

Pointing Ever Upwards: Dickens' Novels as a Guide to Good Living

Few of us write great novels; all of us live them.

-Mignon McLaughlin, *The Neurotic's Notebook*, 1960

When I delve into the literature of past generations, I am often thrown into a confusing moral morass as I wrestle with what passes for “dignified and decent” in past decades and centuries. I am stymied, for instance, by the stifling reserve of Jane Austen’s heroines or the bloody codes and conduct of the heroes in *Beowulf*. I love *Hamlet*, but will never anguish over what I can do to release my ancestors from hell. And, if I were going to murder a man, I doubt I would be deterred by his “praying.” But even though Charles Dickens composed his novels more than a hundred and fifty years ago, I don’t find myself in a time warp. His prose is lively, humorous, and, most striking to a contemporary reader, relevant. His characters, whether they be fully fleshed out or merely stock, evoke empathy, compassion, affection, irritation and laughter—always, and delightfully, laughter. Most striking, though, is Dickens’ social conscience about issues which still trouble us today: education, marriage and divorce, child-rearing, the legal system, the poor and the morally impoverished. Most especially, the autobiographical *David Copperfield* shows by example how to live morally, romantically, and well through the actions of David and his allies. These models of good living, more than Dickens’ satire, show his enduring consequence and relevance.

David Copperfield, who serves not so much as the main character of the novel, but rather as a hub to the swirling lives and personalities surrounding him, is naïve in his earnestness to be noble but is not so much a pushover that he is unable to despise that which is wrong in the world. Even Dickens, by no means a masculine man, is strong: strong enough to recount his experiences at the factory in his own youth, which he

chillingly describes in his notes for the relevant chapter as “what I know so well.” (Ackroyd, 551) By contrast, David is often dry, “obsessed with work, orderliness, and money, and can't always see how dull it makes him” (Hughes) while being slow to grow out of his childhood selfishness. He is a poor judge of character, and often strikingly oblivious to hidden motives. And yet he is still admirable: perhaps not “the hero of his life” always, but on the whole moral, optimistic, and loving.

But loving is perhaps the most prime area where Dickens guides modern readers towards what we should not do, rather than what we should. Remembering that *David Copperfield* is autobiographical fiction, the doll-like Dora becomes a possible remaking of “his adolescent love-affair with Maria Beadnell.” (Leavis, 45) Her rejection seems to have haunted Dickens, as he later implied it may have been “one happiness [he had] missed in life, and one friend and companion [he had] never made.” (Storey, 10) We can see many of the mistakes Dickens made in David’s relationship with Dora, and although it is not overt instruction, Dickens guides the reader rather than imposing his advice.

But if David’s flustered, but deeply loving marriage to Dora is a married man’s old fantasy made real, the nature of his marriage to Agnes could be even more questionable; she resembles how Dickens saw his sister-in-law, especially compared to how he saw his wife who he claimed he could not relate to intellectually. But rather than condemn Dickens for this questionable behavior, it provides a poignant lesson, this time where he does not show by example: that it is best for us to live without regrets and use your mind as well as your heart to choose your love.

And just as in life, the nature of sex can often be seen bubbling into *David Copperfield*, and here again there is guidance. There is, of course, the central story of

Em'ly and Steerforth; but there is also the shamed Martha, the vague and unnerving advances of Heep, the mismatched marriage of the Strongs and Mrs. Strong's dalliance with Jack Maldon, and the repressed and repressive Rosa Dartle. Even the most daunting female character of the novel, Miss Betsey Trotwood, has "her own dark history of sexual betrayal." (Storey, 10) But in all instances where there has been some past indiscretion, there is an element of redemption. While Dickens' England would have condemned those who broke the social order as Martha and Em'ly did, they are still seen as repentant and then forgiven, even if that forgiveness comes in a journey to Australia. Sexual indiscretions should be forgiven, Dickens seems to imply, even if the shame remains.

David, by contrast, seems blatantly unconcerned with his carnal desires, marrying first a "child-wife" and then the sexless, incorporeal Agnes, who "is the first of the group of heroines who mark the least pleasing, most frumpy, and smug vision of ideal womanhood that [Dickens] produced." (Price, 20) But the unarousing Agnes is the final source of bliss in David's life, even as more a moral guidepost than sexual partner. While it is right to forgive those who pursue the passionate, David shows (and Dickens puts forth) that happiness can stem from such a relatively chaste existence, which in a world of sexualization is something most modern readers have, perhaps, forgotten.

The lives of the stock characters, of which almost all but David rank in some slight way, offer valuable examples to readers, and it is easy enough to find that they can be the most important of all in Dickens' fairy-tale world. The indomitable Wilkins Micawber, with his equally resolute wife – who will, it should be humorously noted, never, ever abandon him – presents lessons in fearless, almost insane optimism in the

face of failure. His charming drive means that one “cannot say he is defeated, for his absurd battle never ends; he cannot despair of life, for he is so much occupied in living.” (Chesterton) And even though David begrudgingly acknowledges Micawber’s inability to reliably earn money and pay debts, he recognizes, much like Traddles, that “it is better to have a bad debt and a good friend.” (Chesterton) Micawber’s optimism and David’s loyalty both provide moral advice particularly helpful to those coming of age themselves.

Miss Betsey Trotwood, too, is seemingly from a folk story, a grumpy fairy godmother. She is “irascible, eccentric, and filled with an ominous power,” and when she is present at David’s birth she fills the roles of “both good and bad fairy at once.” (Mulvey, 74) She is at first a caricature, then a surrogate mother to the hapless boy she renames Trotwood. Dickens seems to love the passionate woman he has created, and for good cause: She proves the most eccentric can be the most loving, and the darkest pasts and wildest obsessions dulled by simple love and acceptance of another – and in doing so Dickens informs his audience to not pass judgment upon those stranger than you, for they may possess the finest souls imaginable.

It is often worth noting the existence of social criticism and commentary in Dickens’ work, for in some cases, it is what his novels are finest at. But in *David Copperfield*, this satire is often an afterthought, seemingly tacked on to the story as where David visits Heep and Littimer in a prison they have come to covertly run. Dickens was just as much a critic of the nature of humans as he was of society, and just as much a proponent for its improvement; but here, in his “favorite child,” (Hughes) he paints humans more than institutions. He was well aware of the mistakes of his parents and his own life, but remains able to “point ever upwards” as Agnes has. By

showing both success and folly through glaring contrast in the same work, Dickens makes *David Copperfield* more than an autobiography writ large: he makes it a book as deeply moral as any book of fables or religious proverbs which, for the contemporary reader, is a guide towards love, optimism, acceptance, and, ultimately, inner strength and wisdom.

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