

DAVID COPPERFIELD



CHARLES DICKENS

EDITED BY JEROME H. BUCKLEY

A NORTON CRITICAL EDITION



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Charles Dickens
DAVID COPPERFIELD

AUTHORITATIVE TEXT
BACKGROUNDS
CRITICISM

Edited by

JEROME H. BUCKLEY

LATE OF
HARVARD UNIVERSITY

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Preface

Seven Dickens novels—from *Pickwick Papers* (1836) to *Dombey and Son* (1848)—precede *David Copperfield*, and seven follow it—from *Bleak House* (1852) to the unfinished *Edwin Drood* of 1870. Midway in succession, *David Copperfield* has the advantage of “centrality” in tone, for better than any of the others it combines the humor and bright animation of the early fiction with something of the probing intensity and sober psychology of the later, darker books. Tolstoi, who ranked Dickens above all English writers, considered it Dickens’ highest achievement and the “Tempest” chapter, especially, the standard by which the world’s great fiction should be judged. Though other readers may dismiss such praise as extravagant overstatement, *David Copperfield*, as completed in 1850, may indeed be the “central” novel in quality, as it is in time, of the whole nineteenth-century English tradition. It provides amplitude, variety of dramatic incident, comedy, pathos, satire, and sentiment; it presents over fifty sharply delineated characters; it develops a suspenseful plot with narrative gusto; and it reveals at almost every turn a fertility of observation and invention and a master’s command of an assured and eloquent style.

Dickens over the years has been the most influential novelist in the language, and *David Copperfield*, his own “favorite child,” not only has had the widest popular appeal but also has drawn the strongest response from writers of many different literary persuasions. Henry James, for example, remembered hiding under a table as a small boy to hear the first serial installment read aloud to his mother. Dostoevsky in a Siberian prison pored enraptured over an early translation. Franz Kafka planned his last book, *Amerika*, as a “sheer imitation.” Swinburne declared *David Copperfield* a supreme masterpiece. Matthew Arnold was pleased to acknowledge its perennial charm. James Joyce paid it the less reverent tribute of parody in *Ulysses*. The young D. H. Lawrence liked to identify with the nominal hero. And Virginia Woolf, who had little general sympathy with Dickens, confessed to the durability of this one novel as a force belonging to “the memories and myths of life,” an experience to be assumed in everyone’s education.

Whatever the critical reader’s approach to *David Copperfield*, few would deny its conspicuous virtues. The early chapters remain unsurpassed as a depiction of childhood, the perspectives of a child’s vision,

and the otherness of the adult world. Few novels offer so large a gallery of memorable characters. Byronic, self-destructive Steerforth; “volatile” Miss Mowcher; frustrated, bitter Rosa Dartle; kindly, buxom Peggotty; honest Aunt Betsey Trotwood; and, above all, irrepressible, rhetorical Mr. Micawber—these have become our fixed possessions, permanent residents in the country of the imagination. And all characters are introduced with a Dickensian democracy of concern so that the inarticulate, willing Barkis and the hardly literate Mr. Peggotty have at least as much claim to our attention as the genteel Mrs. Steerforth. No fiction has a greater vividness of visual impression. Dickens—or, more precisely, David the narrator—anticipates cinematic effects and techniques. He has the sharp eye of the camera for both the significant close-up and the long vista; he captures alike the design on the lid of a sewing box and the stretch of a stormy seacoast. He is able to arrange lights, shadows, and colors, to focus on telling details of furniture and decor, patterns and objects sufficiently clear to endow a setting with its own unique and unforgettable reality—Mr. Peggotty’s grounded ark, for example, or Aunt Betsey’s cottage at Dover, the Heeps’ “umble” household or Dora’s disorderly ménage. He understands the importance of tempo. Time becomes qualitative; sometimes the moment expands, and the interview or episode receives portentous emphasis; sometimes whole years shrink into vignettes, series of short stills, reeled by in quick succession as in the four splendid “retrospects,” each evoked in the rapid present tense. From the beginning, many scenes seem to beg transfer to the screen or stage, for the narrator constantly assigns physical gestures as accompaniments to the dialogue, as if directing the movement of the actors. The novel as a whole is vibrant with a heightened sensuous animation.

