



THE IMAGE OF EDUCATORS IN CHARLES DICKENS' DAVID COPPERFIELD

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Abstract

This article studies the role of educator characters in Charles Dicken' "David Copperfield". As a Bildungsroman novel that depicts personal-development, David Copperfield explores protagonist's life from troubled childhood to responsible adulthood. The protagonist becomes mature with a profound influence of both formal educators and life mentors. By analyzing characters of Mr Creakle, Dr. Strong, Mr. Micawber, James Steerforth, Aunt Betsey and Agnes Wickfield, we will learn how Dickens creates various models of education and mentorship in order to reflect the values of the Victorian era critique an institution's shortfalls, as well as depict the complex process of person's moral and intellectual development.

Keywords: Educator, mentor. modern education, Charles Dickens, moral education.

Introduction

Charles Dickens, one of the most significant authors of the Victorian era, used Bildungsroman genre to express his obligations in 19th England – poverty, class disparity and industrialization, and its influence on personal development. David Copperfield is also autobiographical roman, so it takes us to Charles Dicken's own life, starting off as a despised orphan and ending his journey as a well-complicated author. Irene Simon once said:

“David Copperfield was, of all his books, Dicken's favourite child, and readers have long felt that this is the novel which he puts most of himself. As a



Bildungsroman it traces the development of David from the innocence of childhood, through his confrontation with the world and his initiation into evil, to maturity and self-realization in a world very different from the Eden of childhood”¹.

The phrase “from the Eden of childhood into evil” metaphorically contrasts purity of a childhood and challenges of adult world. In this path David meets educator figures who, in one way or another, contribute to his development. These diverse educators reflect the moral and pedagogical conflicts of the transitioning Victorian society and its challenging views on education.

One of the most cruel educator in David Copperfield’s life is Mister Creakle. Protagonist begins his formal schooling in Selam House under the hands of the headmaster Mr. Creakle who is a devoid of educational and pedagogical experience and live with cruelty. David describes the time he meets Mr. Clarke: “Mr. Clarke said nothing. He jumped from his chair and waved his cane at me. I ran from the room, shaking with fear “². It is clear from the passage that, for David Salem House becomes a place where survival is more important than education. This cruel environment shapes protagonist’s initial experiences with institutional authority. Instead of inspiring curiosity and critical thinking, Clarke’s school produces fear. However, this atmosphere of Salem House helps David growing up with the sense of justice and compassion, especially through his relationship with Traddles who endures abuse with dignity. Dickens uses Salem House and Mr. Clarke to criticize Victorian education system that prioritized discipline than development.

Next image of an educator is Dr. Strong who is the model of moral and intellectual enlightenment. “My new school was very different from Salem House. Doctor Strong- the headmaster- was kind and gentle man. With his help, I did very well”³, David writes this to Pegotty in his letter. It is true that, in contrast to the Mr. Clarke, Dr. Strong is more enlightened and well-educated as a head of private school in Canterbury. He appreciates the significance of intellectual effort, moral growing, and personal discipline. Instead of punishing students, he always

¹Simon, Irène. “David Copperfield: A Künstlerroman?” *The Review of English Studies*, vol. 43, no. 169, 1992, pp. 40–56. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/517489>. Accessed 14 May 2025.

² Dickens, Charles. *David Copperfield*. Edited by Elizabeth Walker, Penguin Macmillan publishers, 2008. – P.23.

³ Dickens, Charles. *David Copperfield*. Edited by Elizabeth Walker, Penguin Macmillan publishers, 2008. – P.41.



encourages open dialogue and values individuality of them. Under the guidance of Dr. Strong David not only learns the importance of knowledge but also learns how to be patient and self-resilient. This experience reflects the holistic perspective of knowledge that involves both the intellect and mind of a human. Next life teacher in the novel Mr. Micawber is often viewed as comic figure but in the end he becomes moral hero. The time David begins work, Mr. Micawber gives a place to stay for him and become friends. “Mr.Micawber had many great ideas for making money. He was, in his own words, ‘always waiting for something to turn up’. But it never did. Mr. Micawber never had enough money and he always in debt”⁴. Although David describes Mr. Micawber as a man who always have financial struggles, his use of elevated language and personal philosophy have great impact on him. Despite repeated failures, Mr. Micawber never loses his belief and optimistic outlook. His contribution in exposing Urinah Heep’s fraudulent activities becomes turning point in protagonist’s ethical development. Micawver shows that integrity and courage are not preserve of the privileged class.

