world about him and throws himself with romantic fervor into whatever he does or feels. He possesses honesty, loyalty, generosity, and modesty but lacks active courage. Delicate as a child, he was soon hurt bodily or mentally. Naturally timid, he has a passive fortitude, suffers without complaint (exemplified by his childhood London experience), but exhibits courage only when driven by desperation. He uses his native talents with earnest, persevering industry to win economic success and literary fame. The pervading sensibility of his loving heart wins affection but proves his own greatest weakness. His disposition is too pliant, too easily influenced. At times his loyalty is misplaced, his feeling misdirected or mistaken; his modesty often sinks into lack of self-confidence, his judgment into self-distrust. We must remember, above all, that he is very young. He does not reach twenty-one until the story is two-thirds over, is between twenty-six and twenty-seven at its close, and is thirty-seven when he narrates his history.

Both heredity and environment play their part in forming David's character. Through Aunt Betsey we learn how much he resembles his father and mother, from both of whom he derives his sensibility, earnest heart, and too pliant disposition. Copperfield, Sr., had "a deli-

cate constitution," a dreamy romantic nature without judgment, and a predilection for "wax dolls"; his mother is "a simple affectionate Baby," who becomes an "unhappy, misdirected Baby," a "poor little fool" for trusting Murdstone. Although sure of David's principles (he follows her advice: "Never be mean in anything; never be false; never be cruel") and confident of his powers (he achieves an excellent scholastic record), Aunt Betsey fears his lack of firmness. She urges him to be "A fine firm fellow, with a will of your own . . . with strength of character that is not to be influenced, except on good reason, by anybody, or by anything. . . . That's what your father and mother might both have been, Heaven knows, and been the better for it" (p. 289).

Aunt Betsey herself is the first example we meet of an undisciplined heart, but we do not recognize her as such until Dickens gives his purposely postponed explanation. In the opening chapter we learn enough of her oddities to prepare us for her abrupt departure, never to return, when "niece Betsey" arrives a little David. Knowledge of this formidable eccentric adds to the boy's suspense (also the reader's) in his desperate journey to Dover. Later we find her harsh rigidity hides a good heart that has been closed to the world since her younger husband's deceitful villainy. Embittered by the "first mistaken impulse of her undisciplined heart," Aunt Betsey renounced mankind (save simple Mr. Dick), developed a fixation against marriage, and became an eccentric recluse. Care and responsibility for the orphaned child opens her heart first to love for David, then for mankind; thus she achieves the disciplined heart and proves it by extending the charitable love to Dora that she had denied to Mrs. Copperfield (pp. 366, 672).

Easily recognizable is the example of the undisciplined heart presented by Mrs. Copperfield, who cannot "live under coldness or unkindness" and cannot bear either responsibility or discomfort. The disastrous results of his mother's weakness are clearly revealed in David's account of his childhood sufferings, although even as older narrator he expresses love and pity for her, never criticism. Incapable of understanding the child's unhappy bewilderment when he finds her remarried, she upbraids him and Peggotty for making her unhappy, "when one has the most right to expect [the world] to be as agreeable as possible." The little boy soon perceives Mr. Murdstone's overpowering influence: "I knew as well that he could mould her pliant nature into any form he chose, as I know, now, that he did it" (p. 47). Instead of expecting comfort from his mother, the child tries to help by staying out of the Murdstones' way: "I had perception enough to know that my mother was the victim always; that she was afraid to speak to me, or be kind to me, . . . that she was not only ceaselessly afraid of her own offending, but of my offending,



and uneasily watched their looks if I only moved" (p. 125). Such conditions undoubtedly increased David's timidity and deepened that distrust of himself which he later observes, "has often beset me in life on small occasions, when it would be better away." Recall how often his lack of self-assertion makes him an easy victim to the tyranny of waiters, coachmen, and landladies.