Having described most circumstantially the day of his birth, which he can only have known by hearsay and his own active fancy, David in Chapter II affirms his greatest gift: “If it should appear from anything I may set down in this narrative that I was a child of close observation, or that as a man I have a strong memory of my childhood, I undoubtedly lay claim to both of these characteristics.” David, who here surely speaks for Dickens, retains throughout his career the power to observe with such care and intensity that the object seen emerges with an almost preternatural clarity of definition. He enjoys the “negative capability” toward which Keats aspired, the capacity to suppress the self and all self-interest sufficiently to enter empathically the life of another being. So strong is his habit of selfless observation that we may sometimes think him merely passive and colorless as compared with the colorful persons he meets. Yet we misread his story if we fail to see that he also has the need for self-analysis and the ability to relate his friends and adventures to a self-consciously subjective development.

David Copperfield is actually the most inward of Dickens’ novels, the first to be written in the first person, and the closest in detail to his own career. In private correspondence (see pp. 772–76) Dickens confessed

to a strong personal stake in David's story, and in an autobiographical fragment (see pp. 766–72) not meant for publication, he described the painful experience in a blacking warehouse which serves for the account—often word-for-word the same—of David's misery at Murdstone and Grinby's. By the end of his narrative David is a novelist of considerable popularity, attempting to come to terms with his fame. Dickens, when he designed the novel, was about the same age as the mature David and apparently writing, at least in part, for the same reasons.

Unlike David, Dickens, born in 1812, was a member of a large family, the second child of a grandiloquent, irresponsible father, the prototype, no doubt, of Wilkins Micawber. We know relatively little of his earliest years, except that parallels may be drawn between his boyhood reading in fairy tales and eighteenth-century fiction and David's, and between their schooling, though Dickens' first school was apparently less grim than Mr. Creakle's. When John Dickens was sent, like Micawber, to debtor's prison in 1824, Charles entered the "servitude" of the warehouse, from which six months later his father, over the protest of his mother, was able to rescue him. After further schooling, he began to work in the law courts and then, like David, learned shorthand, proficiency at which, before long, made him a highly successful reporter of parliamentary debates. At seventeen he met the Dora of his susceptible young life, Maria Beadnell, who alternately encouraged and rebuked his infatuation. By the time Maria decided to end the relationship four years later, he had published the first of his *Sketches by Boz*, a series which appeared with great popular success as a book in 1836. In the same year, he began *Pickwick Papers*, which immediately secured his reputation and led him to give his full time henceforth to his own writing. Also in 1836 he married Catherine Hogarth, who was to bear him ten children and yet prove increasingly incompatible. Eventually, in 1858, Kate and Dickens separated; but Kate's sister, Georgina, who had lived with them for many years and was probably the inspiration of the saintly Agnes Wickfield, remained with Dickens and most of the children as devoted housekeeper. Dickens, meanwhile, had become a writer of international pre-eminence and, as public reader of scenes from his novels, a dramatic performer of overwhelming intensity. The best of his later books, *Great Expectations* (1861) and *Our Mutual Friend* (1865), showed undiminished powers of imagination and construction. But the feverish lecturing of his last years, undertaken with almost demonic energy, proved irreparably debilitating. He was near complete collapse in March of 1870, when he gave his last dynamic presentations of *Oliver Twist* and *David Copperfield*, the most popular of his readings. Within three months he was dead.