Another educator character in David’s life is James Steerforth. Although James Steerforth is portrayed as ideal gentleman- wealthy, nurtured, handsome, cultured, and confident, he is not perfect. David and James meets each other at Salem House and become friends. David describes his emotions towards his friend like this: “When I was at school, James Steerforth was my hero. He was very kind to me and I was grateful. Now that I had seen him again, my feelings had not changed. He was polite to everyone and I was proud that he was my friend”⁵. David admires him as a mentor and friend, captivated by his easy adaptation to social situations. However, Steerforth’s betrayal of Emily and his refusal to take responsibility on his shoulders show the dark sides of this character. Through Steerforth, David learns that, charisma and sophistication does not always mean virtue. Steerforth’s tragic end reveals the consequences of ego and irresponsibility.

Aunt Betsey Trotwood also plays significant role in the life of the David because she rescue him from neglect and set him on a path toward stability and self-respect. Her strong will, financial knowledge, and focused behavior help David

⁴Dickens, Charles. David Copperfield. Edited by Elizabeth Walker, Penguin Macmillan publishers, 2008.- P.31.

⁵Dickens, Charles. David Copperfield. Edited by Elizabeth Walker, Penguin Macmillan publishers, 2008.- P.45.



to restore balance in his chaotic life. Aunt Betsey Trotwood encourages him to take control of his destiny and to develop self-worth. She plays both Father's and mother's role in David's life, supporting him emotionally. Although there is no gender equality in Victorian society, Betsey runs her own estate, helping a male heir and always stands for justice. She is strict but combines care and discipline that shapes David's character. Aunt Betsey is always hopeful about David's future and encourages him to be well-educated in Dr. Strong's school. We can see it clearly looking at her words, "Never be mean in anything, never be false, never be cruel. Avoid these three vices and I can always be hopeful of you".⁶

Agnes Wickfield serves as a spiritual and emotional educator in David's life because she acts like spiritual compass from the childhood years of protagonist. They grow up together, become friends and this relationship turns out romantic feelings, taking them to be husband and wife. Agnes' perseverance, emotional intelligence, and loyalty guide David to overcome emotional entanglements. Lily pointed out that, "the book's final pages depict her as the ideal Victorian woman and wife: selfless, supportive, wise, and virtuous."⁷ Indeed, Agnes' role as a teacher is endless because her presence itself is enough to bring clarity to David's decision-making. She also shows an emotional maturity and domestic stability that helps David analyze his ambitions with his values, leading him more balanced life which guarantees the peace of mind.

CONCLUSION

In "David Copperfield", Charles Dickens presents the detailed depiction of education through variety of educator characters. These figures-whether cruel like Mr. Creakle, well-educated and enlightened like Doctor Strong, always in debt but morally grounded like Mr. Micawber, physically ideal like James Steerforth, supporting like Aunt Betsey Trotwood or intelligent like Agnes Wickfield have great impact on David's life journey to maturity. Charles Dickens' main achievement in the work is not only describing the experience of one boy, but also he skillfully criticizes the flaws of the Victorian society that supports inequality in gender, harsh discipline in education. Author masterfully suggests the notion that, personal development cannot be achieved with the knowledge

⁶ Dickens, Charles. David Copperfield. P. Edited by Elizabeth Walker, Penguin Macmillan publishers, 2008.-38.

⁷Beaumont, Lily. "David Copperfield Characters: Doctor Strong." LitCharts. LitCharts LLC, 7 Oct 2018. Web. 14 May 2025.

alone, it is shaped by the impact of various people and the relationship with them during life path.

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