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CHARLES DICKENS

DAVID COPPERFIELD

The Personal History of DAVID COPPERFIELD

CHARLES DICKENS

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David Copperfield
大卫·科波菲尔德

《大卫·科波菲尔德》是十九世纪著名小说家狄更斯的重要作品。小说的主人公大卫·科波菲尔德的生活道路与作者的经历有颇多相似之处，因而被认为是一部带有半自传性质的小说。由于受到1848年高涨的工人运动的影响，作者对现实的认识和描绘都比较深刻。狄更斯以逼真而动人的文笔，刻画了大卫·科波菲尔德、辟果提一家、密考伯夫妇、摩德斯通、尤利亚·希普等一系列性格鲜明的人物形象，通过这些人物的行动和冲突，展示了当时社会生活的广阔画面，并用伦理道德观念分析了造成婚姻和爱情悲剧的原因。

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CHARLES DICKENS

CHARLES DICKENS was born at Portsmouth on 7 February 1812. He was the second of the eight children of John Dickens, a clerk in the Naval Pay Office, whose mother had been in service to Lord Crewe. Although John Dickens was hard-working, he was rarely able to live within his income, and this brought a series of crises upon his family, which lived under the shadow of menacing social insecurity.

John Dickens's work took him from place to place, so that Charles spent his early childhood in Portsmouth, London, and Chatham. He was happiest at Chatham, where he attended a school run by a young Baptist minister, who recognized his abilities and paid him special attention. In 1823 the family moved to London, faced with financial disaster, and, to help out, a relative of Mrs Dickens offered Charles work in a blacking business which he managed. Two days before his twelfth birthday the boy began work at a factory at Hungerford Stairs, labelling bottles for six shillings a week.

Shortly before this John Dickens had been arrested for debt, and soon the whole family, except for Charles who was found lodgings, joined him in the Marshalsea Debtors' Prison. The double blow – his menial job and the family shame – gave Charles a shock which transformed him. In later years he told only his wife and his closest friend, John Forster, of these experiences, which haunted him till his death.

After three months in prison, John Dickens was released by process of having himself declared an Insolvent Debtor, but it was not until weeks later that he withdrew Charles from work and sent him to school, where he did well. At fifteen, Charles began work in the office of a firm of Gray's Inn attorneys. Sensing a vocation elsewhere, he taught himself shorthand, and eighteen months later began to work as a freelance reporter in the court of Doctors' Commons.

In 1829 he fell passionately in love with Maria Beadnell, the daughter of a banker. Their affair staggered fruitlessly on until the

summer of 1833. Meanwhile, he began to report parliamentary debates, and won himself a high reputation for speed and accuracy. His first *Sketches by Boz* appeared in magazines soon after he was twenty-one. In 1834 he joined the reporting staff of the *Morning Chronicle*. A well-received volume of his *Sketches* appeared on his twenty-fourth birthday.

His growing reputation secured him a commission from the publishers, Chapman and Hall, to provide the text to appear in monthly instalments beside sporting plates by a popular artist, Seymour. He 'thought of Mr Pickwick'. Two days after the first number appeared he married Catherine Hogarth, the daughter of a fellow-journalist, on the prospect. Although early sales were disappointing, *Pickwick Papers* (1836–7) soon became a publishing phenomenon, and Dickens's characters the centre of a popular cult. Part of the secret was the method of cheap serial publication, which Dickens used for all his subsequent novels (some, in fact, being serialized in weekly magazines edited by himself), and which was copied by other writers.

While *Pickwick* was still running, Dickens began *Oliver Twist* (1837). *Nicholas Nickleby* (1838–9) provided him with a third success, and sales of *The Old Curiosity Shop* (1840–41) reached 100,000. After finishing *Barnaby Rudge* (1841), Dickens set off with his wife for the United States. He went full of enthusiasm for the young republic, but returned heartily disillusioned, in spite of a triumphant reception. His experiences are recorded in *American Notes* (1842).