Dickens frequently complained of having missed one real happiness in life, and David, too, repeatedly suffers "the old unhappy feeling" of a lack never fully defined, troubling him "like a strain of sorrowful music heard in the night." But David is not to be consumed by restless desire;

he ultimately finds the satisfaction his creator was denied. Though his experience coincides in some details with that of Dickens, he differs sharply in temperament. The closest resemblance lies in the professional dedication of each, the mature pursuit, despite all distractions, of the writer's vocation, and in their unflagging common interest in human aspect and idiosyncrasy and all the modes of memory. *David Copperfield* does not describe the technical problems of a novelist, but it nonetheless reflects a novelist's sensitive observation of psychology at work. David observes not only the deportment of others—the transformation in real crisis of querulous Mrs. Gummidge, the smoldering repressions of Rosa Dartle, Steerforth's battling with "the horrors"—but also his own unaccountable and sometimes perverse reactions: his feeling of distinction at school when he learns of his mother's death; his half-attraction to Uriah Heep, whom he loathes; his continued loyalty to Steerforth after Steerforth's defection; his sense of sudden displacement as he catches sight of a "lunatic gentleman" looking out at the graveyard from his old room at Blunderstone. He shares Dickens' habit of symbolic vision, the will, that is, to make the intensely perceived object the embodiment of a subjective state. Miss Murdstone's chains and bracelets, for example, become to him an index of her essential self: "These reminded me, in reference to Miss Murdstone's nature, of the fetters over a jail door; suggesting on the outside, to all beholders, what was to be expected within." The strength of the great "Tempest" chapter rests on a similar correspondence between inner and outer, which lends the events a sort of hallucinatory vividness:

But there was now a great darkness besides; and that invested the storm with new terrors, real and fanciful.

I could not eat, I could not sit still, I could not continue steadfast to anything. Something within me, faintly answering to the storm without, tossed up the depths of my memory and made a tumult in them.

In a more characteristically tranquil mood, David records the sense of *déjà vu*, and the strange mingling of time levels or the power of sense impressions, to recall the past with its lost joys and secret hungers. Dickens thus grants David a full measure of his own psychological insight and concern. Yet David's personal history achieves its independence as a work of fiction, and it must be read as David's autobiography, not as Dickens'.

The narrative of its hero's growth from childhood to early maturity, *David Copperfield* establishes the form and pattern of the bildungsroman in English literature. As a conspicuously successful example of the genre, which is usually traced to Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister*, it anticipates and broadly influences a whole succession of notable novels: Dickens' own *Great Expectations*, George Meredith's *The Ordeal of Richard Feverel*,

Thomas Hardy's *Jude the Obscure*, Samuel Butler's *The Way of All Flesh*, H. G. Wells's *Tono-Bungay*, D. H. Lawrence's *Sons and Lovers*, James Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. Each of these follows more or less closely the standard formula of the bildungsroman. Each presents a child orphaned or alienated to a degree from his father, growing up in a provincial or parochial environment, making his way eventually to the big city, seeking an education both in and out of school, learning also from two love affairs or sexual encounters (one usually debasing, the other exalting), sensitive beyond most of his contemporaries but rather slow to discover his gifts, finding after struggle and misdirection a career or at least a philosophic attitude towards his varied experience.

Though each of the bildungsromane attains its own style and tone, each concentrates on the emerging identity of the protagonist. David is concerned from the first sentence of his autobiography with the question of his "heroic" orientation: "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." In childhood and adolescence, David frequently feels inadequate and unheroic; he acknowledges his "unsteady and irresolute" disposition and the unexamined susceptibility of his "undisciplined heart." As a young man he expects to find the heroic ideal realized in the person of Steerforth, who seems the complete gentleman, thoroughly self-possessed, sophisticated, and versatile. As the mature narrator describing his youth, he knows Steerforth actually to have been the "bad angel," dangerously attractive, but essentially false and failing, driven by imperious pride, selfish, yet afraid of true self-knowledge. By the end of his story David is clearly the real hero insofar as he has discovered and asserted his identity. Through strenuous self-discipline he has not only mastered his life's work but has also learned a poise sufficient to accept the painful realities of experience. He has achieved what the identity psychologist Erik Erickson calls "ego integrity," or "the ego's accrued assurance of its proclivity for order and meaning," which is the ultimate mark of maturity.

