

David Copperfield by Charles Dickens

David Copperfield is Dickens eighth novel. First published as a serial by Bradbury & Evans of London from May 1849 to November 1850 and then as a book in 1850. Dickens was 38 years old. To better understand Copperfield, it helps to know something about Dickens life.

He was born on a Friday, same as Copperfield (and Saleem Sinai for that matter). Creative, driven, idealistic, passionate, intelligent, conflicted, and temperamental: Dickens said in a letter about himself ***"I was a great writer at 8 years old or so – was an actor and speaker from a baby... [and I] worked many [of my] childish experiences and ... struggles into Copperfield."*** Like Micawber, his father was sent to debtors prison accompanied by his wife and 4 youngest children. Similar to young David's neglect, the 12-year-old Charles, no longer able to attend school, lived in a boarding house and worked in factory putting labels on bottles of shoe polish. As a young man, Dickens quickly mastered court reporting and made a living reporting on parliamentary debates before the success of his own writing took off.

In his literary career, Dickens created over 2,000 characters and if the list were read aloud it would be shocking how many of them are recollected. To name just a few: Pecksniff, Scrooge, Oliver Twist, the Artful Dodger, Wackford Squeers, Sydney Carton, Fagin, Tiny Tim, Uriah Heep and Wilkins Micawber. In a speech commemorating Shakespeare's birthday Dickens's remarked ***"We meet on this day to celebrate the birthday of a vast army of living men and women who will live forever with an actuality greater than that of the men and women whose external forms we see around us..."*** Elsewhere Dickens wrote ***"Of all my books, ... I like [Copperfield] the best. It will be easily believed that I am a fond parent to every child of my fancy, and that no one can ever love that family as dearly as I love them. But, like many fond parents, I have in my heart of hearts a favorite child. And his name is DAVID COPPERFIELD."***

What is Dickens doing in the novel David Copperfield? What are its themes and qualities? In the many vicissitudes of family relationships Dickens conveys the joys and pains of life together. Stories good and bad; with characters tragic, redeemed and unredeemed, Dickens moral compass cuts across social and economic groups. In the emotional force of his narrative is a powerful subtext for personal and social reform. The story smashes together the hyper-reality of the novel's characters: the Christ-like Daniel Peggotty, his devoted and loyalty sister, the genteel Mr. Micawber, the honest Aunt Betsy, the captivating Emily, the angelic Agnes, the vicious Murdstones, the tragic and perfidious Jay Steerforth, and the evil Heep. Upon the stage of this novel the message is made clear. Consider these examples: ***"In a school carried on by sheer cruelty, whether it is presided over by a dunce or not, there is not likely to be much learnt,"*** and ***"I am not found of professions of humility,..."***

or professions of anything else,” and “I don’t find authority for Mr. and Miss Murdstone in the New Testament,” and “when society is the name for such hollow gentlemen and ladies... and when its breeding is professed indifference to everything...I think we...had better find a way out.”

Yet, though Dickens is an able writer for the promotion of social reform, my greatest admiration for him is in the sheer storytelling quality of his characters. I believe I’ve read better authors, but none that so powerfully pull my heartstrings. At David’s beating by Mr. Murdstone, I also feel traumatized. At the death and burial of David’s mother, I feel intense loss. With the fall of Emily and the betrayal of Steerforth, I feel a “second fall of man.” When young David returns home from school and his mother “... ***called me her dear Davy, her own boy! And coming half across the room to meet me, kneeled down upon the ground and kissed me, and laid my head down upon her bosom near the little creature that was nestling there, and put its hand up to my lips.***” “***I wish I had died. I wish I had died then, with that feeling in my heart! I should have been more fit for Heaven than I ever have been since.***” I the reader too feel that longing for childhood’s innocence and tender love. When, in one of his countless loquacious extravaganzas, Micawber says, “***Gentlemen, ...do with me as you will! I am a straw upon the surface of the deep, and am tossed in all directions by the elephants - I beg your pardon; I should have said the elements.***” I am struck at the comic relief, and wonder how Dickens could have made up such a line, or did he hear someone actually say that?

David Copperfield, though a great novel, is far from perfect. There are many flaws, some particular to the book and some of Dickens writing generally. But, I’m sure those will “turn up” in our discussion, which I shall delay no longer and so conclude with a quote from G.K. Chesterton:

“They cannot indulge in any detailed or merely logical defense of life; that would delay the enjoyment of it. These higher optimists, of whom Dickens was one, do not approve of the universe; they do not even admire the universe; they fall in love with it. They embrace life too close to criticize or even to see it. Existence to such men has the wild beauty of a woman, and those love her with most intensity who love her with least cause.”

Charles Dickens died in 1870, on my birthday, June 9th, at the age of 58 of a stroke. He is buried in Poet’s Corner at Westminster Abbey. I believe we live in a better world because of him.