His first setback came when *Martin Chuzzlewit* (1843–4) did not repeat the extraordinary success of its predecessors, though he promptly inaugurated his triumphant series of *Christmas Books* with *A Christmas Carol* (1843). He now travelled abroad, first to Italy (1844–5) and then to Switzerland and Paris (1846). During a brief interlude in England he projected, not another novel, but a paper, the *Daily News*. This first appeared in January 1846, but Dickens resigned after only seventeen days as editor.

His next novel, *Dombey and Son* (1846–8), was more wholly serious and more carefully planned than his early work. In *David Copperfield* (1849–50), he explored his own childhood and youth, thinly disguised. In the 1850s he increased his already intense

interest in public affairs. He founded *Household Words*, a weekly magazine which combined entertainment with social purpose; it was succeeded in 1859 by *All the Year Round*, which sold as many as 300,000 copies. *Bleak House* (1852–3) and *Hard Times* (1854) have strong social themes, and *Little Dorrit* (1855–7) continues Dickens's bitter public denunciation of the whole framework of government and administration which had mismanaged the Crimean War.

In 1858 he separated from his wife. Although Kate, a shadowy, slow person, had given him ten children, she had never suited his exuberant temperament very well. He befriended a young actress, Ellen Ternan, who may have become his mistress. He was now living mainly in Kent, at Gad's Hill, near his boyhood home of Chatham. *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859), *Great Expectations* (1860–61), and *Our Mutual Friend* (1864–5) completed his life's main work of fourteen major novels. By the mid 1860s his health was failing, partly under the strain of his successful but exhausting public readings from his own work, which had begun in 1858. An immensely profitable but physically shattering series of readings in America (1867–8) speeded his decline, and he collapsed during a 'farewell' series in England. His last novel, *Edwin Drood* (1870), was never completed; he suffered a stroke after a full day's work at Gad's Hill on 8 June 1870 and died the following day. Lamentation was demonstrative and universal, and he was buried in the Poets' Corner of Westminster Abbey.

Dickens's extreme energy was not exhausted by his unique success as a novelist. His weekly journalism made heavy demands on his time after 1850, and he constantly turned to the stage, first, in many amateur theatricals, given privately or for charity, where he produced and took leading roles with great brilliance, and later, in his public readings. His concern with social reform in his novels and journalism was matched by an active personal interest in several charitable projects.

Furthermore, as Lionel Trilling puts it, 'the mere record of his conviviality is exhausting'. His typical relaxation was a long walk at great speed, and he was dedicated to any and every sort of game or jollification. In the early days of his success, observers were sometimes displeased by his flamboyant dress and a hint of vulgarity

in his manners, but he had powerful, magnetizing eyes and overwhelming charm. Beneath his high spirits, friends could detect a permanent emotional insecurity and restlessness, which flavours the tragi-comic world of his novels.

Two biographies stand out among many: John Forster's *Life* (1872–4, many times reprinted); and Edgar Johnson's *Charles Dickens, His Tragedy and Triumph* (London: Gollancz, 1953), which embodies material neglected or suppressed by Forster. Readers interested in Dickens's methods as a novelist will be enlightened by John Butt's and Kathleen Tillotson's *Dickens at Work* (London: Methuen, 1957). There are innumerable specialized studies of his work, life, and views. A magazine exclusively devoted to the subject, *The Dickensian*, is published three times a year by the Dickens Fellowship.