At the beginning of the second-to-last chapter, David speaks of an incident still to record, "without which one thread in the web I have spun would have a ravelled end." *David Copperfield* as a whole is so various, so multitudinous, so rich in character and action, that we do not readily think of it as an intricately spun web. Life, as we know it, is full of loose ends, and in such a vast and life-crowded canvas as David has unrolled we scarcely demand that every strand be accounted for, interwoven, caught up in one tight fabric. Yet the novel as a bildungsroman has one insistent theme, the disciplining of the hero's emotional and moral life, and it is not difficult to perceive the relationship of many of the principal persons and events to this central motif. Annie Strong warns earnestly against following "the first mistaken impulse of [the] undisciplined heart," and David echoes her phrase in self-accusation.

Aunt Betsey's impetuous marriage of long ago and Clara Copperfield's foolish passion for Mr. Murdstone are correlatives to David's impulsive infatuation with Dora. Steerforth, Emily, and Rosa provide object lessons in undisciplined self-indulgence, whereas Uriah Heep exemplifies a viciously self-seeking restraint. Traddles and Agnes, on the other hand, are models of willing self-sacrifice and disinterested affection. David's role in the plot and subplots that engage the energies of all these sometimes seems minimal, as if he were merely the acute observer. Yet he learns much by his responses, and each grouping of chapters, each original serial installment, adds something new and significant to our impression of his developing personality.

The deepest unity, however, ample enough to encompass apparent surplus and irrelevancy, lies less in the content than in the style, not so much in the absolute symmetry of the web as in the expressive imagination of the spinner. *David Copperfield* first appeared in the same year as two of the greatest poems of the nineteenth century, *The Prelude* of Wordsworth and Tennyson's *In Memoriam*. Thematically it shares a good deal with both, a concern with the grounds of selfhood, the persistence of memory, and the force of vocation in confronting the challenge of experience. As a novel, of course, it differs from both in method and dramatic color. Nonetheless, it compares with each in one vital respect, its serious regard for language. No earlier English fiction more closely approaches the condition of poetry than the reminiscential passages of *David Copperfield*. None shows throughout its course better control of cadence, metaphor, and recurrent image, or a quicker sensitivity to the connotations of the lonely word. If, as F. R. Leavis concluded in a seminal essay, Dickens is essentially "a great poet," whose "endless resource in felicitously varied expression is an extraordinary responsiveness to life," then this book shows him writing at the very height of his poetic power.

JEROME H. BUCKLEY

A Note on the Text

The present edition closely follows the 1850 text (the first issue of *David Copperfield* in book form), including most of the original punctuation and spelling, but corrects the "Errata" (indicated in the first edition), along with other obvious misprints and several minor misreadings.

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The Text of
DAVID COPPERFIELD



DAVID COPPERFIELD by Charles Dickens London: Bradbury & Evans, Bouverie Street, 1850

DAVID COPPERFIELD

BY
CHARLES DICKENS.



LONDON:
BRADBURY & EVANS, BOUVERIE STREET,
1850.

PREFACE

I do not find it easy to get sufficiently far away from this Book, in the first sensations of having finished it, to refer to it with the composure which this formal heading would seem to require. My interest in it, is so recent and strong; and my mind is so divided between pleasure and regret—pleasure in the achievement of a long design, regret in the separation from many companions—that I am in danger of wearying the reader whom I love, with personal confidences, and private emotions.

Besides which, all that I could say of the Story, to any purpose, I have endeavoured to say in it.

It would concern the reader little, perhaps, to know, how sorrowfully the pen is laid down at the close of a two-years' imaginative task; or how an Author feels as if he were dismissing some portion of himself into the shadowy world, when a crowd of the creatures of his brain are going from him for ever. Yet, I have nothing else to tell; unless, indeed, I were to confess (which might be of less moment still) that no one can ever believe this Narrative, in the reading, more than I have believed it in the writing.

Instead of looking back, therefore, I will look forward. I cannot close this Volume more agreeably to myself, than with a hopeful glance towards the time when I shall again put forth my two green leaves¹ once a month, and with a faithful remembrance of the genial sun and showers that have fallen on these leaves of David Copperfield, and made me happy.

LONDON,
October, 1850.

1. The covers of the monthly numbers.