What he unconsciously misses in his mother and sorely needs, the child finds in Peggotty—a love "founded on a rock," a trust and constancy on which he can rely. When she refuses to believe he has "bad passions," David observes, "there grew up in my breast a feeling for Peggotty which I cannot very well define. She did not replace by mother—no one could do that; but she came into a vacancy in my heart, which closed upon her, and I felt towards her something I have never felt for any other human being" (p. 64). What the child sensed, the reader can fully perceive—Peggotty has the disciplined heart; his mother's childish nature prevents her loving heart from ever achieving discipline. Fortunately for David's memory of her, his mother with death "winged her way back to her calm, untroubled youth, and cancelled all the rest." Dickens clearly makes the example of Mrs. Copperfield prophetic of David's experience with Dora, another "simple, affectionate Baby."

His school experiences first reveal weaknesses in David's own character. Although the boy cannot perceive Steerforth's faults nor Traddles' merits, his detailed account exposes them, and his comments as narrator plainly intimate the course of future events. David's erroneous valuation of his two friends, so long held, is the first example of his heart's "mistaken impulses." This error, understandable in the boy, not easily excusable in the young man, is destined to bring grief to David and grave trouble to others—sorrow for which David feels partly responsible. Critics who designate the whole Steerforth episode as extraneous, an "artistic blot" on the story, have not realized fully its purpose and use.<sup>10</sup> Both Steerforth and Traddles, absolute foils to each other, serve as foils to David. The stories of each friend's fate are intertwined and integrated with David's own story and with his emotional growth; their parts in the novel both illustrate and develop the theme. The child's self-distrust and need for loving approval—increased by his unhappiness at home—help explain his blind hero-worship of the older Steerforth. His champion's magnetic personality long represents what he himself would like to be but is not. The comic Traddles arouses David's affection but also his laughter—"I never think of that boy but with a strange disposition to laugh, and with tears in my eyes"—and he inevitably feels superior.

Misled by appearances, David long fails to appreciate Traddles' worth, honor, and honest friendship. Years afterwards, when Traddles frees the Wickfields from

Heep's net, David confesses that "this was the first occasion on which I really did justice to the clear head, and plain, patient, practical good sense of my old schoolfellow" (p. 798). Further illustrating the theme, Dickens contrasts the love of Traddles and Sophy ("the dearest girl—one in ten, you know") to that of David and Dora. Traddles and Sophy have unselfish hearts, "suitability of mind and purpose," and love "founded on a rock." David finds comparison impossible between their patient love and his and Dora's ecstasy. He cannot comprehend their unselfish consideration for Sophy's preposterous family; his impatient ardor rejects their motto, "Wait and hope." Only when the finally disciplined David returns from Europe does he appreciate how rich in happiness such a marriage as theirs will prove.

When David and Steerforth meet later, the overtures of the jaded young man, attracted by "Daisy's" fresh innocence, indicate true friendship to David's trusting heart: "As he had treated me at school differently from all the rest, I joyfully believed that he treated me in life unlike any other friend he had. I believed that I was nearer to his heart than any other friend, and my own heart warmed with attachment to him" (p. 316). Nourished by sensibility, this warmth inevitably blazes into a bright glorification of *friendship* in Steerforth that blinds David to realities. When Agnes warns of his "bad angel," Steerforth's image is so cemented in David's heart by all his "romantic feelings of fidelity and friendship" that he feels ashamed of entertaining even a momentary doubt. When Steerforth proclaims his philosophy of riding roughshod or smooth-shod over all obstacles to win a race, David merely wishes his friend had a race worthy of his great powers. Equally blinded by innocent love for Emily, David has no suspicion of the impending Yarmouth catastrophe. His shock and grief, therefore, are great when he learns of their elopement and witnesses the widespread disaster resulting from his friend's "roughshod" victory.

From this experience David could have learned much about the real nature of love, truth, and the disciplined heart, for the entire episode teaches this important lesson. In varying ways and degrees, all the principal characters, including himself, provide enforcing examples of the theme. Steerforth, Mrs. Steerforth, and Rosa Dartle, each marred by the "alloy of self," exemplify the misery to which the undisciplined heart can doom itself and bring innocent victims. David does perceive that mother and son are "alike in their moral constitution" and that her misguided mother-love has helped ruin the son. Her proud refusal to be reconciled except on her own terms perpetuates the tragedy which her son's passion has begun. Selfish in their love, she and Rosa Dartle are embittered, not softened, by grief and feel no compassion for others; they are doomed to wear out their desolate years in conflict and misery. Dickens