A. C.

INTRODUCTION

DICKENS is an author who has evoked devotion and love in quite extraordinary measure. Other authors might be considered greater: Tolstoy more comprehensive, Henry James more subtle, Flaubert more nearly perfect; but Dickens's stature is immense, and the bulk of his work needs no apology. His readers have always been legion, and it is paradoxical that current analytical criticism has only fairly recently begun to pay proper respect to what his enormous popularity has suggested all along. Whereas the reputations of certain authors have slumped disastrously with the passage of time, that of Dickens has, in some respects, improved. His novels and stories are adapted for the theatre, for radio, television, and film, for solo performance, and for both 'musicals' and modern opera. The novels themselves sell steadily. Thus, it is not to his limitations that we ought really to look – how, for example, his sense of tragedy falls short of that of Dostoevsky, or in what ways he exceeds the bounds of literary tact in a way that Jane Austen never does – but at his special astonishing virtues. His copiousness, energy, vividness, imaginative sweep, and tender concern have made his characters proverbial and his novels household names. His grip on the reader is hypnotic. He is funny, macabre, melodramatic, delicate by turns. What the critic must demonstrate is the scale of his endeavour and the deliberate artistic control he exercises over his spontaneity and abundance. It is a subtle and marvellous achievement.

To see the extent of this achievement in proper perspective we need to recall how early, comparatively speaking, in the history of the modern novel Dickens was writing. What had gone before? Dickens loved the great eighteenth-century novelists, especially Smollett; he knew Shakespeare and Ben Jonson extremely well; he admired Scott; he knew the pulp fiction of his own century; he adored the *Arabian Nights* and *Don Quixote*. He was very widely read, and vastly different from the ignorant and unintelligent comedian that certain critics sometimes manage to see. But, self-evidently, unlike any twentieth-century novelist he had not had the chance to learn from Tolstoy or Henry James or James Joyce; and,

in fact, Dostoevsky had to acknowledge *his* debt to Dickens. This needs emphasizing because his explorations in form and technique, both in his early picaresque novels and in the later 'poetic' constructs, ought to be seen as breaking relatively new ground.

This is not to deny all those qualities that have traditionally been ascribed to him. He was always able to raise a smile or a laugh and bring a tear to the eye. Characters rise from his pages with unbounded vigour: great comic creations like Pecksniff, Mrs Gamp, and Wilkins Micawber; creatures of controlled pathos like Paul Dombey and poor Jo (in *Bleak House*). Such is the power of his imagination, embodied in a style occasionally slipshod but more often of striking originality and variety, that his novels form a phantasmagoric world seen with the sharp intensity of hallucination. He had suffered in his early life, and knew what it was for others to suffer, and his sensitive awareness of the plight of the sick, the oppressed, and the lonely informs his character-drawing with sympathy and gives great significance to the documentary materials he uses as the basis of his fiction. *David Copperfield* is no exception to all this. It is by turns wonderfully comic, theatrical, ironic, and tender. It is a delight at the first reading; but every subsequent experience of it deepens one's admiration for Dickens's imaginative fertility and for the tact with which he controls it.

Although the first reviews were surprisingly mild, *David Copperfield* excited admiration from the outset. Thackeray's generous response to the first number has been echoed again and again: 'Bravo Dickens,' he wrote to Mrs Brookfield on 4 May 1849. 'It has some of his prettiest touches w^h^ make such a great man of him.' In June 1870 *Blackwood's Magazine* decided that of all Dickens's novels it was the one 'the reader has most satisfaction in'. In 1881 Matthew Arnold found it 'a work so sound, a work so rich in merits'. In 1953 Dickens's fine modern biographer, Edgar Johnson, judged it 'the most enchanting' of Dickens's novels. Writing in 1911, G. K. Chesterton put it excellently. In *David Copperfield*, he says, Dickens has created 'creatures who cling to us and tyrannize over us, creatures whom we would not forget if we could, creatures whom we could not forget if we would, creatures who are more actual than the man who made them'. As reported in *The Dickensian*, *David Copperfield* has been a best-seller, often the top best-seller, in

every popular library of English classics so far published. With public and author and often with critics – *'le sommet de l'œuvre'* Sylvère Monod calls it – *David Copperfield* has proved the 'favourite child'.

David Copperfield is written in the form of an autobiography, and the skill with which it is unfolded goes a long way towards justifying the presentation of David as a successful novelist; even as a schoolboy he is shown re-telling stories to his fellow-pupils at Salem House. The novel as a whole is organized to show how he grows to maturity in the affairs of the world and the affairs of the heart – the two are seen as mutually dependent in a fully integrated person – and his success as an artist is meant to grow out of his sufferings and out of the lessons he derives from life. Behind this clever use of the actual autobiographical form – the very medium of the novel – which Dickens uses to emphasize theme and character, is Dickens's own artistic intuition. In his own art, therefore, Dickens goes far beyond the explicit novelistic qualities that he bestows on David.

The story that David tells falls into three general sections: his childhood; his youth and early manhood, including his marriage to Dora Spenlow; and his period of maturity, including his marriage to Agnes Wickfield. Thus, the first chapters show David's happy life with his mother and his devoted nurse Peggotty, his misery under his 'firm' stepfather Mr Murdstone and the latter's sister Jane Murdstone, his period of trial at Salem House Academy, run by the bullying Mr Creakle, his drudgery at Murdstone and Grinby's wine warehouse in London, and his adventures on the road to Dover after he has run away to find his eccentric aunt, Betsey Trotwood. Betsey adopts him and sets him happily to school with Dr Strong at Canterbury, where he lodges with Betsey's lawyer Mr Wickfield and makes the acquaintance of Wickfield's daughter Agnes and his clerk Uriah Heep. As a young man David is articled as a proctor in Doctors' Commons with Spenlow and Jorkins, and comes to fall in love with Spenlow's delightful empty-headed daughter Dora whom, after Spenlow's sudden death, he eventually marries. The baleful influence Heep has been exerting over Mr Wickfield puts him in a position to defraud Wickfield's clients, including Betsey – who has been supporting David and

whose apparent ruination necessitates his efforts to be self-supporting. David's own development is the central thread of the novel, but interwoven with it are the lives of various other groups of characters, chiefly David's Yarmouth friends the Peggottys, James Steerforth, David's schoolboy hero, whose selfish pride leads him to seduce and then abandon Peggotty's niece Little Em'ly, and the grandiloquent, feckless Mr Micawber and his devoted wife and family. These and all the other characters do not form isolated groups, and the nefarious activities of Uriah Heep, for example, bring into active conjunction the Wickfields, Micawber, Betsey, and Traddles, another friend from David's schooldays. The canvas is large, but the action is never confused or confusing. The story flows with a supple mingling of comedy and drama.

The first quarter of the novel is beyond praise. The tenderness and terrors of David's childhood experiences are angled from the boy's point of view with complete credibility, yet we are at the same time left in no doubt of the maturer judgement which the grown-up David now holds, because of his tone and occasionally his comments. No less impressive is Dickens's rendering of David's adolescent love-affairs, and his ironic treatment of David's passion for Miss Shepherd and then Miss Larkins leads on logically to the ironic treatment of his infatuation with Dora Spenlow. Some elements in the later sections of the novel at times irritate a twentieth-century reader, and Dickens's treatment of Little Em'ly's delinquency, for example, is in parts scarcely better than the breathless mawkishness of the artistic mishandling of the 'fallen woman', Martha Endell. But however much certain parts of the novel seem to have dated – obvious symptoms of a shift in popular sensibility – most of the novel has defied time. Thus, the passionate intensity of Steerforth and Rosa Dartle still rings true; the climactic storm-scenes continue to exert their massive power; while, in less dramatic vein, Dickens's touch is light and sure with the sentimental comedy of Omer and Joram, with Traddles and Sophy, and with Mr Dick. The spontaneity and grace of the novel disguise how well-knit are its parts. Added to this is the fact that *David Copperfield* was Dickens's own 'favourite child'. Its autobiographic content is unmistakable, and there is the inevitable feeling that we are being privileged to come much closer in this work than elsewhere to